

## **There is no cure: paratexts as remediations of agency in *Red Dead Redemption 2***

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### **Abstract**

Towards the end of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), the main character Arthur Morgan contracts tuberculosis. The videogame is set in the United States in 1899, a time when many died from the respiratory infection. The videogame does not provide a cure for the disease, nor does it show when the contagion happens. It is presented as the consequence of an invisible action. Combining auto-ethnographic analysis with (para-)textual readings, in this article I articulate my engagement with the game and with YouTube videos in which players claim to have identified a strategy to save Arthur. I argue that these paratextual practices address, without fully resolving, an affective response that originates from an unresolved reading of the videogame (Consalvo, 2016; Genette, 1987). The videos on Arthur's sickness remediate (in the double sense of restoring upon and *healing*) players' agency (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). I argue that this imagination of a restoration of the player's agency insists on two levels: a narrative level, interpreted as a navigable database of events, and on the environment, seen as a 'gamespace' of resources and non-player characters to exploit or keep at distance (Jennings, 2019; Stang, 2019; Anikina, 2020; Wark 2007). The duration of the auto-ethnography overlaps with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article concludes by exploring some recent mediations of the virus, observing how they restore a view of human agency that runs parallel to that which players of *Red Dead Redemption 2* have articulated in a much more marginal context. The case studies, although diverse in nature, gravity and scale, shed light on the variety of contexts in which agency is negotiated, on the affective potential of these negotiations, and on the pervasiveness of white and able-bodied normativity in contemporary digital culture.

**Keywords:** agency; affect; paratextuality; representation; performativity; tuberculosis; COVID-19; *Red Dead Redemption 2*

### **Introduction: a consequence with no actions**

*Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2) was released by Rockstar Games in October 2018 and is now available for PlayStation 4, Xbox One and PC. RDR2 is one of the biggest blockbusters in the history of the medium of the videogame. At the time of writing, over 38 million copies of the game have been sold globally (Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 2020). RDR2 is set in a fictional representation of the Midwestern and Southern United States in 1899. This is a period of political, social and technological transition in the history of the United States: a year of economic resurgence after the Panic of 1893-1897 (Timberlake and Richard, 1997), and following the Spanish-American War of 1898 that would pave the way for an imperialist and colonialist century (Schoonover, 2003). The main character in RDR2's story, Arthur Morgan, is an outlaw trying to make a living in such an end-of-century period of transformation. Arthur is a member of the Van Der Linde gang. Following the tropes of Western movies, the group engages in bank and train robberies, money extortion, and any other adventurous and criminal activities that can provide the necessary means of survival.

However, in RDR2, Arthur's decisions and desires are not the main driver of the story. RDR2 contradicts the promises of control and continuous progression associated with most videogames (Muriel and Crawford, 2018). Arthur is following the gang led by Dutch Van Der Linde and Hosea

Matthews. Arthur has only limited control over the choices of the group and, as a consequence, over his own life. For instance, he has a distant relationship with a woman, but he is unable to make any commitment. Arthur and the gang's options become more limited as the videogame advances. They are pushed further out on the map; friends and partners betray or leave the group, and some of them get killed. The group must hide from growing numbers of head-hunters and a newly established police force: a sign of an emerging society that is erasing the presence of anarchic and nomadic communities.

As Arthur realises that their hopes of an independent and peaceful life will never materialise, he suffers from an unexpected respiratory crisis while walking in the streets of Saint Denis, a city in the game modelled around the real New Orleans. Arthur discovers that he has tuberculosis. The disease was not curable in 1899 – at the time, it was a common and deadly illness and it became treatable only around 1930 with the introduction of antibiotics. From this key moment in the game, the main character becomes aware of his imminent death. The new condition limits Arthur's movements and restricts the player's options. The game has four alternative endings, and in each of these Arthur dies while being severely affected by tuberculosis. The final part of the game, the dialogues and Arthur's choices are defined by the acknowledgement of his impending fate.

RDR2 does not provide an indicative sign of when, where, and through whom the contagion happens. Being transmitted by living in close proximity with others and in poor hygienic conditions, the virus could have been passed to Arthur in many circumstances during the 60-100 hours of gameplay. The game does not show how to treat tuberculosis either. The doctor who visits Arthur explicitly mentions that the disease is not curable. Tuberculosis makes Arthur slower, less likely to heal himself with food and drink. A special item in the game, the 'Owl Feather Trinket', powers-up Arthur and partially alleviates the symptoms, but it does not cure tuberculosis. Arthur keeps going. He knows that he has limited time to make decisions about his own life and that of his friends. His final moments include some heroic actions, and a number of everyday, banal activities that Arthur must undertake in order to fulfil his objectives.

The fatalism of Arthur's illness, and its realism, have been praised as one of the most nuanced representations of a chronic disease in a videogame. As argued by Eirik Gumeny, tuberculosis does not define Arthur's life, despite its deteriorating effects, just as living with tuberculosis or other respiratory diseases does not define the entire personality of a human being. As the reviewer argues, 'a person doesn't lose their agency because of a diagnosis of a terminal illness' (Gumeny, 2019). RDR2 denies Arthur a specific kind of agency, typically assigned to the white, able-bodied male characters of videogames, which puts them in control of their actions and their destiny (Conway, 2019; Jennings, 2019; Joyce, 2016). As I am going to discuss, agency on narrative and environment are the two key sites of negotiation that players have been trying to address in their paratextual productions, and which most directly trigger the anxieties of the white, able-bodied male audience. As player of RDR2 and author of this article, I believe I can easily identify with and belong to the same audience group.

The game's reception has emphasised such a contrast between the game implicit promises of control and their partial denial. Over the past two years, the players community has produced a corpus of paratexts around RDR2 speculating about how to prevent or even cure Arthur's illness. While the case might be seen as another example of the participatory culture in which digital media products are embedded, there are two aspects that make this phenomenon different from other cases of fandom literature (see Jenkins, 2006). First, players actively seek a solution to Arthur's tuberculosis within the videogame, imagining when and where Arthur became infected and how to find a cure. Second, the same paratexts produced by players of RDR2 affirm that a solution cannot be found. There is a general and contradictory awareness of the impossibility of saving Arthur. Imagining that tuberculosis could be prevented, or cured, would imply the presence of an alternative and markedly different final section of the videogame. Considering the investment of economic and human resources that Rockstar Games has put into the production of RDR2, it appears unlikely that such an enormous effort has been kept hidden

from the players (Good, 2018). A good number of sources can be easily classified as *clickbait*: texts, images and videos made with the purpose of attracting clicks, for the sake of receiving higher returns from online advertisement. The blatant attempt at exploiting players' curiosity explains the abundance of angry comments left by viewers, who nonetheless often claim in the comments section to have spent a significant amount of time and effort in analysing and testing the suggested strategies to save Arthur. The desire to save Arthur and the awareness of its impossibility co-exist. A short comment appears whenever users are annoyed by this contradictory tension: 'there is no cure'.

In this article, I discuss my engagement with the videos about Arthur's sickness. I elaborate my own anxieties and discomfort with the videogame, and how these feelings have been addressed by the paratexts without ever being fully resolved. I look at these videos through an auto-ethnographic account that brings to the fore the potential of paratexts as productive of affective responses. I discuss more closely the kinds of agency that these videos identify as key sites of affective conflict: players' control on the narrative of the videogame, imagined as a database of navigable forks, and on the environment, seen as a repository of resources and populated by non-player characters to manage and dispose of. My auto-ethnography overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the final section, I elaborate how the images circulated as part of the prevention strategies evoked and solicited a comparable structure of feeling. I argue that these remediations of a lost agency re-enable the white able-bodied normativity now under threat by invisible microscopic forces. None of these images and videos ever cured any respiratory diseases, neither fictional nor real, but assuage the existential fear of losing control on our bodies, stories, and social relations.

### **Methodology: auto-ethnography and the performative potential of paratexts**

In this article, I articulate my engagement with the paratexts produced by the community surrounding RDR2, and in particular by looking at YouTube videos. After acknowledging that none of these texts point to a solution to Arthur's tuberculosis, I discuss my affective response to the contradiction underlying the very presence of these videos, and their potential to produce new affective structures. The article reflects retrospectively on the period starting in spring 2019, when I completed RDR2, and ending in spring 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic became a global crisis. Throughout this time, I have been searching on YouTube a cure for Arthur's tuberculosis, following the *rabbit hole* of algorithmic suggestions of the video sharing platform. I have collected a selection of the material surveyed in this period on a YouTube playlist.<sup>i</sup>

In 2020, when the images, statistics and simulations that would quantify the spread of COVID-19 and visualise the strategies of prevention started appearing on our screens, the two respiratory infections overlapped. The pandemic generated a multitude of visualisations of the invisible virus: simulations of contagions, strategies to prevent infection, supposedly effective cures and stories about 'patient zero' spread on the internet, in ways that seemed to replicate, on a global scale, the more marginal obsession with Arthur's sickness. Angry comments and clickbait videos similarly became part of an attention economy surrounding the speculations about the virus.

The article spawns from the hypothesis that these images, although different in gravity and in their channels of circulation, respond to a comparable affective structure, which result from the perceived loss of agency on my body and *avatar*. Both the fictional tuberculosis of RDR2, and the real COVID-19, could infect a white, able-bodied man. Falling in this category, in 2020 I felt that the fragility experienced while playing RDR2 could only intensify in light of the global pandemic. The article is ultimately addressing my own attraction to these visual documents, which speak of how to prevent or cure a respiratory infection while acknowledging the impossibility of controlling, seeing, or knowing the disease. My argument is that the visual production surrounding the two viruses restores the imagination of control that characterises white able-bodied normativity. It does so by imagining how to

re-gain control over the *narrative* of both the game and our lives, and on the *environment* in which we act upon. The analysis will inspect these two areas more closely.

There are various examples of auto-ethnographies in the study of videogames. Most focus on analysing play sessions limited in time and place (Giddings and Kennedy, 2008); discuss how the scholar has been making sense of the game while playing it (Keogh, 2012); or engage with specific features that enable forms of self-representation (McArthur, 2018). My case is different as it retrospectively analyses an engagement extended in time, and involving a variety of media texts. For the most part, I focus my reading on the paratexts produced by the RDR2 players' community, how they refer to the original source text, and how remediate player's agency. I am particularly interested in how paratexts worked on me, in ways that would still resonate one year later when the COVID-19 pandemic came about. I focus on how these videos evoked in me a comforting feeling of temporary reassurance regarding the possibility of re-instating the agency of white able-bodied actors in a world where lethal, invisible viruses are spreading freely and vaccinations are not yet available.

Paratexts are more than additions or commentaries. They can 'provide challenges to sedimented meanings' (Consalvo, 2007: 182) and articulate complex and contradictory readings of the ludic text. I explore the relation established across paratexts and texts as a destabilising and decentring force that complicates the chronological hierarchies separating the primary texts from its derivations (Consalvo, 2016). The YouTube videos on Arthur's cure re-open the boundaries of RDR2 and imagine a parallel text running next to it, where player's agencies are not yet exhausted and actualised. Paratexts can remain peripheral for most readers, but have the potential of influencing official modifications of the original text, extend the lifetime of a product, and circulate across entirely different groups and communities (Gray, 2010). For the purpose of this article, I intend to focus on the performative potential of paratexts to bring about affective states that open the possibilities of the text – and on the political potential of these openings.

I re-evaluate the original formulation of paratexts intended by Gérard Genette, who identified those texts sitting at the 'thresholds' (*seuils*, the original title in French) as having an illocutionary force and a performative potential (1987: 10-12). Genette noted how dedications, inscriptions, prefaces, post-faces, epigraphs, appearing on the cover, at the end, or outside of a book have a pragmatic function for the reader: these provide indications, promises, sometimes 'involve a commitment' (1987: 11). In discussing paratexts as *mediations* of texts (rather than *independent media texts*), Genette gestures towards the evaluation of the productive effects of paratextual practices and the conditions for their efficacy. Suggesting that texts and paratexts are not ontologically separate entities and focussing on the practices and performances of paratextuality and their effects, Genette partly prefigures the debates surrounding the problematic tension between representationalism and performativity (Barad, 2007: 46-50). In doing so, he suggests that paratextuality is not located prior to or after the act of reading, and does not refer to a separate and independently existing text, but rather is co-constitutive of readers' interpretative strategies. Paratextuality does not merely represent, describe or define the text, but is part of its reconfiguration. Genette wants us to reflect on how we would 'read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not titled *Ulysses*', and on the conditions that would make it possible to answer such a question (1987: 2). I am taking up his invitation, and I am looking at the YouTube videos on Arthur's tuberculosis as paratexts that performatively bring about in me a number of affective responses that redefine the experience of the videogame by moving backwards through the arc of the narrative - rather than commentaries or exercises of imagination taking place separately from the videogame.

I suggest that what mattered for me when watching the YouTube videos around Arthur's illness is the 'productive, rather than negative, relationship between the event and its mediation' (Kember and Zylinska, 2012: 32). The representations of the possible contagion and its cure are not merely descriptive, or instrumental, as there is nothing to describe or *fix* in a videogame that neither shows nor includes any solutions to Arthur's tuberculosis. These are not representations so much as performances.

They are mediations, more than media objects, productive of affective responses in the viewer. In turning towards questions of mediation of viruses and illnesses, I interrogate the ongoing tension between representation and events, and the wound (re)opened by the videos in their attempt to heal it – a wound that prompts many to react with anger in the comments section.

Following Bolter and Grusin (1999), I argue that the videos ‘remediate’ Arthur’s illness and respond to a perceived lack of agency on the part of the players. YouTube videos ‘reform and restore upon’ the medium of the videogame, and ‘fulfill its unkept promise’ (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 60-61). As the authors argue, remediation derives from the Latin *remederi*, meaning ‘to restore health’. The videos remediate Arthur’s tuberculosis: they heal the trauma experienced from the separation of Arthur’s sickness from its invisible causes.

As I navigated through the YouTube videos, I started paying attention to what players decided to represent when addressing the player’s failure to save Arthur from contagion, or to heal him afterwards. The videos tend to refer to two specific kinds of agencies, both implicitly promised by the videogame and later denied as the story progressed: control on the narrative and on the environment. In the following sections, I look more closely at how these two types of agencies have been represented while drawing on a selection of examples.

### **Agency on the narrative: the disembodied subject of interactive storytelling**

I started my research for a cure on YouTube as soon as I played the section where Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis. At first, I thought I could have prevented the infection by doing something differently, but I did not know when the contagion happened. In retrospect, it is precisely the invisibility of the *event* of the infection that made RDR2 so unsettling for me. After browsing the first couple of videos, I received suggestions from YouTube for similar contributions. The column on the right side of the screen started being populated by videos concerning the videogame and Arthur’s sickness.

I turn to some of the thumbnails linking to the YouTube videos on Arthur’s cure to better illustrate the performativity of paratextual practices and their potential to refigure the affect of being in control. Thumbnails are paratexts of a different order, as they occupy the threshold connecting viewers from one video to the next. While introducing the following video, they preserve a paratextual reference (algorithmically elaborated) to the video currently being watched. Thumbnails introduce and illustrate videos by showing their title, duration, a static image and, when rolling over with the mouse, a brief animated preview. However, as I will argue, they do more than publicise the content of the videos. They also blur the thresholds of the videogame-text, reconfigure its meaning *and representation*, and evoke structures of feeling that have not yet been resolved and are still bouncing back and forth between the player, the game, and the screens through which these two meet each other (Anable, 2018). The narratives that emerge from the videos strive to restore a different kind of continuity, ‘located not only in the core of the tale, but also in configuration (the desire for the story) and refiguration (its reopening or activation in a particular horizon)’ (Bassett, 2007: 178).

In Figure 1, I have included a collection of thumbnails that link to videos related to Arthur’s tuberculosis, which I have gathered during my period of research. In ‘What Would Happen if Arthur Morgan NEVER Dies & LIVES After The Ending of Red Dead Redemption 2?’, the image is split into two halves. To the left, we see someone from behind, someone who might be Arthur, visiting Arthur’s own grave, and an arrow pointing at *something* on that grave that we cannot yet see with clarity. On the right side of the thumbnail, there is a picture of Arthur with grey hair and beard, smiling at us: a version of Arthur who might have survived his apparent fate, Arthur as we have never seen (and will never see). In ‘What Happens if Arthur Goes Back To The Doctor After Getting The TB Cure in Red Dead Redemption 2?’, the split image to the left section tells us that someone ‘gets TB cure...’, and this leads to the right where... ‘secret outcome!’ In ‘Revisiting the Doctor that Diagnosed Arthur with TB (Hidden

Dialogue) Red Dead Redemption 2', we see the doctor who diagnosed Arthur saying 'I thought you would be dead by now?' In 'How to Avoid Getting Tuberculosis from Thomas Downes!! Red Dead Redemption 2 Secret Spoiler', the image on the thumbnail is a close up of Arthur's face, and an undulating and snake-shaped (for *some reason*) arrow points at a detail on his hat.

Have I missed any details of the videogame? Did I fail to notice something, or perform a certain action? The thumbnails suggest that alternative storylines, dialogues, and actions are yet to be explored. The videos offer a temporary confirmation that something in the videogame remains unresolved, or at least the promise of a *mise-en-scene* that will re-open my engagements with the ludic text. However, none of these thumbnails point to anything that is ever visible in the videogame, or in the videos. For this reason, these thumbnails prompt viewers to react with angry comments, which might even be intentionally solicited by the video-makers, as they increase the value of the video in an attention economy that has erased the difference (both technically and semantically) between 'linking' and 'liking' (Lovink, 2011). I evaluate these texts and images, and the videos they introduce, *as clickbaits*: their very existence and circulation on social media suggests that they respond to and solicit a desire to open a threshold in the videogame-narrative in which players' agency can be re-situated. Their existence as a promise to the players suggests that YouTube is perceived as a platform on which the videogame can be played *by other means*, imagining how the storyline could be re-opened and how different modes of play could co-exist.

The videos on Arthur's tuberculosis, and their associated thumbnails, reinforce the comforting belief that the narrative of the videogame is made of individual and separate positions, events, and forks, each necessarily requiring representation, and each available to be activated through player's interaction. The videos challenge the notion that the symptoms of an illness could manifest without an identifiable, visible and controllable source of infection; the possibility that consequences could manifest with no preceding actions. They do so by evoking the imagination of the narrative branches: a feature of interactive storytelling, often used in the promotional material accompanying videogame products. An implicit promise of control on the narrative, to be navigated back and forth following the player's desire to explore alternative pathways.

Such a promise of control on the narrative is pervasive in the design and marketing of videogames and normally generates expectations and desires that far exceed the actual affordances of the product. Sarah Stang (2019) comments on the narrative branches of the videogame *The Walking Dead*, noting how they offer to the players a sense of control on the storyline that is largely in surplus to the available options. While the videogame asks its players to decide which narrative pathways they intend to follow, the final outcomes are limited and predetermined, and do not necessarily respond to players' decisions. Following Smethurst and Craps (2015), Stang argues that the illusion of agency defines the experience of the videogame: players engage with a number of moral decisions, and their imagination of the alternative narratives and 'what-if' scenarios frames their experience of what they have been playing (see also Sicart, 2009, 2013). The agency on the narrative of videogames is often 'the affect of being in control; of becoming immersed within the game story and environment, of becoming emotionally invested in the outcome of the story' (Owen, 2013: 72).

The thumbnails have an illocutionary force and performative potential. They provoke an affective and bodily response (clicking, watching, commenting, liking/disliking, subscribing/unsubscribing) and re-open the virtuality of the narrative, even if temporarily, within a new horizon of refiguration. This could also happen through the use of fake images and suggestive titles that do not quite correspond with anything we will ever find in the videogame, but which nonetheless produce the 'point and positions' where affect and sense-making happen, and let them 'appear *retrospectively*' in the text (Massumi, 2002: 6). The re-articulation extends through the horizon of reception and, contra Marie-Laure Ryan (2004: 334), re-values the 'retrospective availability of meaning' of videogames and digital simulations. In doing so, such a retrospective re-writing of the videogame's narrative suggests an alternative

structure of the actionable bifurcations of the plot, and a new subject capable of navigating such a narrative. Ultimately, it is this new kind of subject that is brought about by the paratexts – a position that I ended up occupying, and which reveals something of the uncertainties and fragilities opened up by the fictional disease.

As my experience of the videogame felt incomplete, I followed the fantasies of control underlying the thumbnails on YouTube. Each fantasy would last the time that it takes to open a new video, watch it (or scroll through the comments), and understand that it would not deliver what it promised. However, that brief expectation positioned myself as a new type of player. A player now capable of seeing the virus, knowing the cause of the infection and the actions required to heal its symptoms. Knowing the points of the storyline where the virus *happens* denies to that invisible agent the potential to cut across all narrative options and of doing so unexpectedly, independently of the player's performance. Imagining of navigating the storyline of the infection is primarily a visual fantasy: it involves new ways of seeing the causes and effects brought about by the virus. Through these temporary refigurations of the narrative, I became the subject of disembodied vision, detached from the lived experience of the illness, and able of turning 'story-line into navigation' (Wark, 2007: para 69). Such a fantasy and desire for disembodied knowledge and control would also emerge through the videos that identified a solution to tuberculosis in Arthur's interactions with the surrounding environment.

### **Agency on the environment: prevention in gamespace**

Among my findings, one video captures the contradictions underlying the search for a cure for Arthur better than any other. It is titled 'How to prevent Arthur Morgan from being exposed to Tuberculosis during Money Lending & Other Sins'. It was published on YouTube by the user Doak1851 on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2018. It lasts about 10 minutes, it has been watched over two million times and has over 5,000 comments. Doak1851 explores the 'Thomas Downes hypothesis', frequently mentioned in videos about Arthur's tuberculosis. Downes is a farmer, and his family has borrowed money from the gang. Arthur must visit Downes in the early stages of the videogame to collect their money. Visiting Downes is a necessary condition to proceed further in the story, even though the scene appears to be only marginal to the narrative. Downes is severely sick, and Arthur gets close to his face while beating and trying to extort money from him. Players have speculated that the scene might represent the moment when the infection happens.

In the video, Doak1851 explores different strategies to approach Downes with Arthur wearing a face mask. He soon finds out that the game removes the mask attached to Arthur's face before triggering the non-interactive scene of the fight. Doak1851 then shows various attempts, creating a number of paradoxical scenarios. Finally, they find a solution. Doak1851 makes Arthur wear a face mask and grab the lead of his horse. RDR2 is only programmed to remove one item, which leaves Arthur without his horse but with a mask covering his face when beating Downes [see Figures 2-6]. The mask should have prevented the infection. However, the YouTube user claims that they have not proceeded further with the videogame after discovering this possibility. They state in the comments section: 'I initially wanted to document the idea and possibility of protecting Arthur. I know the probability of changing the final outcome could be unlikely'.

The rest of the video shows other possible strategies to keep the sick farmer at distance. Between 3'07'' and 7'30'', Doak1851 tries to kill Thomas Downes [Figures 7-10]. The YouTube user first tries to scare Downes by shooting at him from outside the ranch. When Downes starts running away from Arthur, the player makes Arthur follow him by riding a horse. The player tries to catch Downes with the lasso, but fails. Downes reaches a cliff. The player shoots at Downes and moves the farmer's corpse on the horse. They then trot back to the ranch, only to find Downes to have respawned. There are now two Thomas Downes, one dead and one alive. Killing Downes does not allow the player to skip the

encounter with the (possibly) infected farmer. The final part of the video shows Arthur beating Downes, while the corpse of the other reincarnated Downes is also present in the background of the scene. The four-minute attempt at killing Downes does not resolve Arthur's tuberculosis. If anything, it produces a paradoxical scenario that turns ironically against the viewer's hopes.

This and other similar videos on the 'Downes hypothesis' imagine how Arthur could exercise control on the surrounding environment. Specifically, control involves keeping NPCs at distance, and drawing on the available resources (weapons, clothing, animals and so on) to avoid contagion. The strategy is consistent with the implicit promises made by the videogame in its initial stages, and which are broken after the scene of the diagnosis. Arthur first appears to the player as the embodiment of a fantasy of control: a white able-bodied man, participating in various forms of violence against human and non-human actors populating the alternative version of 1899 United States imagined by Rockstar Games. Arthur might not be in control of his destiny, but he is capable of exercising control over others. He hunts animals; he beats and robs anyone he meets along the way. The environment is his playground. The novelty of RDR2 lies in its refusal to fulfil Arthur's capacities, which are revealed in their fragility as soon as the gang starts to disaggregate, and when he falls ill. Arthur loses control of his goals, friends, resources, even his own lungs.

Trying to kill Thomas Downes refigures Arthur's capacity to kill before getting killed, of *choosing his own destiny* against that of others, restoring his power as an able-bodied character and 'straightening' the narrative (Kagen 2020). The video imagines how the 'ludic agency' (control over the main character) could affect the 'narrative agency' (their control over the story) (Joyce, 2016), or, in other words, how the 'mechanical' agency could affect the 'fictional' agency 'pertaining to the world, story, narrative, or NPCs' (Cole and Gillies, 2021: 196). In doing so, the video suggest to act not on the narrative arc of the videogame, but on the 'nonlinear narrative' that 'must unfold in algorithmic form during gameplay' (Galloway, 2006: 92). The YouTube video is not concerned with curing Arthur's tuberculosis, or ultimately proving that the infection could be prevented. The video is rather imagining how Arthur could take control over his body and that of others, and identifying the rules governing the game that would allow such position of dominance.

The infective Downes is turned into an expendable NPC, a 3D model of a human figure who can be killed in uncountable ways, and against whom the player can exercise their will. Each strategy has the same weight, and is equally irrelevant and insufficient to change the story. In this context, killing Downes is seen as a valid and legitimate interaction as much as avoiding contagion with a face mask. We see the same strategy explored in videos such as 'Can You Kill Thomas Downes Before He Gives Arthur Tuberculosis In Red Dead Redemption 2? (RDR2)'. In this video, we see the various encounters with Downes through the videogame, and a number of possible ways to kill him – although the 10-minute video concludes that Downes cannot be killed. The video 'Red Dead Redemption 2 - How To Save Arthur From Tuberculosis' [Figures 11-12] shows a montage of two encounters with Downes early in the videogame, followed by the moment when Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis. The video pauses during the doctor's diagnosis, moves backwards, and shows an alternative scene where Arthur shoots Downes before their first encounter. Here the imagination of control over the NPC is presented as control over both space and time: agency over social relations and over the story arc, seen as a linear and reversible unfolding of options.

As I am watching these videos, I understand that they convey a feeling of temporary reassurance as they flatten all the represented agents of the videogame, both human and nonhuman, under the player's potential control. Such a momentary feeling must come to terms with the realisation that the main agent of the final part of the story, the virus, cannot be seen, and any strategy to prevent the infection are never demonstrable or conclusive. The main victims of this uncertainty are NPCs such as Thomas Downes. The videos suggest that, even if the virus cannot be seen, it must be hidden in one of the bodies of the NPCs before infecting Arthur's body. Keeping the right NPC at distance, or killing them, should



prevent the infection. My research on YouTube started as a response to Arthur's loss of control on his own body resulting from the infection with an invisible agent. The solution proposed by the paratexts is to dispossess all other human and nonhuman actors of their agency.

I maintain, with Alexandra Anikina, that the interactions with and design of NPCs opens 'a different set of questions pertaining to how we, as humans, construct the aesthetic perceptions and imaginaries of agency that is not our own' (2020: 89-90). Drawing on the work of Anna Munster (2013), Anikina argues that the 'gamespace', the environment of the game encompassing our lived experiences, appropriates the aesthetic of the network, where all relations are flattened and imagined as 'a uniform, all-encompassing cloud of connections' (Anikina, 2020: 91; see also Wark, 2007). The aesthetic of the network flattens the relations between the player and the NPCs. At the same time, it speaks of how real-life encounters are imagined in social environments. Lisa Nakamura (2009), cited by Anikina, observes, for instance, how Chinese gold-farmers in machinima built around *World of Warcraft* are represented as indistinguishable from each other and deprived of the 'privilege of avatarial self-possession' (2009: 141). Racialised discrimination emerges when representing the other as an undefined and replaceable NPC.

The paratexts reinforce a vision of human agency centred on the individuality of the player, exercised in the environment and through the *avatar*, with all its implied (and colonialist) notions of able-bodied normativity and control (Carr, 2014; De Wildt et al., 2020). As the farmers, animals, architectural barriers and the elements of the landscape are imagined as being tied to the user's experience, I come to occupy a position from where the entirety of the gamespace is at my disposal. These remediations of Arthur's illness explore the possibility of navigating through social relations and engaging with the environment from a position of power. While the virus could, theoretically, transit through any human being and proliferate, the new subject of play imagined by the YouTube videos can take advantage of their position to eliminate and keep at distance all possible sources of infection.

In the final section, I turn to Wark's prediction that 'gamespace' is now 'everywhere and nowhere' and pervades our socio-economic reality (Wark 2007: para 1). I draw on the metaphor of gamespace to discuss what it makes invisible, in its attempt to visualise information and its configuration. Prevention in gamespace is, in other words, 'encompassing both in-game and real worlds [and] shows how gaming itself can be seen as a metaphor for life within capitalist networks in which the processes of labour and affect are enmeshed in virtual worlds and images' (Anikina 2020: 90). The COVID-19 pandemic and its numerous visual remediations address the anxieties deriving from the loss of control on the storyline of events potentially leading to a contagion and on the environment of human relations. Only a privileged subject can expect to have full control on the narrative arc of their actions and on their surrounding environment as populated by visible, actionable, and disposable agents. It is ultimately such a privileged subject that I was aiming to evoke through my research, and which revealed itself in both its fragility and pervasiveness.

### **Remediating a global pandemic**

Just when I stopped searching for a cure for Arthur's tuberculosis, I stumbled upon another virus. The COVID-19 pandemic started circulating in the news in early 2020 and re-signified my initial interest with Arthur's tuberculosis. Or, to borrow Timothy Morton's term, the global pandemic manifested as a 'hyperobject': something too large in scale to be grasped and fully known, but at the same time reflecting at micro level in daily actions such as washing hands, wearing masks, and, in my case, watching videos on Arthur's tuberculosis on YouTube (Morton, 2013). Around spring 2020, I encountered a number of remediations of COVID-19: visualisations, articles and reports on strategies for prevention, rumours, memes, and the occasional fake news. I spent a significant amount of time

watching these images, and soon realised that I was feeling a similar sense of anxiety than what I felt while browsing the videos on RDR2.

In Figures 13-20, I have collected a selection of images, which appeared to me more than once during the research period across news websites and social media. I observe that these images can be analysed, as much as the videos on Arthur's cure, for their potential to produce affective states that reinforce existing power structures embedded in our capitalist society and framed by the illusion of individual agency. None of these images prevent or cure the virus, but imagine an ideal subject of prevention framed on the expectations typically assigned to white, able-bodied characters. The fragility perceived while reading the news could be assuaged by imagining an optimal strategy and behaviour, and a new way of seeing and knowing the invisible threat. The ideal subject of prevention would have control on the *narrative* of the pandemic, that is the storyline of events leading to the spread of the virus, and on the *environment* of social relations.

I start from the most light-hearted example. Figure 13 shows a meme, one among the many circulating in 2020 on COVID-19. The idea that the global pandemic originated from someone eating a bat soup in Wuhan is easily debunked. It would be impossible to determine the specific circumstances that caused the initial zoonotic transition. All that we can see are the symptoms, the fall of domino pieces: consequences with no actions. The satirical potency of the image points at our fragile modes of knowledge. It would be self-reassuring to decide that we know when and where the virus started circulating, and the chain of events that led to the current circumstances. It also suggests that the chain of causation is performatively brought about through the visual remediation of the pandemic. It does not pre-exist its representation, and the representation imagines the subject of prevention to be capable of navigating the storyline backwards, as if it were a database of information.

Preventing the virus presumes the ability of seeing the invisible, or imagining being capable of doing so. Figure 14 shows the visualisation of the COVID-19 virus produced and circulated by the World Health Organization. Figure 15, published by *The Guardian*, represents the curve of contagion in the United Kingdom up to February 2021. Images that have been circulating widely, and which we have sadly become accustomed to during the pandemic. None of these images provide a cure for COVID-19, but they heal, in the sense that they remediate (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), the wound that separates the events of the pandemic (the deaths, the crowded hospitals, and so on) from the invisibility of the causes, their happening at the microscopic level. I argue that these images share the representational premises that drive the production of videos on Arthur's tuberculosis, and the same reassuring effects that derive from the illusion that the invisible could be represented and controlled.

Prevention is also exclusionary, and marks an implicit separation between those who can act on the environment, and those who do not. Those who have the privilege of controlling the gamespace of their lived realities, and those who are disposed of such control. Figures 16-20, produced by research centres and distributed to news agencies, visualise the efficacy of social distancing measures. The ideal subject of the prevention strategies is imagined as an able-bodied, white, middle-aged man, capable of controlling his own actions and movements against those of others. Figures 19-20 show how to prevent contagion while jogging – an activity characterised by its whiteness, and excluding those who cannot be seen running-while-black (Petrzela, 2020). These are not everyone's *avatars*. The imagined subjects of prevention are allegedly in control of their own movements and can keep others at distance. The others, in turn, are pushed to the background, out of the centre, or made to disappear. These are the Thomas Downeses, the expendable NPCs: those who have caring responsibilities, cannot work from home, must take public transport, or are incarcerated. Those who are seen running only when hunted by the Arthur Morgans.

Prevention from contagion is imagined in and as gamespace, framed by an understanding of agency as tied to the centrality of the user. Real and virtual prevention share the same ideological effects, and the same tools: a study on the efficacy of social distancing published in April 2020 emphasises that the test

was conducted by a developer working at the company that provided aerodynamics analysis for Sony's videogame *Gran Turismo* (Magee, 2020). Ultimately, I argue that the feelings of fragility and the temporary sense of control experienced while engaging with paratexts surrounding Arthur's tuberculosis are close to those that I and, probably, many others felt during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those feelings have been remediated through images that circulated across the same screens and digital devices that we use to work, share information, entertain ourselves, and elaborate strategies of survival. At the same time, those images are productive of affective states that reinforce dynamics of social exclusion, based on class, gender, race and able-bodied normativity.

## Conclusion

To summarise, from spring 2019 until spring 2020 I have been following the search for a way to save the main character of RDR2, Arthur Morgan, from dying of tuberculosis. I argue that the YouTube videos documenting the research are not just instrumental, that is, seeking to identify a cure for the illness. Their authors and participants are shown to be aware that it is not possible to resolve the issue. For me, the videos have been productive of affective responses. They have been 'remediating' the wound opened up between the events of Arthur's sickness and their representation in the videogame (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Kember and Zylinska, 2012). The videos do more than just describe, comment on, or refer to the videogame. These paratexts fulfil a performative function, which produces new affective states by expanding the threshold of the videogame-text and allowing a refiguration of its rules, images, and narratives (Genette, 1987; Consalvo, 2016).

I have been discussing the specific kinds of agencies that most triggered my anxieties. The videos suggest refiguring the player's power relationship with the storyline, and the environment of resources and NPCs. Agency on the narrative assumes a disembodied subject capable of navigating the branches of the storyline (Bassett, 2007; Stang, 2019). Agency on the environment imagines restoring the centrality of the player's avatar within the surrounding environment of human and nonhuman actors, while dispossessing them of their agency (Anikina, 2020). In these views of agency, connections between narrative branches and actors are thought as part of a network where all links are equally tied to the user's experience (Wark, 2007). These remediations of Arthur's illness gave me a temporary comforting feeling: the reassurance that the power position occupied by a white able-bodied male character could be reaffirmed, in light of an invisible threat capable of cutting across all storylines and impeding the actions of any living being.

I conclude that following these minimal remediations of a fictional illness could shed light on some of the ways in which we understand our lives in times of pandemic. The normativity of the strategies of prevention that we have been consuming and sharing across digital devices during the pandemic might assuage our sense of fragility, but at the cost of excluding those who cannot control the storyline of their lives and their relations with the surrounding environment. These remediations are equally productive of affective states, which might work on us in different ways depending on our class, gender, race and able-bodiedness. Respiratory infections, real and fictional, imagined, felt and expected are enmeshed in the virtuality of gamespace.

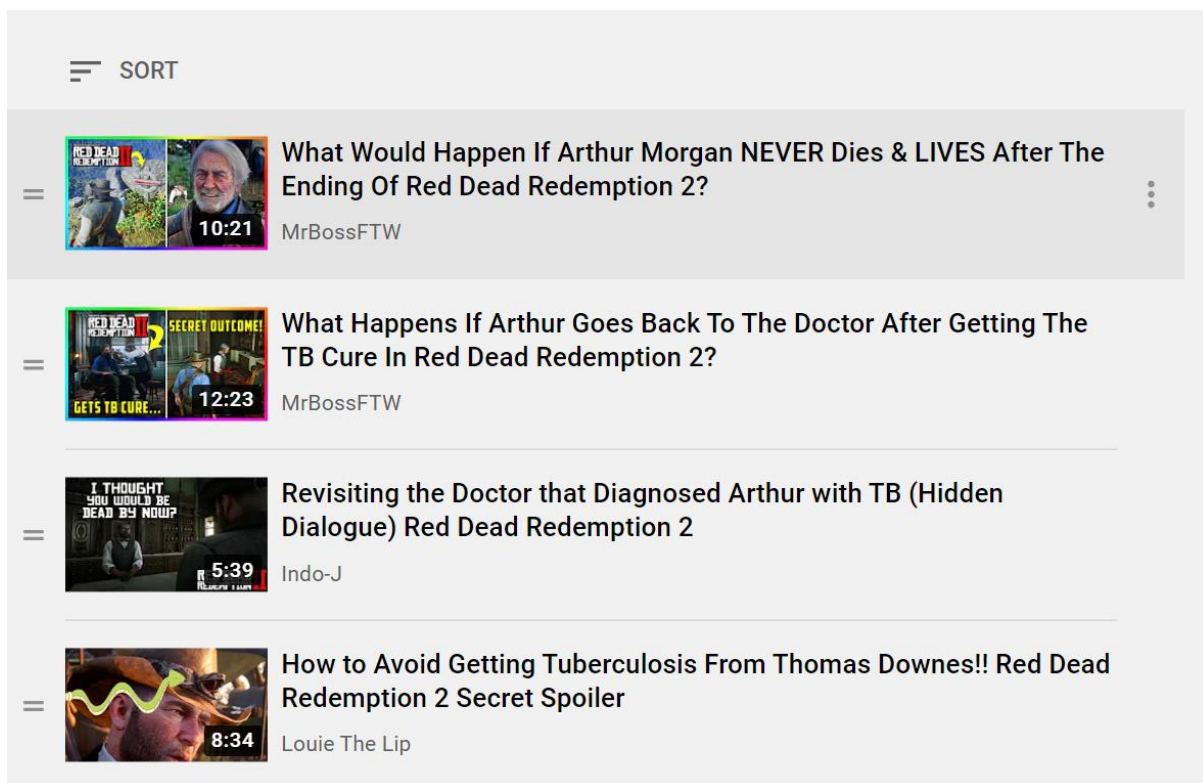
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## Appendix



**Figure 1:** thumbnails for the YouTube playlist ‘There is no cure’, created by AUTHOR and last updated March 20th 2021. Available at <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1CQ1907K5PCWIeo03wEhPtRHdnwTfX16>









**Figures 2-6:** screenshots of YouTube video ‘How to prevent Arthur Morgan from being exposed to Tuberculosis during Money Lending & Other Sins’, uploaded by Doak1851 on November 30<sup>th</sup> 2018. Available at: <https://youtu.be/e1FVcJp8MfI>

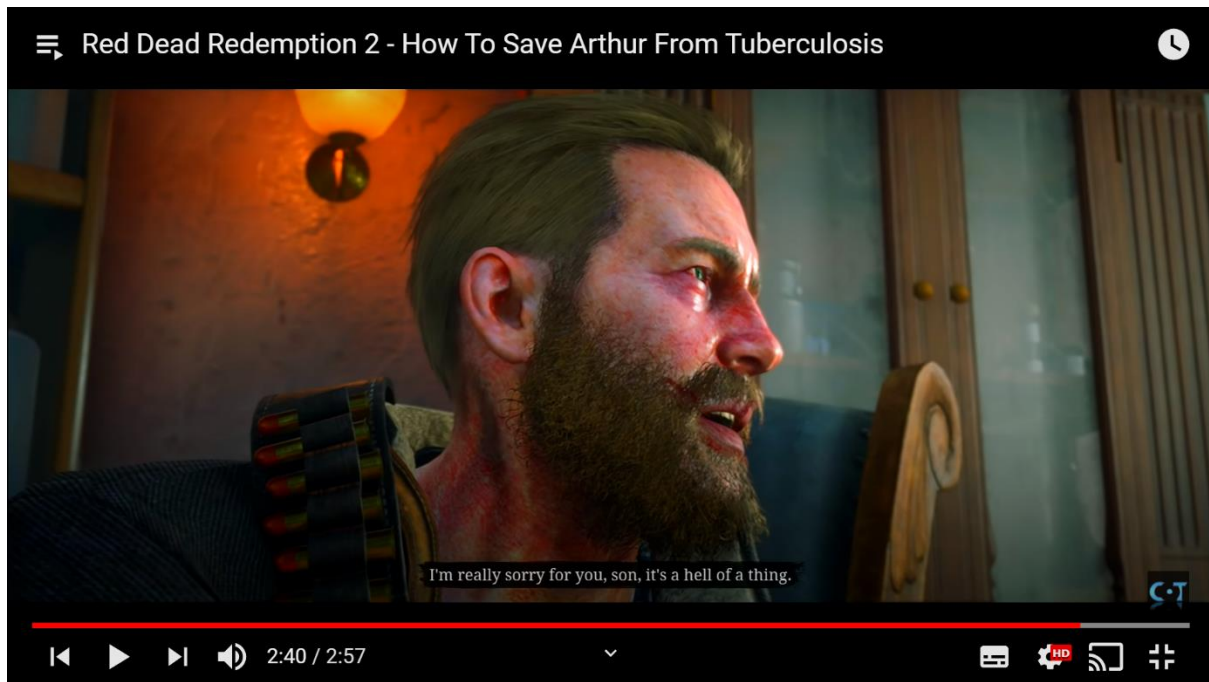






**Figures 7-10:** screenshots of YouTube video ‘How to prevent Arthur Morgan from being exposed to Tuberculosis during Money Lending & Other Sins’, uploaded by Doak1851 on November 30<sup>th</sup> 2018. Available at: <https://youtu.be/e1FVcJp8MfI>

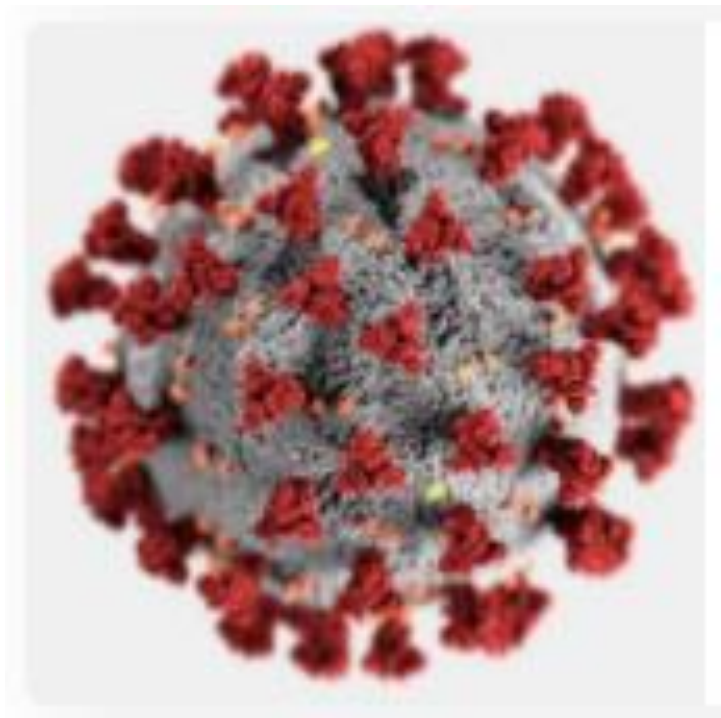




**Figures 11-12:** screenshots of YouTube video 'Red Dead Redemption 2 - How To Save Arthur From Tuberculosis', uploaded by calloftreyarch on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2018. Available at: <https://youtu.be/AudVEJIJdyo>



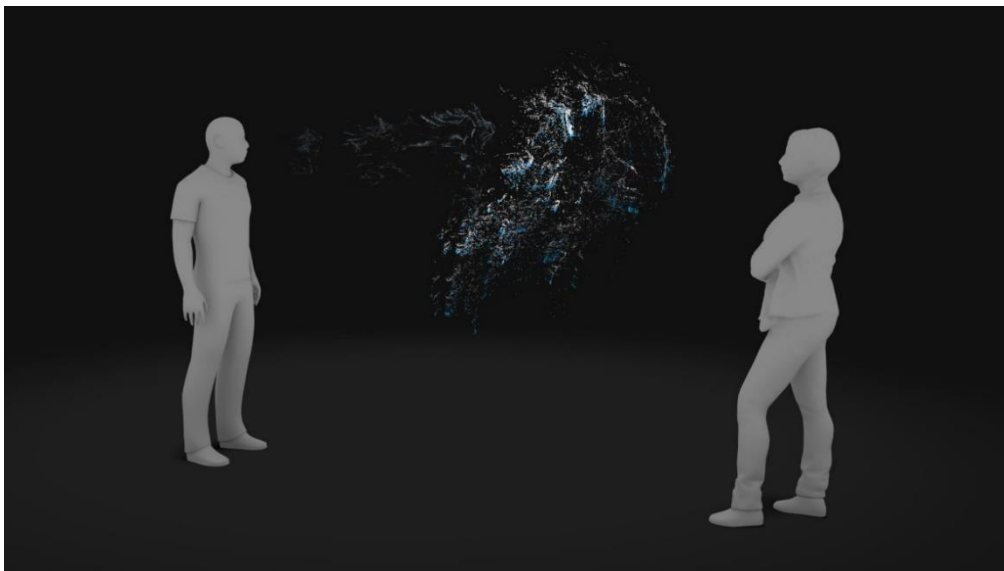
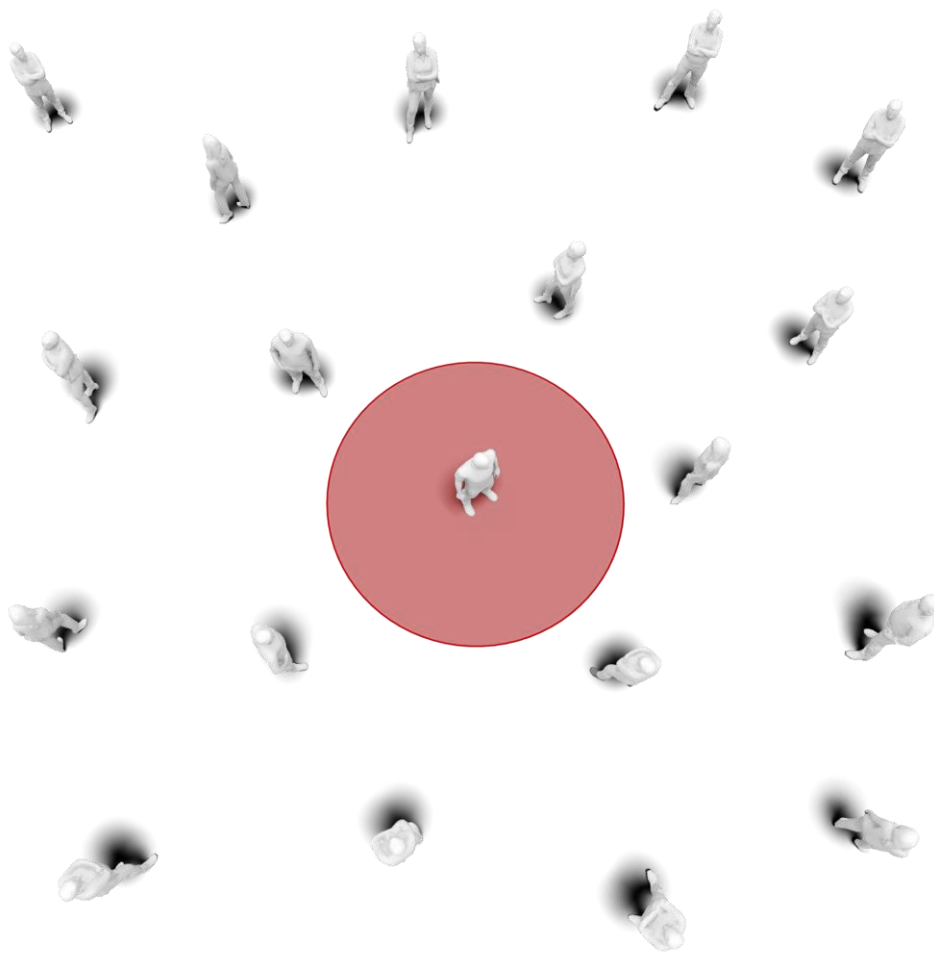
**Figure 13:** source 9gag.com



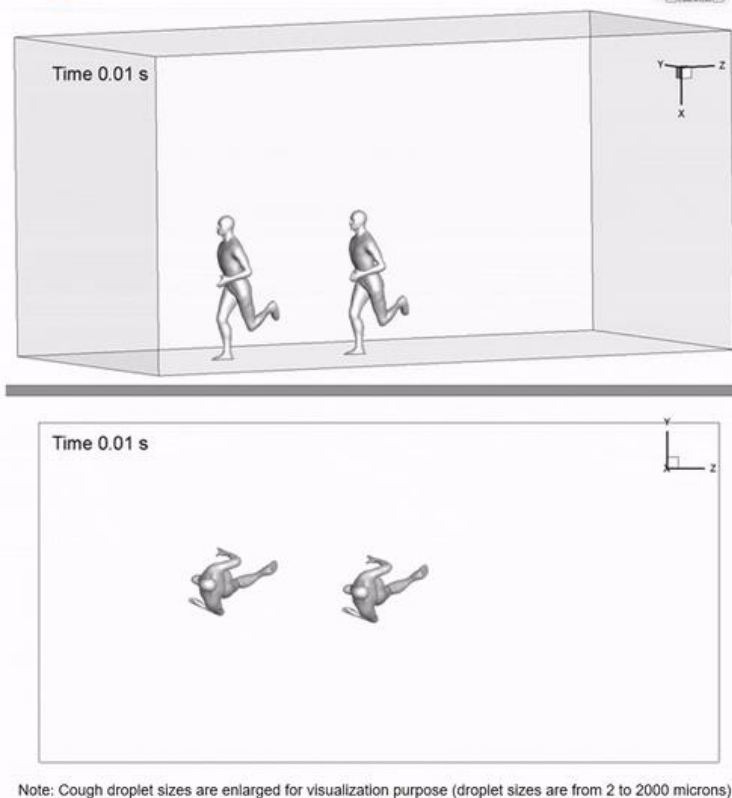
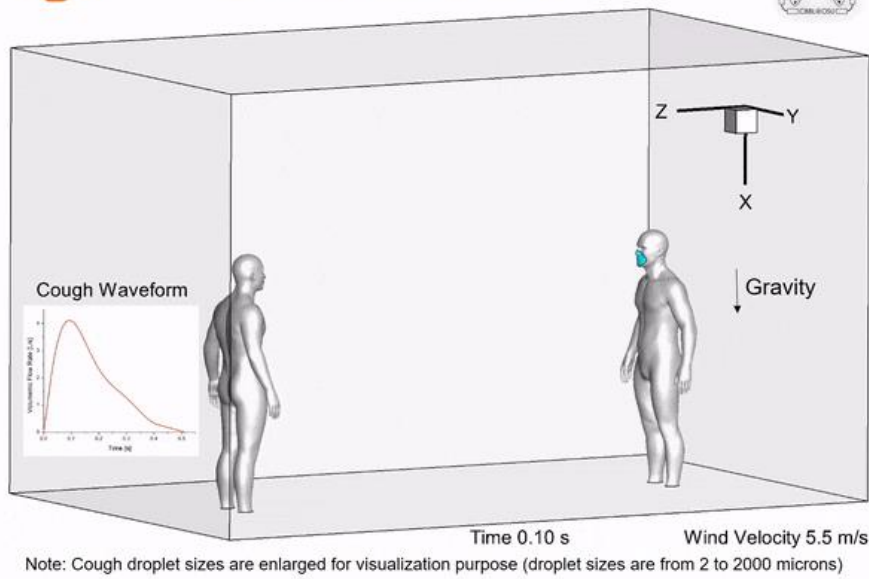
**Figure 14:** source *World Health Organisation*



**Figure 15:** source *The Guardian* 20 February 2021



**Figures 16-17:** images from Parshina-Kottas, Yuliya, Saget, Bedel and Patanjali, Karthik. 2020. This 3-D Simulation Shows Why Social Distancing Is So Important. April 14<sup>th</sup>. *New York Times*. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/14/science/coronavirus-transmission-cough-6-feet-ar-ul.html>



**Figures 18-20:** Oklahoma State University (2020). OSU researchers examine social distancing models, encourage caution. *OSU News and Information*. April 7<sup>th</sup>. Available at <https://news.okstate.edu/articles/communications/2020/osu-researchers-examine-social-distancing-models-encourage-caution.html>

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<sup>i</sup> I have collected the videos on a public YouTube playlist, available at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1CQ1907K5PCWIeo03wEhPtRHdnwTfX16>.