CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Humans understand each other and make sense of the world by developing social constructs. Social constructs are the beliefs that human life exists as it does because of social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985). Notably, one of the examples of social constructs is gender. Unlike biological sex, which lies in the physiological differences between males and females, gender is something we perform. Gender is socially constructed in how individuals and cultures attribute particular traits to men and women based on their sex, though their attributions differ across societies (Blackstone, 2003). However, like other social groups, men and women are also subject to stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are the "fixed" beliefs about activities and traits considered appropriate for only a certain gender (Brannon, 2017), providing oversimplified assumptions of each sex and influencing how individuals are expected to act, behave, and what roles to bear in society. Men are expected to embody masculine traits, such as assertiveness and toughness, while women are expected to embody feminine traits such as gentleness and passivity. While some stereotypical gender traits—such as 'women are nurturing' or 'men are brave'—may seem positive, most tend to be harmful, particularly for women. This is because the formation of gender stereotypes is not exempt from the influences of patriarchy, as its values are commonly embedded within society. For instance, society often asserts the stereotypes that women are submissive, timid, and weak.

This perpetuates the idea that women are inherently subordinate and must rely on men, who are stereotypically known as strong leaders.

Since gender stereotypes are mostly taught and instilled throughout society, they become embedded in various social elements, including the media. Through platforms such as television, radio, newspapers, etc., we construct, deliver, and receive mass messages that shape our understanding of the world and its diverse perspectives. Among these platforms, video games in particular have become a popular form of entertainment due to their interactive nature. However, the video game industry is known to be established by a male-dominated workforce that designs games appealing to a male-centric market (Pan, 2023). This masculinity is reflected in both the production process and the content of the games, in which they often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes that elevate the male characters while sidelining female ones.

In terms of production, the video game industry is related to the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and despite societal progression, some occupations have remained profoundly sex-segregated, with women typically underrepresented in STEM fields (Sczesny et al. 2019). This is reflected in how, in 2021, 18% of American women worked in STEM occupations while men made up 30% (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2024). Thus, the roles and direction of women in the game development process remain restricted; female employees who work in the industry would still need to conform to the dominant male-centered norms

Given the patriarchal qualities of the video game industry, female characters are often constructed stereotypically; they are often underrepresented, lack depth in the story's narrative, or are portrayed as submissive and dependent on their male counterparts. Meanwhile, the male characters are depicted as brave, independent, and dominant. Such portrayals contribute to the creation of unequal expectations in society. They reinforce gender stereotypes where women are seen as passive, weak, and inconsequential as individuals. When these stereotypes are perpetuated, they become normalized and internalized by the audience, further reinforcing harmful views about how a woman should be. Therefore, analyzing the portrayals of female characters is essential to understanding how they are represented within a patriarchal world.

Considering the previously stated issues, this study aims to analyze how female characters are portrayed in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, a 2018 action-adventure game developed by Rockstar Games that focuses on male protagonist Arthur Morgan and the Van Der Linde gang as they navigate their lives as 19th-century outlaws. Similar to other video games, *Red Dead Redemption 2* also caters to the male interest, portraying themes such as violence and masculine values. The game's elements of the Wild West and portrayals of "cowboy culture" are particularly relevant as they are known for being deeply associated with American masculinity; in the late 19th century, cowboys became the poster men for a new formulation of masculinity that emphasized ruggedness, aggressiveness, and physical fitness (McGillis, 2009).

However, as opposed to the men who lived more freely, women in the 19th century faced significant societal constraints that restricted their personhood. Nineteenth-century women were often confined and reduced to stereotypical feminine roles, such as subordinate caregivers and dependent homemakers, with their purpose of nurturing the household. This raises the question of whether the game's female characters are portrayed in ways that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes through rigid feminine traits or if they challenge these stereotypes by exhibiting complexity. Given its background and male-centric nature, *Red Dead Redemption 2* serves as an interesting subject for exploring how female characters are portrayed.

In conducting this study, theories of gender stereotypes and liberal feminism will be utilized. Copenhaver's (2002) categorization is chosen to classify the characteristics of female characters. The first category, Behavior Characteristics, defines how women and men act toward each other and the world. Second, Communication Patterns refer to how men and women communicate, including the language they use (explicit or polite), what they communicate for, and how they express themselves. Source of Power refers to where women and men's roles find their control in public or domestic spheres. Lastly, Physical Appearance emphasizes how men and women are viewed physically.

To further analyze the characters' stereotypes, this study uses a liberal feminist lens, particularly Rosemarie Tong's *Feminist Thought*. While liberal feminism is often associated with political and legal reforms for gender equality, it also condemns oppressive gender roles as they hinder women's development. Therefore, the female characters' portrayals in this study will be discussed

through a liberal feminist perspective to explore whether their characteristics indicate resistance to gender stereotypes, and whether such resistance allows them to access liberal feminist values that bring personhood and equality.

Previous studies have examined the portrayal of female characters and gender stereotypes in various forms of media, such as video games, movies, books, etc. For this research, five studies were selected to provide relevant insights. Ward and Grower (2020) examine the role of media in the development of gender role stereotypes, while Bristot et al. (2019) focus specifically on the representation of women in various video games. Perrault et al. (2021) analyze female character portrayals in indie video games, offering a contrast to mainstream depictions. Gonzales et al. (2020) highlight the prevalence of gender stereotypes in children's animated films, and Kumar et al. (2022) investigate the evolution of gender stereotypes in media.

While previous studies have uncovered the understanding of how gender stereotypes manifest in various forms of media, *Red Dead Redemption 2,* in particular, has not been extensively studied for the portrayal of its female characters. The novelty of this study also lies in the incorporation of Copenhaver's (2002) gender stereotype framework, allowing a comprehensive analysis of whether female characters in a patriarchal game setting conform to or challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Additionally, this study incorporates the analysis of stereotypes through a liberal feminist lens. Therefore, this study aims to offer new perspectives regarding the portrayal of women in media, particularly video games, and contribute to the growing discourse on gender portrayal in gaming, an issue that remains highly relevant today.

1.2 Research Question

1. How are gender stereotypes portrayed in female *Red Dead Redemption 2* characters?

2. How do their portrayals grant them access to liberal feminist values that challenge patriarchal norms?

1.3 Purpose of Study

1. To identify the gender stereotypes portrayed in female *Red Dead Redemption 2* characters.

2. To analyze whether their portrayals grant them access to liberal feminist values that challenge patriarchal norms.

1.4 Scope of Study

This study focuses on gender stereotypes and liberal feminism. Out of seven female characters within the Van der Linde gang, this study will focus on four female characters based on the most screen time appearances, namely Sadie Adler, Abigail Roberts, Susan Grimshaw, and Tilly Jackson. This study examines the characters through dialogues and narrative in cutscenes. Using Copenhaver's (2002) gender stereotypes framework, the study identifies gendered traits of each character, categorizing them as either stereotypically masculine or feminine. Their identified traits are then analyzed through a liberal feminist lens to determine whether they allow the women access to values that bring them closer to personhood and equality.

1.5 Significance of Study

The writer hopes readers will gain a better understanding of the portrayals of stereotypes in female characters in media, given its significance in shaping the audience's perspectives. The writer also hopes that this understanding will empower readers to challenge harmful patriarchal expectations imposed on women, as it could hinder their achievement of personhood. For future researchers, the writer hopes that the results of this study could be utilized as a reference in studies concerning gender stereotypes and liberal feminism in media.