

# The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

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After eight years of development, *Red Dead Redemption 2* was released in 2018. It was met with both critical and commercial success, resulting in the biggest opening weekend in the history of entertainment, and ranking among one of the best-selling video games of all time. The game's scale, scope, and style is a large part of its success: Rockstar Games are well-known for popularising the 'sandbox' genre, a style of game which offers players a level of freedom and open-ended interaction. Despite its linear narrative progression, in which the player controls a morally-challenged outlaw within a fictional reflection of American expansionism, the game's sandbox nature allows players to complete missions and optional activities at their own pace and with an element of choice.

*Red Dead Redemption 2* <sup>[1]</sup> serves as the prequel to 2010's open-world Western game *Red Dead Redemption* <sup>[2]</sup>. *Red Dead Redemption* itself was the sequel to *Red Dead Revolver* <sup>[3]</sup> released in 2004. If that was not confusing enough, *Red Dead Revolver* is set in the 1880s, *Red Dead Redemption* is a new continuity (separate and distinct from *Revolver*) and set in 1911, where *Red Dead Redemption 2* is set in the same continuity as *Redemption* but in 1899, twelve years earlier. In the world of video games where the latest games look light-years ahead of their predecessors that only came out a few years previous, the eight years between the two *Red Dead Redemption* titles demonstrate the challenges of creating games that provide open-world sandbox gameplay that force the player

to take into consideration what is meant by the terminology of historical account, historical accuracy and historical authenticity.

This article will look at ways in which to approach and use video games as text, not too dissimilar to the use of film and literature, and their validity within the classroom. Its intentions are that of inspiring and encouraging teachers to utilise popular video games among their pupils to explore and better understand the way in which such video games shape and influence players' perspectives of historical narratives. It will explore *Red Dead Redemption 2* as an example of a video game that can be viewed through the lens of historical rigour and applied within a history-based classroom exercise. In particular, the article will analyse the content of *Red Dead Redemption 2* with three main themes: account, accuracy, and authenticity.

## Account, Accuracy, and Authenticity

### Account

The 'historical account' of a game refers to the evidence of a given observation, interpretation, and understanding of an instance in time. Video games have long used history, and the interpretation of historical account, as the basis to create engaging

play experiences. Events such as the French Revolution (*Assassin's Creed Unity*) <sup>[4]</sup> and the tribulations of 19th century pioneering (*The Oregon Trail*) <sup>[5]</sup> provide a framing for which playful and immersive experiences of adventure emerge. Environments are also used as rich, historical



Promotional artwork for *Red Dead Redemption 2*

backdrops to engage in play, such as the various conflicts and home-front settings of World War I (*Valiant Hearts: The Great War*)<sup>[6]</sup> and 16th-century Japan (*Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*)<sup>[7]</sup>. Games also utilise well-known historical figures to communicate information about a period of time, evidenced by the many leaders and figures (*Sid Meier's Civilisation V*)<sup>[8]</sup> and the interpretation of composer Frédéric Chopin's life and works (*Eternal Sonata*)<sup>[9]</sup>. Games act as containers of account based on the developer's underpinning research and knowledge of the instances that they depict and can be subject to critical analysis.

The challenge in looking at games as historical accounts is to separate the 'layers', which describes the various components of games that create an intended experience. Tracy Fullerton, Professor of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, divides these layers into two sections labelled 'formal elements' and 'dramatic elements'<sup>[10]</sup>. Formal elements are defined by the systems which govern the play experience. Rules, boundaries, procedures, objectives, conflicts, resources, and outcomes characterise the formal elements of a game. For example, the formal elements of *Sid Meier's Civilisation V* outline clear conditions of victory based on science, diplomacy, culture, and world domination, that the player must achieve in order to win the game. Dramatic elements concern the aesthetic components of a game that aim to establish an emotional connection with the player. Dramatic elements are interconnected with formal elements: 'premise' and 'challenge' presents to the player the context of the game's objectives and conflicts; the rules and boundaries of the game's system provides the space for 'play' to emerge; a 'story' and 'dramatic arc' are formed from the procedures that a player acts out in order to achieve the defined objectives of the game. Within *Sid Meier's Civilisation V*, the player must utilise elements of play across scenarios requiring strategy, negotiation, and an understanding of each character's unique personalities to navigate the game's emergent challenges and maximise the chances of reaching a victory condition first. By differentiating and identifying the characteristics of formal and dramatic elements of a game, an effective analysis of specific instances present in the game can be conducted without risk of misrepresenting or misunderstanding the representation of the game's components.

'Game analysis' is one such method of analysing games as artefacts of historical account. It applies practices of content analysis traditionally associated with identifying meaning and value in text such as literature, film, and art<sup>[11]</sup>. Game analysis acknowledges games as containers of text and provides a framework with which to identify, critique, and evaluate games and their reflection of a specific topic, issue, or audience. This technique is very useful when considering the historical account of a game, particularly if the goal of using games in a learning context is to facilitate sense-making and inductive reasoning. By participating in game analysis, learners develop a wide range of

skills relevant to their learning experience, including observational and descriptive skills, evaluation of sources, reasoning and justification, and presentation skills with their findings.

### Accuracy

The notion of 'historical accuracy' in games, and in other creative mediums, is often fiercely debated. Controversies abound where games are defended for their lack of racial diversity as more accurate representations of medieval Europe (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*)<sup>[12]</sup> or criticised for their prominent inclusion of female characters in circumstances perceived to be fictional or forced (*Call of Duty: WWII*)<sup>[13]</sup>. One of the fundamental issues with regard to whether a game is deemed to be 'historically accurate' is the perception of how the material details are portrayed. The material details are important to place the player in the game world and potentially more fictionalised narrative because they are the solid, objective facts. The developers need to be careful about including elements in games that actually existed at the time, in order for the player to feel that the world is believable and 'real', so that they can be immersed into the gameworld. This is especially true of popular historical eras in – be that the Renaissance (*Assassin's Creed 2*)<sup>[14]</sup>, World Wars (*Battlefield 1*)<sup>[15]</sup>, and the Western (*Red Dead Redemption 2*) – because players desire to be fully immersed in the story and world. The visual and visceral environments combined with the ability to replay missions and levels to examine the environment often bring players to the history and the sheer number of players (multiple millions) inevitably lead to a portion that are more aware of the history. One of the significant challenges is that the established historical record may already be perceived as wrong or incorrect due to other interpretations.

If we are considering video games, it is entirely possible for games to create a historically accurate representation of known elements. This can be considered as 'material accuracy'. In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, these are demonstrated through the factual use of organisations, events, buildings, outfits and objects. The accuracy of the material detail is fundamental to constructing a gameworld that is believable to the player. At the same time games tend to steer away from trying to align any historical accuracy to characters, especially in relation to thought and action. The games are an exaggerated version where the application of thought or action is not only up to interpretation, but is often a core mechanic that allows the player to choose options that would not be historically accurate. These are further extenuated by their application through the lens of present day attitudes and standards. The historical accuracy of the *Red Dead* series uses elements of historical accuracy to portray the American West in the 1880s, 1911 and 1899 but all through the lens of the developers and modern-day perceptions.

Many people think they know aspects of history that are not even remotely accurate, because they have seen or read about versions or accounts in other media. In film, television and fiction the demands of the narrative do not necessarily coincide with the recorded history. Yet, it is often in gaps in the historical record that storytellers find the space or opportunity to weave fact and fiction into a believable account, and this is where the difference between accuracy and authenticity becomes important.

### Authenticity

In games, more so than other mediums, 'historical authenticity' is generally regarded as a different concept than 'historical accuracy'. If we consider that accuracy is the contextualisation and alignment with the established historical record, be that the timeline of events, or the material accuracy of the various organisations, events, buildings, outfits and objects, then authenticity as a concept is much harder to define. It is more personal and subjective. The idea of authenticity is deeply rooted in the concepts of communal and collective memory. These are both the shared perceptions about what the past was and was not and are shaped by cultural identity. This can be used for moving past elements that are restrictive due to perceived notions of right and wrong. Take, for example *Battlefield 1*, a game that plays as the 'Hollywood' blockbuster of World War One games, made during the centennial of the first catastrophic world war of the twentieth century.

The game is made by a Swedish developer, published by an American conglomerate, and depicts a war that does not have the same connotations and reverence that might be expected from a British, Canadian, French or German perspective of that conflict.

Authenticity is less about getting the past completely accurate and more about getting the feeling of period and timeline correct. In many ways, authenticity is about creating a feeling for the gameplay experience that feels correct in order to be immersed. This can be reflected through other mediums. Comics such as *Commando* <sup>[16]</sup> or *Charley's War* <sup>[17]</sup> both feel authentic and have many aspects that are accurate but both are entirely fictional. In film, it is that same feeling that we experience the historical via a medium that never existed at the time. Whilst *Red Dead Redemption 2* is not historically accurate, Rockstar's sprawling cowboy epic may be set in a fictional place but it is firmly rooted in the early 20th century. The environment does

not have to be accurate but it has to feel authentic, and what Rockstar have achieved is in crafting one of gaming's best examples of carefully considered historical atmosphere. The game not only brings in elements that are directly derived from the period but it sets the scenes, dresses the environment and weaves facts and fiction so expertly that players can easily forgive discrepancies or inconsistencies. One other aspect that *Red Dead Redemption 2* deals with so skilfully is how it acknowledges the multiple layers of cultural memory associated with the wild west and from a multitude of perspectives. Whilst not always achieved with any subtlety it creates a world that can be believed, even if it can be taken to unbelievable or extreme actions.

### Historical Analysis of *Red Dead Redemption 2*

In this paper, we explore the world of *Red Dead Redemption 2* through the lenses of historical account, accuracy, and authenticity. Primarily, we will look at examples from three areas of the game's design which contributes to the historical setting of the American Old West during 1899. Firstly, we identify characters from the game and their real-world representations. Secondly, we analyse the environment as a container of

motifs and symbols that punctuate the time period. And finally, we develop an understanding of how real-world events have been transposed as in-game scenarios that contributes to the story told from the perspective of the player.



The Van der Linde Gang in transit, led by Dutch Van der Linde

### Characters

#### Van der Linde Gang

**Account:** The Van der Linde Gang are one of many fictional outlaw gangs in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and portrayed as the main protagonist faction of the game. Led by self-professed revolutionary Dutch Van der Linde, the gang features a host of outlaws struggling to deal with a changing social and political landscape within their American frontier. Of the gang, the player assumes the role of Arthur Morgan, a morally-balanced outlaw trusted enforcer of Van der Linde who is often instructed to carry out criminal activity on the gang's behalf, including train robberies, bank robberies, and theft, often resulting in bloodshed that leads to a greater spiral of unlawful behaviour.

**Accuracy:** The design of the Van der Linde Gang is influenced by many outlaw factions active during the decline of the Wild West: most notably, the Dalton Gang (1890-1892), the Doolin-Dalton Gang (1892-1895), and Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch (1899-1901). Notable figures include Butch Cassidy, one of the most

well-known outlaws during the late-19th century. Much of Cassidy's life is subject to media dramatisation with films such as *The Three Outlaws* <sup>[18]</sup> and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* <sup>[19]</sup>. While these interpretations are explicitly based on Cassidy's life events, these serve simply as inspiration for characters in *Red Dead Redemption 2*: Van der Linde possesses the charismatic leadership that guides a band of outlaws to some success in the American frontier, before increased pressure from the authorities forces him to flee on numerous occasions and descend into various delusions of grandeur that clouds his judgment. The mythos and subjectivity of Cassidy's life provided at most a framework – rather than an accurate account – to develop Van der Linde as the central figure through which a reflection of real-world major events take place in the game.

**Authenticity:** It is important to highlight that the dramatisation of the mythos surrounding key figures in the history of the American frontier, particularly those associated with Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch, brings into question the authenticity of the representation of characters. Specifically, it is important to emphasise the portrayal of outlaws as protagonists or of heroic qualities throughout media, and the risk of glorifying the motivations, behaviours, and injustices presented to the audience or player.

**Application to Learning:** Investigations of 19th century outlaw gangs; comparisons between Van der Linde Gang and real-world gangs; portrayal of morality in outlaw gangs in media and text.

#### Pinkerton Detective Agency

**Account:** In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Pinkerton agents appear as antagonists tasked with tracking down the Van Der Linde gang after they attempt a heist in the fictional town of Blackwater.

**Accuracy:** The Pinkerton National Detective Agency was established as a private security guard and detective agency in the United States by Scotsman Allan Pinkerton in 1850. The agency garnered attention after they claimed to have foiled a plot to assassinate president-elect Abraham Lincoln, but are largely known for their pursuit of outlaws in the American West and in their strikebreaking and other anti-labour activities

during the labour strikes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries <sup>[20]</sup>.

**Authenticity:** Although the activities of the Pinkertons in *Red Dead Redemption 2* are fictional, the use of a real world agency – and one that still existed as part of the Swedish security company Securitas AB – even in a historical context was problematic for the game. Indeed, the authenticity was considered significant enough that Take-Two Interactive (the publisher of *Red*



The Doolin-Dalton Gang. Four members were killed in a raid on banks in Coffeyville, Kansas in October 1892. Emmett Dalton survived to serve a long prison sentence.

*Dead Redemption 2*) had to settle out of court after the modern-day Pinkerton security company issued a cease-and-desist notice over the use of the company's trademarks and the game's negative portrayal of Pinkertons as villains <sup>[21]</sup>. Take-Two counter-argued, arguing that the use of the Pinkerton name should be covered under fair use, given that the game emphasises historical authenticity. Ultimately, the

dispute was settled without a court case <sup>[22]</sup>.

**Application to Learning:** Connection to American History (Westward Expansion, Immigration and the Melting Pot, Labour Organisation); Connection to Scottish History (Allan Pinkerton, Scottish Emigration and Diaspora); Exploration of modern day Copyright and Intellectual Property Law and the concept of 'Who Owns History?'

#### Murfree Brood

**Account:** One aspect that *Red Dead Redemption 2* demonstrates its understanding of the multiple layers of cultural memory associated with the Wild West is through the Murfree Brood family. In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the Murfree Brood are renowned for their looting, pillaging and ruthless murder. The brood are portrayed not just as stereotypical inbreds but as brutal savages and cannibals. In the game they are killed by Arthur Morgan in order for the Van der Linde gang to establish a new camp.

**Accuracy:** The Murfree Brood are arguably inspired by historical figures, such as the 'Kentucky Cannibal' Levi Boone Helm (1828-1864), who was notorious for robbing, murdering people, and feeding on their remains <sup>[23]</sup>. The tale of Alexander 'Sawney' Bean in Scotland may well be another inspiration. Sawney Bean was the leader of 16th-century clan that

allegedly resided in a cave and robbed travellers and locals, dismembering and consuming their victims <sup>[24]</sup>. The story has become more well known through the dark tourism circuit in Scotland and its influence on filmmakers such as Wes Craven for *The Hills Have Eyes* <sup>[25]</sup>.



A landscape of the scenic wilderness from *Red Dead Redemption 2*

response from the player. The developers have taken care and consideration to design a world which ‘feels’ situated in a time of social and political upheaval, emphasised by the technological implementation of dramatic techniques typically found in other forms of art and literature.

**Authenticity:** Like all good stories the semblance of some historical elements adds authenticity, but it is more obvious that the influences and connections are film-based. The rural, brutal clans are a trope from *Deliverance* <sup>[26]</sup> and *The Hills Have Eyes* through to those with a more distinctive Western theme. Influential Western horror films include *Ravenous* <sup>[27]</sup>, which revolves around cannibalism amongst a party of travellers in the American West in the 1840s (itself influenced by historical events such as the stories of the Donner Party and that of Alferd Packer, who both resorted to cannibalism to try to survive the trips West), and *Bone Tomahawk* <sup>[28]</sup>, which focuses on a posse travelling into a desolate region to rescue townspeople who were abducted by a cannibalistic tribe.

**Application to Learning:** Connection to American History (Westward Expansion; Manifest Destiny); Connection to Scottish history (Sawney Bean; Dark Tourism); Influence of films and other creative mediums on the crafting believable worlds.

## Environment

### Declining Wild West

**Account:** *Red Dead Redemption 2* takes place in 1899 during the decline of the frontier and the emergence of progressive reformation. This social and political upheaval conflicts with the way of life of outlaws opposed to progressivism, including Van der Linde’s vision of a ‘Savage Utopia’ free from governance and in support of personal liberty. The towns, cities, and highways of the frontier are often the battlegrounds of rival outlaws and law enforcement who aim to establish dominance in wealth, status, and ideology.

**Accuracy:** The presentation of the environment, and the narrative portrayed within it, has been influenced by many different types of sources. Primary sources of interest include Albert Bierstadt’s ‘Among the Sierra Nevada’, California <sup>[29]</sup> and N. C. Wyeth’s ‘Hands Up!’ <sup>[30]</sup>, whose paintings provide inspiration for landscapes, stories and events, and dramatic elements such as lighting and composition to elicit an emotional

**Authenticity:** The environment’s attempt to mimic the Old West during a period of reformation in the late-19th century is debatable. The situated context of the environment – during the transition from the ‘Gilded Age’ towards progressivism in America – provides a template of conflicting beliefs, values and perspectives from the game’s inhabitants that adds to the drama of the projected decline of the American frontier. In the twelve-year difference in time depicted in the game (between 1899 and 1911), most of the American West and South were established with the exception of Arizona, which was admitted as a state in 1912 and the inspiration for the ‘New Austin’ territory within the game that forms the basis of the environment in the first *Red Dead Redemption* game. Changes in the environment that reflect society’s ideological change are introduced over the course of the game, such as new residential and commercial properties, deforestation, and the completion of a major railway line. It is important to highlight that the game’s environment, much like its characters, is the setting of ‘historical fiction’ that explores themes and topics of a changing landscape similar to that of the American frontier: as a result, the game’s locations are subject to dramatisation as opposed to an account of historical accuracy.

**Application to Learning:** Understanding reformation and its impact on the American frontier; Social, environmental, political, and cultural developments during reformation; Art and literary depictions of 19th century American Old West.

### Encampments

**Account:** Encampments play a pivotal role for outlaws and gangs within the world of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Many gangs occupy a stationary encampment that provides strategic advantage to their goals, with various examples throughout the game: camps adjacent to towns and cities allows access to supplies such as medicines and ammunition, while presenting an accessible target for committing felonies; camps

close to rivers provide a fresh supply of food and water necessary for day-to-day survival; fortresses provide a resilient shelter from rival gangs.

**Accuracy:** Of particular interest is Horseshoe Overlook, the camp for the Van der Linde Gang during Chapter 2. This encampment is reflective of Hole-in-the-Wall Pass found in Johnson County, Wyoming, which was used by the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang and Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch. The Hole-in-the-Wall pass was considered an effective location for encampment as its secluded location and narrow passageways made it easy for outlaws to defend and difficult for law enforcement to approach undetected. As a result, the site was used frequently for over five decades. A cabin used by outlaws from Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch has been preserved at the Old Trail Town Museum, which provides primary evidence of the conditions and events of the American frontier <sup>[31]</sup>.

**Authenticity:** Encampments, and particularly the manner in which the Van der Linde Gang consistently move between various posts across the map, projects the feeling of insecurity, paranoia, and a necessity to be one step ahead in order to survive rival gangs and law enforcement. As a transitory gang,

the Van der Linde gang are found to move between encampments. This is often as a way of escaping law enforcement as a result of their criminal activity, but it also presents the reality of the time period: outlaw gangs often moved across the country in search of the promise of riches, operating across a large area rather than a specific location. In this instance, the Van der Linde Gang are moved across landscapes that represent the states of Louisiana, Texas, North Carolina, and Arizona. Overall, encampments in *Red Dead Redemption 2* provide a believable balance of shelter and fortification, access to materials and supplies, and ease of transit and mobility to accommodate the Van der Linde Gang's needs to survive.

**Application to Learning:** Identify significant encampments and their (dis)advantages to outlaws; Case studies of outlaw gangs, and their travel and use of encampments.

### Saint Denis

**Account:** Saint Denis is the largest urban area within *Red Dead Redemption 2*. With an infrastructure of

industrial warehouses, freight railway lines, and cargo ports, Saint Denis is a city booming with manufacturing, trade, and commerce. The metropolitan city features a densely populated and overcrowded area closest to the industrial space in the south-east, an affluent residential area to the west, and various slums in the north-east of the city. Saint Denis is notable for its diversity of residents which includes American, French, Chinese, Italians, and African-Americans. Saint Denis is presented as a juxtaposition to the towns and wilderness that populates the majority of the game's environments, as well as a drastic and unsettling experience for the Van der Linde Gang who are not accustomed to cities.

**Accuracy:** The design of Saint Denis adopts many of the characteristics and time-period understandings of the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Many real-world locations in New Orleans are dramatised within Saint Denis. Firstly, Jackson Square, a central location in New Orleans' history and the home to an arsenal in the late-



A still of Arthur Morgan preparing to rob a train

19th century, is present and depicted as Harris Square, though many key buildings have been removed. Secondly, there are various mentions in newspaper clippings and citizen conversations around the murder of Henry Jenkins,

a representation

of the real-world murder of David Hennessy in 1890, which led to the New Orleans lynchings, the largest single-mass lynching in U.S. history <sup>[32]</sup>. Finally, the player can interact with a vampire in the alleyways of Saint Denis once they have met several conditions within the game: this is loosely based on New Orleans' rich cultural history with the legend of vampires, such as Count Saint Germain and the Carter brothers, though the vampire portrayed in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is based on Count Orlok from the film *Nosferatu* <sup>[33]</sup>, which was published numerous years after the events of both the main storyline (1899) and the epilogue (1911). This further reinforces the need to interpret the design of Saint Denis as a fictional characterisation of New Orleans loosely based on real-world events from the 19th and 20th centuries that helped to shape its design.

**Authenticity:** The city of Saint Denis is a complex and well-designed manifestation of historical significance. New Orleans was known to be the largest port of the American South during the 19th century: Saint Denis reflects this scale and significance as the largest and

busiest city in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. The diversity of Saint Denis overlaps with the colonial and slave history of New Orleans, particularly with respect to French and African-American civilians. The civil history of New Orleans is reflected in the segregated design of the city: in particular, the African-American community occupy the northern, disconnected slums. This could possibly be a design decision that reflects the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* <sup>[34]</sup>, a landmark ruling in the U.S. Supreme Court that constitutionalised racial segregation and came to be known as the “separate but equal” doctrine. Saint Denis can also be interpreted as a personification of St. Denis of Paris, a 3rd century bishop. Denis’ patronage is embodied through the city’s design, with various French motifs (as patron of France and Paris), the high surveillance and volume of law enforcement (as patron of anti-frenzy), and an optional mission focusing on the control vermin within a derelict saloon (as patron of hydrophobia) <sup>[35]</sup>.

**Application to Learning:** Investigate the history of New Orleans during 19th century American Old West; Case studies of events in New Orleans that culminated in social, cultural, political, and environmental reformation; Socioeconomic inequalities in 19th-century American Old West.

#### Events

The Union Pacific Overland Flyer Robbery

**Account:** The fifth mission of the main storyline in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is entitled ‘Who the Hell is Leviticus Cornwall?’. This main objective of the mission is to carry out an attack on the private train of Leviticus Cornwall with the intention of stealing large sums of cash that is on-board. The mission plays on the Western trope of train robbery with Arthur Morgan required to chase after and leap on-board a moving train, and gradually pressing forward boxcar to boxcar.

**Accuracy:** The game could use any number of famous train robberies but the clearest influence is that of the Wilcox Robbery <sup>[36]</sup> which was undertaken by the Wild Bunch, including infamous members Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. That this robbery occurred on 2 June 1899, and that the timeline ties in with the game, is largely fortuitous: the in-game events follow aspects of the robbery but with some added interactive additions. For example, the Union Pacific Overland Flyer was not leapt on by the robbers but was simply flagged down by two men with warning lights, whereupon the first engine was disconnected from the rest of the train and a bridge blown up to prevent the second part of the train from following. One of the similarities is that, in both the in-game robbery and the Wilcox robbery, the gang used dynamite to blow the doors off of a car: in the game it is used on the personal carriage of Leviticus Cornwall, whereas in the real world it was used on the mail and express cars.

**Authenticity:** One of the core elements of authenticity is not the use of the train robbery as a set piece for

players but in the introduction of Leviticus Cornwall. This character is both a parodic caricature of the 19th century’s captains of industry and an amalgamation of business leaders (or ‘robber barons’) like George Vanderbilt, J.P. Morgan, and the Scottish-born Andrew Carnegie. Cornwall is presented as having the same limitless wealth and associated power. One aspect that Rockstar explore is the connections with industry, labour and colonialism but without the complexity of the anti-imperialist movement that was supported by the likes of Carnegie. The details provide an authentic feeling but Rockstar stop short of making any social commentary on such wealth.

**Application to Learning:** Exploring the history and political motivations of the great American industrialists of the 19th century; Connections to Scotland via Andrew Carnegie and his philanthropy; Investigating the impact of movements such as anti-imperialism that divided the US in a similar vein to Brexit, Influence of films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* on the game’s events.

#### The Spanish-American War

**Account:** *Red Dead Redemption 2* carefully weaves fact and fiction not just in the foreground to the player but throughout the gameworld. For example, the in-game President Alfred MacAlister bears not only a similarity to the real-world equivalent William McKinley (1843-1901) but the timeline bears this out with references to the 1898 Spanish-American War and the start of the Philippine Insurrection through various newspapers. Other fictional representations of real people include Colonel Thaddeus Waxman, a thinly-veiled Theodore Roosevelt Jr. (1858-1919) whose backstory demonstrates both the direct relevance to historical fact and the blending with a fictional world. Waxman is a politician (fact) and military officer (fact) who, at a time before 1899, had served as a U.S. Senator (fiction). He was best known for leading American troops to victory in Guarma (fact, in that Guarma is a fictitious Cuba) during the Battle of San Juan Hill (fact, from 1898).

**Accuracy:** There are various elements that are sufficiently accurate that, at the very least, Rockstar can argue they mimicked the press of the day. For example, the Spanish-American War was regarded as a unifying call-to-arms for the American people (it was the first war since the American Civil War) and this is portrayed as North and South joining together to defeat Spain. Similarly, there are references to the ‘splendid little war’, acknowledgement that the U.S. Navy defeated the Spanish fleet in a mere few hours without loss of life and that only about 300 Americans lost their lives in the war (at least in combat). Whilst the newspapers of *Red Dead Redemption 2* represent the period - they are jingoistic and mimic the tone of ‘yellow journalism’ - they are also simplified and modernised for the audience. For example, the front pages replace the dense advertising text of the real papers of 1899 with headlines and news accounts, and are supplemented with the use of drawings.

**Authenticity:** The newspapers in *Red Dead Redemption 2* are not accurate portrayals of the press, yet they do give an impression of authenticity to the proceedings. The news accounts that they recount do give an aura of the journalistic standards of 1899. The developers mimic the headlines of the day, grabbing the readers' attention whilst being jingoistic in the reporting. For example, the headline 'Army General Praises Troops' in *Blackwater Ledger* No. 70 quotes the fictional General Edwin Forsythe as saying, "The Treaty of Paris stands as proof that no country dare challenge the United States. Our men fight strong and brave and for God and Country". The melding of the real Treaty of Paris<sup>[37]</sup> with a fictional general plays into the perception of authenticity. The use of fictionalised characters that replicate the real world equivalent (the backstory of Alfred MacAlister's assassination and succession of Thaddeus Waxman is the same as that of William McKinley being succeeded by Theodore Roosevelt Jr.) and events (the Spanish-American War and subsequent Philippine Insurrection are mentioned, but in the game's universe the Battle of San Juan Hill takes place not in Cuba but in the gameworld island location of Guarma). This weaving of fact and fiction allows players to believe that the fictionalised world is sufficiently authentic.

**Application to Learning:** Considering yellow journalism in the context of modern day 'fake news'; American imperialism (and the anti-imperialist movement which is not covered in the game) and the careers of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt Jr. as portrayed through Alfred MacAlister and Thaddeus Waxman.

### Civic Unrest in the Reconstruction Era

**Account:** With the decline of the American frontier and the emergence of the Progressive Era (characterised by civic issues such as industrialisation, immigration, and corruption), many wealthy families and allegiances sought ways to grow or protect their assets amidst political reform. Within *Red Dead Redemption 2*, this is characterised by two opposing families that the Van der Linde Gang engage with over the course of Chapter 3. Firstly, the Braithwaite family represent the Confederacy of the region and opposed changes to slave labour that saw the demise of their wealth through vast cotton plantations. Instead, the Braithwaite family aligned with an anti-government militia (the Lemoyne Raiders) and deal in the illicit trade of 'moonshine'. Secondly, the Gray family built their wealth in cattle and tobacco. Their alignment with law enforcement highlights the Gray family's attempt to capitalise on new reconstruction policies with their support of the government. Both families have a deep-rooted and vehement opposition to each other, which began with the theft of gold and the subsequent blaming each other for its disappearance.

**Accuracy:** The Braithwaite-Gray feud encapsulates and recreates many cases from the Reconstruction Era in which rivalling families split between the Confederacy and the Government. In particular, two

main feuds provide the influence for the Braithwaite-Gray feud. Firstly, the Liddell-Jones feud<sup>[38]</sup> saw the Confederate-aligned Liddell family (Braithwaites) at war with the Jones family (Grays) who supported the local Reconstruction government. The war over wealth, plantations, and revenge killings lasted over three decades. In particular, both families lost a significant portion of wealth as a result of the American Civil War, and held opposing views on ways to strengthen their economic position. Secondly, the Hatfield-McCoy feud<sup>[39]</sup> emerged during the American Civil War and continued into the 1890s. The cause of the feud is obscure and debated, though the feud remains one of the most infamous feuds in American history, enshrouded by political corruption and murder, and enshrined through film, music, and television.

**Authenticity:** The uncertainties and the high drama surrounding the Liddell-Jones and Hatfield-McCoy feuds, including underlying motivations and unbiased accounts, allow *Red Dead Redemption 2* to explore themes of dispute during the Reconstruction Era through a similar framework: through two families, similar in wealth, with directly-conflicting views on how to maintain and develop wealth in a changing landscape. By situating the player as an external force to the feud (where the Van der Linde Gang operate as supporters and opposition to both families) the resolution of the Braithwaite-Gray feud differs greatly from its inspirations: in the drastic loss of life and wealth at the hands of an outlaw gang. This dramatisation makes sense from the perspective of the game's delivery, where the outlaws overcome adversity as a sign of the gang's character development, though it veers wildly from the accounts of each feud.

**Application to Learning:** Case studies of feuds within the American frontier surrounding Confederacy and Government; Reformation policies and the impact on family-led businesses in 19th-century American Old West.

### Next Steps

At their core, the concepts of 'historical account', 'historical accuracy' or 'historical authenticity' in video games are at best nebulous. They are more challenging than those posed through the range of creative endeavours that are inspired by history from historical novels, living history museums, historical re-enactments, and historical dramas. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is not a game that teaches history, and if it was it is unlikely it would succeed in grabbing students' attention. However, as a game that invites players to learn about the world and, in particular, America in 1899, it gives a distinct sense of the characters, environments, and events that have enough historical grounding that the game can open up new ways of exploring how to teach American Expansionism and how that relates to the wider world and its interpretations in the modern world. As a game, *Red Dead Redemption 2* does more than explore history, but brings our cultural understandings



and interpretations of the American West into one expansive sandbox (a style of game in which minimal character limitations are placed on the gamer, allowing the gamer to roam and change a virtual world at will - [www.technopedia.com](http://www.technopedia.com)) where players need to play with history to understand the world of the protagonist.

By providing *Red Dead Redemption 2* as an example of how games can be understood as text within a learning environment, we hope to encourage the use of more games within the classroom to explore subject matter. This paper has focused specifically on games as containers of historical text, and how our curiosity and understanding of real-world events is stimulated as a result of the rich stories and immersive environments found in video games. By exploring the account, accuracy, and authenticity of games, this paper intends to provide a framework with which to approach the critical analysis of the game and its historical significance.

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