



# Digital Narrative and Interactive Design

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## Private: Your Mom Goes to College: Middle American Social Relations in Napoleon Dynamite

February 15, 2021 Max Phillips Edit

**Text:** *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)

**Model:** [Schelling's model of segregation](#)

### The Text

Jared Hess's cult comedy film *Napoleon Dynamite* creates a pastiche of mid-2000's mid-Western life: long expanses of farmland, isolated naivete, and decades-old fashion and technology still in the cultural zeitgeist. The film pairs this setting with a cast of quirky characters to create a nearly surreal image of flyover living. Despite its absurd tone and low-brow humor, *Napoleon Dynamite*, paired with the Schelling model, can provide an interesting insight into the social dynamics of mid-2000's mid-western America in regard to race and class.

I chose *Napoleon Dynamite* because the film is one of my favorites of all time, and I believe that many low-brow comedy films do not receive the analytical credit they deserve. I chose the Schelling model because it best represents the segregation of different groups of people in a broad sense; the terms of racial segregation can easily be scaled to apply to class as well. In the context of *Napoleon Dynamite*, the characters can serve as agents, with two disparate groups forming: the

“protagonists” and “antagonists.” The protagonists, such as Napoleon, Pedro and Deb, all act as social underdogs due to their socioeconomic, racial and cultural backgrounds. The antagonists, such as Uncle Rico and Summer, appear on the upper echelon of the social hierarchy (when compared to the protagonists).

## Rationale

By applying the Schelling model to the characters in this film, I believe a pattern will emerge to better understand the relationships between characters, the forces that draw them together, and by extension the complex social dynamics of the United States in 2004. *Napoleon Dynamite* is a film driven by its characters, placed in semi-unrelated vignettes of varying shenanigans.

In the famous final dance scene, Napoleon wins Pedro the school election with his choreography. According to Cateforis, “by breaking out into song, and often dance, adolescent males attempt to overcome social challenges.” Napoleon’s oddball behavior initially appears to further divide himself from his more popular peers. However, their standing ovation makes it clear that these barriers were broken down. These dance moves were bestowed upon Napoleon by LaFawnduh, the only black character in the film. This raises an interesting question in the racial relations in Idaho: can black culture only be celebrated if whitewashed? Can Latinx people only succeed with the support of white people?

Napoleon is constantly humiliated by those higher on the social hierarchy, often for his lack of traditional masculinity. However, he does not base his self-worth on this; he “refuses the imperatives of the gender system that he conform to a particular model of masculinity if he is to succeed” (Buchbinder 237) in winning the election. The application of the Schelling model will help to highlight the complex relations in Napoleon’s success against his classist odds.

## Rules

Many movies of the same era, such as *Mean Girls*, perpetuate the archetype of the mean, sometimes evil popular girl, and this archetype is present in the characters of Summer and Trisha. Uncle Rico, as a former high school football star and instigator in the Dynamite family, also plays into this popular vs. unpopular dynamic. By manipulating the parameters of the interactions between characters, the model can visualize interesting aspects of the relationships between the characters of different castes. For example, by eliminating Napoleon’s interactions with characters on the same level, such as Pedro, Deb, and Kip, we can more clearly realize his relationships with Summer, Trisha, and Don. If Napoleon never meets Pedro, how different would his prom date with

Trisha go?

In contrast, we can also map Napoleon's social networks by eliminating his interactions across social lines. By eliminating "popular" characters from the equation, we can more clearly represent the complex web of relationships Napoleon holds (or attempts to hold) with his family and friends.

## The Technical

My copy of the transcript for *Napoleon Dynamite* was sourced from a movie fansite, [awesomefilm.com](http://www.awesomefilm.com). The transcript contains only dialogue spoken by characters, which may be helpful in parsing the text and identifying character relationships more easily. Due to the formatting, the text will need to be modified manually in order to more easily parse in Python.

## Concerns

Despite *Napoleon Dynamite* having an interesting cast of characters, these characters are not particularly deep or numerous, and the script is not extensive. This may present some issues in the technical application of the Schelling model.

## Fair Use

The use of the transcript for *Napoleon Dynamite* falls under fair use, as described in Section 107 of U.S. Copyright Law.

- The work is being used in a nonprofit, educational setting.
- The copyrighted work is a creative, fictional work.
- The entirety of the main film's transcript is being used. Some deleted scenes are included in the transcript, but will be removed for canonical reasons. In the sampling portion of the program, only a small sample of the whole text will be used.
- This project is not for profit and will not be distributed outside of this class, so it will not infringe upon the potential market for the original copyrighted work.

## Sources

**Model:** <http://ccl.northwestern.edu/netlogo/models/Segregation>

**Transcript:** <http://www.awesomefilm.com/script/Napoleon-Dynamite-transcript.doc>

## Works Cited

Buchbinder, David. "Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinities in Recent Film and Television." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 38 no. 2, 2008, p. 227-245. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/crv.0.0012](https://doi.org/10.1353/crv.0.0012).

Cateforis, Theo. "Rebel Girls and Singing Boys: Performing Music and Gender in the Teen Movie." *Current Musicology*, 2009, pp. 161-190. *ProQuest*, <http://pitt.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/rebel-girls-singing-boys-performing-music-gender/docview/1037316/se-2?accountid=14709>.

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## 1 thought on "Private: Your Mom Goes to College: Middle American Social Relations in Napoleon Dynamite"



**JESSICA FITZPATRICK**

February 20, 2021 at 3:45 pm [Edit](#)

Max, You've got a thoughtful plan, one that builds from your initial research and is aware of the issues with the assumptions of your model's assumptions / text's realities. I wonder: How can you now start to push the boundaries a bit to work around those possible distinctions? If you're interested in race and the larger questions of School / State / Nation

then you may want to account if there's a heavily skewed school population, how might you replicate that into your model? (Remember rules might be useful here for both bringing in elements of the text or exploding / rewriting them.) Looking forward to this!

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