

The University of Central Oklahoma

**The Educational Value of *Red Dead Redemption II*:
Analyzing Law and Order, Environmental Pollution, and Tuberculosis in Rockstar's
Blockbuster Video Game**

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Department of History and Geography
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Abstract

Released in 2018, *Red Dead Redemption II* (*RDR2*) is a video game set at the demise of the American frontier that explores historical themes such as racism, environmental pollution, Indigenous communities, capitalism, corruption, Manifest Destiny, and more. As of 2026, *RDR2* is the third best-selling video game of all time. Production on the game began in 2010 following the release of its predecessor, *Red Dead Redemption* (*RDR*). The eight-year development cycle permitted designers ample time to ensure *RDR2* is historically accurate to its setting of 1899, though some discrepancies exist. The game's open world features five states representative of American cultures and climates with environments, weaponry, transportation, and technology allowing the player to experience life at the end of the nineteenth century. In 2021, *RDR2* became the subject of a college course at the University of Tennessee Knoxville taught by Tore Olsson, a professor of the American South. Called "Red Dead America," his class examines the violence and dilemmas presented in *RDR2* through an academic lens. This thesis expands on Olsson's work in arguing for the efficacy of *RDR2* as a mode of "edutainment" (educational entertainment) by utilizing primary and secondary sources to analyze the historicity of three facets of the game—law and order, environmental pollution, and tuberculosis—and their roles in the settlement of the American West.

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Introduction

America, 1899. The end of the Wild West era has begun.¹

—Rockstar Studios

The American West has long been a cultural phenomenon. Larger-than-life figures like rough and tough John Wayne, singing cowboy Gene Autry, and future president Ronald Reagan graced the big screen as heroic figures of the Wild West. Western rodeos became nationwide entertainment. The National Rodeo Hall of Fame and Hall of Great Westerners are found at Oklahoma City's National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, better known as simply, "The Cowboy."² The mascot for "America's Team," the most valuable sports team in the world, is the cowboy.³ Why is there so much fascination with the American West? What is it about the West, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century, that generates so much interest? How did Western movies become the dominant film genre of the twentieth century? What sparked the development of Western video games in the twenty-first century? Academics have long studied and debated representations of the West through popular media such as dime novels, film, and television, but little is written on Western video games. One reason for this is that Western video games are significantly younger than print and screen media, with the first mainstream Western video game, *The Oregon Trail*, released in 1971. Western arcade games followed during the

¹ This is the beginning of the official description of *Red Dead Redemption II* by publisher Rockstar Studios. *Red Dead Redemption II*, Rockstar Games, accessed June 22, 2026, <https://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2/>.

² "This is The Cowboy," National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, accessed June 28, 2026, <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/about-the-museum/thecowboy/>.

³ The Dallas Cowboys are worth \$13 billion, which is two billion more than the next team. Brett Knight, Justin Teitelbaum, and staff, "The World's 50 Most Valuable Sports Teams 2025," *Forbes*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettknight/2025/12/18/the-worlds-50-most-valuable-sports-teams-2025/>; "Most Valuable Sports Teams Worldwide in 2025," *Statista*, December 19, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278027/brand-value-of-sport-teams-franchises-worldwide/>.

arcade boom of the late 1970s into the 1980s, and Western console games gained popularity in the early 2000s as the video game industry has blossomed into the most popular form of entertainment worldwide.⁴ Advancements in gaming technology have produced incredible open worlds of a fictional living West with narratives and storylines of questionable historicity, which has garnered attention of historians. This thesis explores these questions and more by analyzing Western mythology through the most popular Western video game of all time—*Red Dead Redemption II (RDR2)*.

Competitive gaming, known as Esports, offers million-dollar payouts and many universities actively recruit teams that have their own full-time coach.⁵ The National Association for Collegiate Esports includes over two-hundred-and-sixty member institutions that award more than sixteen million dollars in scholarships each year.⁶ The most popular games for Esports include *Counter-Strike*, *PUBG*, *Dota 2*, *Fortnite*, *League of Legends*, *Valorant*, *Rocket League*, *Call of Duty*, *Rainbow Six Siege*, and *Apex Legends*.⁷ All of these games are online multiplayer, meaning players compete against each other on a dedicated internet server for each game.

Despite the popularity of Esports there is little historical value or realism for the most popular video games (some installations of *Call of Duty* being a notable exception). Contrarily,

⁴ The global market value for video games is three hundred billion dollars, surpassing that of the film, music, and sports industries. “Video Game Market (2025-2030),” Market Analysis Report, Grand View Research, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/video-game-market>; “Video Games Industry Is Bigger Than Film, Sports and Music,” Gamepressure, May 11, 2021, <https://www.gamepressure.com/newsroom/gaming-market-grows-beyond-cinema-sports-and-music/z03265>.

⁵ “Esports: The Rise of Competitive Gaming and Why It’s Here to Stay,” Top End Sports, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.topendsports.com/sport/esports/rise-of-esports.htm>; Shilo Lucyk, “Esports in College: What You Need to Know (2025),” Appily, January 30, 2025, <https://www.appily.com/guidance/articles/academics-college-readiness/esports-in-college-what-you-need-know>.

⁶ Shilo Lucyk, “Best Colleges with Esports in 2025,” Appily, January 29, 2025, <https://www.appily.com/guidance/articles/applying-to-college/colleges-with-esports-programs>.

⁷ Kristjan Schellenberg, “Biggest Esports Games,” Esports.net, March 6, 2025, <https://www.esports.net/news/top-10-esports-games/>.

one franchise that has been praised for its historicity is Rockstar Studio's *Red Dead* franchise consisting of *Red Dead Revolver* (*Revolver*), released in 2004; *Red Dead Redemption* (*RDR*), released in 2010; and *RDR2*, released in 2018. Well-received for their detail, depth, and realism, the trio of games has combined to sell more than one hundred million units, with *RDR2* being the best-selling video game since its release and third best-selling video game in history.⁸ All three *Red Dead* games are Western-themed, with *Revolver* set in the 1880s and *RDR* and *RDR2* (hereafter referred to collectively as *Redemption*) set in 1899, 1907, 1911, and 1914 in various stages of the games. Gaming website *IGN* listed *RDR* as thirty-seventh and *RDR2* as eighth on their list of best video games of all time.⁹ Limited by console capabilities of the early 2000s, *Revolver* does not feature a detailed explorable world like *Redemption* and is reminiscent of shooter games commonly found in arcades of decades past. *RDR2*, which is revered for true-to-life depictions of the American West, became the subject of a University of Tennessee history course taught by professor Tore Olsson. Called "Red Dead America," the class examines the violence and dilemmas presented in *RDR2* through an academic lens.¹⁰

Olsson's book, *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past*, focuses primarily on violence in *RDR2*. "Violence," he says, "might in fact open a window to better understanding the defining features of modern American history." He adds that violence

⁸ Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., *The Red Dead Redemption Series*, Rockstar Games: Diverse Portfolio of Industry-Leading Owned Intellectual Property, November 2025, 12, <https://ir.take2games.com/static-files/2b782ec8-e583-4f7b-a213-86f2d1dbce40>; Wesley Yin-Poole, "Red Dead Redemption 2 Overtakes Wii Sports in Best-Selling Games of All Time List," May 21, 2026, <https://www.ign.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-2-overtakes-wii-sports-in-best-selling-games-of-all-time-list>.

⁹ IGN staff, "The Top 100 Video Games of All Time," *IGN*, updated May 23, 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/the-best-100-video-games-of-all-time>.

¹⁰ Tore Olsson, *Red Dead America: Exploring America's Violent Past Through the Hit Video Games*, (Department of History, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Fall 2022), Syllabus.

is intertwined with the social and political issues of the era.¹¹ As a historian of the US South, Olsson writes about Jim Crow laws and political corruption portrayed in *RDR2*'s southern locations, reflecting on how they have shaped America today. He notes that there are historical inaccuracies with *RDR2*'s 1899, like the Ku Klux Klan being active in the game while dormant historically, and the prevalence of government-tribal relations in *RDR2*'s sixth chapter that had largely ceased by the end of the 1880s.¹² The lack of time-accurate issues is likely by developer choice to make playing *RDR2* more engaging than if it was based on strict historical accuracy. According to Dan Houser, co-founder of Rockstar Games and lead writer on *RDR2*, social issues like gender and racial disparities were oppressive and not suitable for an entertaining video game. “(*RDR2*) may be a work of historical fiction...but you can’t do it with 100 percent historical accuracy,” he says, because “it would be deeply unpleasant.”¹³ Houser’s acknowledgment that *RDR2* is not fully historically accurate in favor of entertainment value regarding unpleasant social issues can be extrapolated to the anachronisms. In “Red Dead America,” Olsson addresses the unpleasantness in *RDR2* that writers intentionally omitted. Despite these inaccuracies, Olsson extracts enough historicity from the game to utilize it for a college course by highlighting what the game gets right and what it does not about 1899 America.

“The historicity on show in *RDR2* is on many levels breathtaking,” write John Wills and Esther Wright in the introduction to *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*. The book’s collection of authors emphasizes the game’s portrayal of several

¹¹ Tore Olsson, *Red Dead’s History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America’s Violent Past*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2024), 4-5.

¹² Olsson, *Red Dead’s History*, 4.

¹³ Sam White, “Red Dead Redemption 2: The Inside Story of the Most Lifelike Video Game Ever,” *GQ Magazine*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/red-dead-redemption-2-interview>.

historical themes, such as post-Civil War racial issues in the South, the suffragette movement, and industrialism, as well as digital representations of nature and architecture consistent with the turn of the century. For players, the game “provides their most extensive foray into Western history...far more complex than that offered by a single book or film” because it offers both “traditional and revised histories of the West.”¹⁴ This complicated presentation of the West is in part what makes *RDR2* so appealing to players and historians alike. Every Western stereotype is on full display, including train and bank robberies, duels, cowboys, and Indians. But *RDR2* also contains longstanding American issues such as political strife, labor, capitalism, and corruption. These intertwine to establish a narrative on the West.

Olsson states that *RDR2* can be used to guide our understanding of the past, but that the games alone do not reach status of an educational tool without accompaniment, simultaneously acknowledging that “video games can be powerful tools in teaching serious historical content.”¹⁵ The purpose of this thesis is to expand on Olsson’s vision and provide supplemental material that demonstrates the effectiveness of using *RDR2* as an educational tool to explore the history of law and order, environmental pollution, and tuberculosis in the American West. This is accomplished by inclusion of primary and secondary source material such as newspaper articles, medical reports, personal writings, government documents, books, and journal articles.

Law and order in *RDR2* combines a mix of Western mythology and historicity with the inclusion of gunslingers that are depicted as heroes of fabricated tales, as well as the real Pinkerton Detective Agency playing the role of nemesis.¹⁶ The game also includes real events but

¹⁴ George Wills and Esther Wright, *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), 4, 8.

¹⁵ Olsson, *Red Dead’s History*, 5-6.

¹⁶ The Pinkerton Detective Agency still exists under parent company AB Securitas, who sued Rockstar Games over their portrayal in *RDR2*. Rockstar filed a counterclaim. The cases were eventually withdrawn or

in the wrong time period, such as Indigenous tribal relations with the federal government that were violent, but, as noted by Olsson, those events had largely ended by *RDR2*'s setting of 1899. Something not portrayed extensively in the game that became a constant legal battle in the early twentieth century is rights to land belonging to American Indian tribes, a fight that continues well into the twenty-first century. Much like the settlement of the historical West, *RDR2*'s West contains many mythological concepts mixed with real people, places, and events. Therefore, the game, despite not being a fully historically accurate narrative, lends itself to analysis of what it gets right and wrong about law and order in the West.

Despite the abundance of environmental contamination in *RDR2*, no aspect of the story narrative comments on it. Pollution is inescapable, however, when roaming the game's open world. Most notable is toxic water, particularly when adjacent to active or abandoned mining communities. It is well-established that mining practices throughout the nineteenth century produced swaths of environmental hazards, as is evident in *RDR2*, yet it is interesting that the game makes practically no comment on the issue outside of one in-game newspaper article titled "Contamination."¹⁷ It is possible that the in-game silence regarding environmental pollution reflects the lack of concern by powerful industrialists and corporations largely responsible for creating it. Regardless of why it is not a bigger factor in the game, the visuals provided demonstrate the severity of environmental pollution and those can be used to study nineteenth century environmental practices.

dismissed. Joey Callo, "9 Rockstar Lawsuits You Might Not Have Heard About," Lawyer Inc, April 21, 2026, <https://lawyerinc.com/rockstar-lawsuits/>; Rebekah Valentine, "Take-Two, Rockstar Complaint Against Pinkerton Dismissed," Games Industry, April 11, 2019, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/take-two-rockstar-dismiss-complaint-against-pinkerton>.

¹⁷ "Contamination," Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed May 29, 2026, <https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Contamination>.

Tuberculosis is a hereditary disease, the symptoms of which have been described for millennia.¹⁸ Affecting both humans and animals, tuberculosis was the cause of death for many in the settlement of the American West.¹⁹ It is also the cause of death for *RDR2* protagonist Arthur Morgan, as his impending fatality plays a key factor in his late-game decisions. As Arthur becomes more progressively ill, the effects from the disease become more prominent as he struggles to breathe and his body thins and weakens. Since tuberculosis plays a major role in the character development of *RDR2*'s leading actor, it prompts exploration of the history of the disease and its impact on public health and the settlement of the West. By analyzing Arthur's diagnosis scene as well as supplementary newspaper reports and journal articles regarding tuberculosis, the historicity of the disease as portrayed in *RDR2* can be evaluated and the accuracy of Arthur's portrayal, including the scene in which he is diagnosed, can be assessed.

Through historical analysis of law and order, environmental pollution, and tuberculosis in *RDR2*, this thesis will demonstrate the efficacy of using the game as a learning tool in higher education. This is done by combining game elements with primary and secondary source data such as newspaper reports and government documents, studies regarding environmental contamination, and causes, treatment methods, and discovery of a cure for tuberculosis. By using *RDR2* in conjunction with the supplemental material, an educational hook is achieved that can generate curiosity in students that would otherwise not be concerned or interested in the historical content.

¹⁸ Seyed Mohammad Amin Mousavi-Sagharchi, Atousa Ghorbani, Maryam Meskini, and Seyed Davar Siadet, "Historical Examination of Tuberculosis: From Ancient Affliction to Modern Challenges," *Journal of Infection and Public Health* 18, no. 3 (March 2025): abstract, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jiph.2024.102649>.

¹⁹ "The Forgotten Plague: Tuberculosis in America," Public Broadcasting Service, written and directed by Chana Gazit, aired February 10, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/plague/>.

Chapter 1

Historiography

Travelers long had found fascination in looking for what they conceived to be the West—a land of cowboys, gunslingers, and “red” Indians—only to be disappointed when they found black broadcloth suits, real-estate agents, tramways, and gaslit streets.²⁰

—Robert G. Athearn

The significance of the West in American history reached the forefront of academic circles when Frederick Jackson Turner presented his frontier thesis at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. Though others had written on the West, including future president Theodore Roosevelt with his 1889 book, *The Winning of the West*, Turner argued that the frontier closed three years earlier, coinciding with U.S. Census Bureau’s declaration of closure in 1890.²¹ “What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks,” he writes, “the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States...And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”²² This era being the conclusion of the first chapter of American history is largely predicated on the finalization of settlement from coast-to-coast, as Turner explains that the frontier ends when the availability of free land ends.²³

Since Turner’s presentation historians have debated even the most basic ideas of where and when constitute the American frontier. In earlier interpretations of the West, the easternmost

²⁰ Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 17.

²¹ United States Census Bureau, “Following the Frontier Line, 1790-1890,” September 6, 2012, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/001/>.

²² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 38.

²³ Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 3.

boundary often began with the Mississippi River. Over time as development and eastern technology reached beyond that line in an ever-expanding Midwest, historians began to approach the West's boundaries by a different definition, with many indicating the ninety-eight to hundredth meridian as the eastern border of the West.²⁴ Though the census formally closed the frontier in 1890, that does not mean the West had ended. From those that lived in the era, personal connections shaped their perspective of the closure. Cowboys often indicated the 1880s as the end coinciding with cattle drives coming to a halt. Ranchers and miners reminisce that it ended around 1900 when there was no more open land to graze or resources to extract. Younger generations may have cited it as late as 1913.²⁵ Understanding the complexity in identifying where and when constitute the Old West is part of its mythology as penned by Turner. Henry Nash Smith noted the significance of Turner's thesis, claiming, "[A] whole generation of historians took over his hypothesis and rewrote American history in terms of it."²⁶ These conversations, coupled with Hollywood glamorizing the Western genre of film and television for over fifty years, provide a mythical nature to the West.

In the 1996 PBS documentary *Ken Burns Presents: The West*, Richard White quips,

The myth of the West is a very appealing one. The myth of the West is that there once existed a place which was free for the take. And in which people who were willing to work hard, people who were willing to invest their own labor, could not only improve their lives, but they could improve the place themselves. That out of this labor, out of this struggle, would come progress, would come a better world than they ever imagined. Not just for themselves and not just for their children, but indeed for the whole world. Stated

²⁴ Athearn, *The Mythic West*, 17. The ninety-eighth meridian starts in the north with the easternmost border of North Dakota, proceeding south through the great plains of eastern Nebraska and Kansas, central Oklahoma, and finally along the western edge of east Texas, concluding just east of the southern tip of Texas. The hundredth meridian begins in the north with the middle of North Dakota, extending south through the center of South Dakota and Nebraska, western Kansas, far west Oklahoma, and concluding along the western edge of Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

²⁵ Athearn, *The Mythic West*, 21.

²⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 3.

that way, the myth has this extraordinary appeal. But of course what it does is mask the infinitely more complicated, more tangled story.²⁷

One of the falsehoods of this myth is that there existed open land free for the take as Native Americans inhabited the land for thousands of years prior to westward expansion by European settlers. Patricia Limerick notes one reason that settlers easily dismissed the idea that the land belonged to American Indians is that they “were not using the land properly” and it was the responsibility of the Europeans settlers to “liberate the land for its proper uses,” which, as consequence, means removing its inhabitants.²⁸ Ray Allen Billington echoes this, citing efforts to expand mining and transportation across the West that resulted in conflicts with Native Americans. “What should be done with the red men who roamed the prairies and hunted in mountain valleys coveted by whites?” he posed about the issue.²⁹ In addition to using the land for material resources, the growing cattle industry also necessitated uninterrupted access to grazing land on the plains. Calling it “America’s last frontier,” Billington indicates that the “Indian barrier” was an enduring and deadly process that culminated in the cost of “blood, wealth, and human decency which will forever stain the annals of the American frontier.”³⁰ Through violence and turmoil the West was eventually settled by easterners and its land used for different means than its prior inhabitants, though the process is more akin to a takeover than a settlement.

²⁷ *Ken Burns Presents: The West*, episode 9, “One Sky Above Us,” directed by Steven Ives, PBS Paramount, 2009, DVD, disc 5.

²⁸ Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 190.

²⁹ Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), 651. Billington poses this question from the perspective of the settlers.

³⁰ Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 651, 671.

White mentions the people involved in the development of the West and their progress leading to a better world. This idea is also one shrouded in myth as the opportunities afforded in the West were not available to everyone. Many people responsible for building the infrastructure of the West were immigrants from a plethora of countries, including China. From laying track to blowing away portions of mountains with dynamite to make way for the transcontinental railroad, many Chinese nationals toiled and labored to achieve the American dream. But the very people integral to the establishment of the American West were barred from citizenship by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.³¹ Many foreigners sought a better life in America, but the idea that anyone could succeed and improve their life in the West is part of the more complicated, tangled story alluded to by White.

Western mythology has no doubt been enhanced by media and entertainment, first with nineteenth century dime novels followed by Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, then turn-of-the-century books and moving pictures, and to Hollywood's Western film craze for much of the twentieth century. One of the first popular media publications of the West was Owen Wister's 1902 novel, *The Virginian*. Robert Athearn identified that Wister "had a product that filled a vacuum" of Western lore and by "putting the cowboy on the center of the stage, Wister contributed heavily to the rise of the western's popularity."³² The next year saw the release of Edwin Porter's twelve-minute film *The Great Train Robbery*, which drew inspiration from an 1896 play of the same name, as well as Wild West shows and newspaper accounts of robberies.³³

³¹ The Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 had similar effects. Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

³² Athearn, *The Mythic West*, 163.

³³ Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 256.

Perhaps more than anything else, these two productions commenced popular obsession of the American West.

Douglas McReynolds noted that at the core of essentially all Western films is the “enduring idea of the American West.” He stops short of defining that enduring idea but adds, “It is a familiar enough plot: the expansive vistas of a golden West stand mute backdrop for a tawdry drama unfolding in a squalid little town” where “the drama concludes in a saloon gunfight, the good guy killing all the bad ones.”³⁴ Historical events are not immune from this idea either. The Gunfight at the OK Corral, perhaps the event most synonymous with the Old West, is itself shrouded in mystery and mythology. Though the now-infamous shootout took place in 1881, it did not reach status in popular culture until well into the 1900s.³⁵ And when it did, the legend of John Henry “Doc” Holliday and Wyatt Earp were cemented as Western heroes despite the fact they were arrested for their roles in the shootout. The myth of the gunfight glamorizes idealism of the West and no doubt helped launch public demand for cinema Westerns, but their popularity has dwindled over time. The Western film now “currently exists primarily as a curiosity, a once popular, once fashionable, once immensely profitable form of entertainment that wore out, exhausted its possibilities, and has, except for isolated reappearances, more or less vanished.”³⁶ A few Westerns made the rounds in the 1990s with success, but it was a far cry from the decades prior.³⁷

³⁴ Douglas J. McReynolds, “Alive and Well: Western Myth in Western Movies,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1998): 47, 50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43796823>.

³⁵ Michael Paul Mihaljevich, *The Bird Cage Theater: The Curtain Rises on Tombstone, Arizona’s National Treasure* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2024), 197.

³⁶ Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), x.

³⁷ *Dances With Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992) both won Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Film Editing at the Academy Awards.

Western television shows have gained some popularity in the twenty-first century, but by far the most popular Western medium this century has been video games. Beginning with the mid-2000s, console games like *Revolver* (2004), *Gun* (2005), and *Call of Juarez* (2006) proved successful in reigniting interest in the Western genre among younger populations. With this new platform popularizing Westerns once again, new opportunities became available to recapture the image of the West. As Peter Rollins noted in *Hollywood's West*, “the possibility that rethinking, reimagining, and realigning the Western with contemporary issues of race, class, gender, and violence will lead to newly refined, freshly insightful critical, cultural, and historical analysis.”³⁸ These themes were generally not historically accurate during the prime era of the cinema Western but have come to the forefront in Rockstar’s *Redemption*, creating innovative new opportunities for education through video games.

Researchers have been studying the educational effects of gaming for decades and the growth of the industry has increased those efforts. Matthew Barr, lecturer of computer science, uses a variety of video games to assess the similarities of game-based skills with skills generally achieved through higher education, finding gains in communication, resourcefulness, and adaptability among the gaming group. He also noted meaningful experiences of collaboration among the gaming students tied to team working skills.³⁹ In 2015, three years before the release of *RDR2*, historian Dawn Spring reviewed several historically themed video games and their potential for use in education. She noted that modern technology permits historians to develop a game that is “based on original primary source research that forms an argument and provides a close examination of a historical topic.” She added that “historical content has proven to be a

³⁸ Rollins, *Hollywood's West*, xi.

³⁹ Matthew Barr, *Graduate Skills and Game-Based Learning: Using Video Games for Employability in Higher Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2, 130.

successful choice for informing game play, developing characters, narratives and settings, establishing game mechanics, and determining strategy.”⁴⁰ This is precisely the path that Rockstar Studios would follow three years later, creating one of the most dynamic history-themed games of all time with *RDR2*. As Spring hypothesized, the developers were able to craft a game so realistic that it could be analyzed in a college class, much like Tore Olsson’s course.

Olsson first played *RDR2* during lockdown from the coronavirus pandemic and quickly realized its educational potential. Having not played video games in two decades, he purchased a new gaming computer and was impressed by *RDR2*’s detail and was “surprised by the complex topics it broached, ranging from women’s suffrage to the dispossession of Native peoples to the racialized terror of lynching.” He decided to focus his course on the violence depicted in *RDR2* and how historical violence is depicted among the social issues of the era. Using the game as a launching point for academic readings and primary source documentation, Olsson stated that class discussions in “Red Dead America” were some of the best he has experienced in twenty years of college instruction.⁴¹ This demonstrates the value of video games in captivating a young audience to engage with historical themes.

The dispossession of Native peoples, as referenced by Olsson, is portrayed in the game, though perhaps not violently or brutally enough to be considered historically accurate. Arguably the most classic Western game of all time is *The Oregon Trail*, first released in 1971 and featured as an early example of the value of educational video games. The game centered on a wagon train from Missouri to Oregon along the path of the game’s namesake. It focused on the

⁴⁰ Dawn Spring, “Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015): 207-208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.973714>. Spring includes assessment of *RDR*.

⁴¹ Tore Olsson, “Teaching History with Video Games,” *American Historical Review* 128, no. 4 (2023): 1757-60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhad488>.

settlers traveling westward and essentially wrote out the autonomy of Indigenous communities. However, in 2022, French gaming company Gameloft relaunched the game after consulting with Indigenous scholars of Native American history to more accurately represent Native American populations in the game. In *Retracing the Oregon Trail*, historians William Bauer, Margaret Huettl, and Katrina Phillips detailed the process of adding Indigenous voices to the game “to challenge the ways in which historical narratives of the Oregon Trail—in video games generally and *The Oregon Trail* specifically—depict Indigenous people.” This included Native American attire, names, and language, re-creating in-game maps that originally showed empty lands despite the presence of Indigenous populations there, more accurate portrayals of relations between settlers and Natives, and portrayal of European westward migration as an invasion rather than a conquering.⁴² This 2022 version of *The Oregon Trail* is a prime example of how video games can provide an educational value by seeking appropriate sources and historical content that provide an accurate representation of the past.

RDR2 is also featured in the class “Virtual River Methods” at the University of California, Davis taught by Gregory Pasternack. The course centers on river science field management practices with learning experiences achieved through *RDR2*’s digital world. In addition to guided readings, students are expected to analyze rivers on a variety of criteria, develop quantitative measurements for rivers, and perform wetland classifications.⁴³ This hydrology class is an example of *RDR2* being used outside of the history discipline, further supporting the game’s use in higher education across a variety of fields. Pasternack, along with

⁴² William J. Bauer, Margaret Huettl, and Katrina M. Phillips, “Retracing The Oregon Trail,” *California History* (San Francisco) 99, no. 3 (2022): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ch.2022.99.3.53>.

⁴³ Greg Pasternack, *Virtual River Methods*, (Department of Land, Air, and Water Resources, University of California, Davis, Fall 2021), Syllabus.

Barr, Spring, Olsson, and *Retracing the Oregon Trail*, demonstrate the possibilities that exist for using video games in higher education. Despite these opportunities, the subject must be broached thoughtfully with a historical mindset as a tool to support learning.⁴⁴ The game must be considered an avenue to reach primary source content and assessment of historical themes, not a substitute for those methods.

Three books address the *Red Dead* series directly: *Red Dead Redemption* by Matt Margini; *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* edited by John Wills and Esther Wright; and *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past* by Tore Olsson. Each book attacks the subject from a different perspective. Margini focuses on *RDR* and his experience controlling protagonist John Marston. He summarizes his book to be “about the “West” that lives in the imagination of Easterners,” of which he is one.⁴⁵ *RDR* portrays a more classic Western feel than its prequel *RDR2* as it takes place in a fictionalized version of the traditional Old West as well as Mexico, with the protagonist tasked with apprehending or killing his former fellow gang members to right the wrongs of his past (and therefore achieve redemption). Though Margini delivers an exceptional analysis of his virtual venture as a reformed outlaw, his book focuses exclusively on *RDR*, whereas this thesis is focused on *RDR2*, and therefore his book will not be discussed any further.

Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West dives into all three *Red Dead* titles but approaches the games from a split perspective of historical accuracy and societal ideologies. From the ideological standpoint, several chapters in the book contain opening paragraphs commenting on issues such as colonial agendas, American masculinity, the

⁴⁴ Barr, *Graduate Skills and Game-Based Learning*, 174, 176.

⁴⁵ Matt Margini, *Red Dead Redemption* (Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books, 2020), 2.

race of notable female characters in the games, the domain of white men, and white male heroes.⁴⁶ At times it reads as a scathing review of cultural wrongs of America's past and offers assessment on a variety of these issues in the game with varying degrees of accuracy. "[*RDR2*'s] gender politics," writes Emil Lundedal Hammar in chapter eight, "leave much to be desired with women being relegated to the margins or serving the needs of the male protagonist." In this respect, *RDR2* "perpetuates the frontier myth" and "operates within dominant forms of memory-making about the American West," particularly regarding violence and male heroes.⁴⁷ *RDR2* improves upon this in comparison to its predecessors *RDR* and *Revolver*, however. While *RDR2*'s protagonist remains a male, seven of the twenty-three Van der Linde gang members are female, some of whom play critical roles in the storyline. The newest member of the gang, Sadie Adler, joined out of necessity after a rival gang murdered her husband and held her hostage, after which she is rescued by three (male) members of the Van der Linde gang. Despite her inauspicious start in the story, Sadie plays a critical role in the game's final chapter by helping Arthur see that John Marston, along with his wife and child, escape the gang. She maintains a prominent role as a side character during *RDR2*'s epilogue, helping John capture bounties and eventually tracking down the game's final antagonist, former gang member Micah Bell, who is killed by John. While valiant in her efforts, this supports Hammar's notion of female characters in Rockstar's games serving the needs of the male protagonist.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ashlee Bird, "The Mechanical Machinations of Manifest Destiny: Winning the West and Vanishing the Indian in *Red Dead Redemption 2*," 111; Esther Wright, "'What's Famous' and 'What's True': Women's Place from *Revolver* to *Redemption*," 129-130; Emil Lundedal Hammar, "Producing and Exploiting the Cultural Memory of the American West: Imperialism, Gender, and Labor at Rockstar," 149; Poppy Wilde, "Moral Ambiguity and the Zombie Scapegoat in *Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare*," 164.

⁴⁷ Hammar, "Producing and Exploiting the Cultural Memory of the American West," in Wills, *Red Dead Redemption*, 152.

In the book's second chapter, "Frontier Fatherhood: Examining Paternal Masculinity in *Red Dead's* Old West," Shannon Lawlor examines the role of fatherhood in each of the three games. An accurate depiction is provided of the relationship that *Revolver* protagonist Red Harlow has with his father upon the death of the latter in the opening scene and how the primary game narrative sees Red seeking revenge for his father's death. Lawlor also assesses John Marston and son Jack, who both appear in *RDR* and *RDR2*, along with their wife and mother, Abigail. A connection is then made between Arthur and John, as "Arthur clearly condemns John's initial lack of paternal responsibility."⁴⁹ Lawlor erroneously states that Arthur does not have a child, but two missions provide context that Arthur was a father whose young son was murdered.⁵⁰ Though not every player sees this conditional dialogue on a playthrough, the knowledge that Arthur lost his son provides additional context to his bickering regarding John's parenting skills and responsibilities, further explaining why Arthur spends his dying moments seeing the Marston family to freedom. It is not Arthur's lack of fatherhood that sees him care about the Marston family's security, but his lost role as a father that so passionately drives him to protect their wellbeing and is a critical tenet to Arthur's redemptive arc. Despite this inaccuracy and gripes about ideologies, the book nonetheless provides a thorough assessment of the historical nature of *RDR2* and that will be the only focus of the book going forward in this thesis.

⁴⁸ This may be changing, however, as trailers for Rockstar's next release, *Grand Theft Auto VI*, indicate dual male-female protagonists that double as a romantic couple and appear to be equally involved in the game's storyline.

⁴⁹ Shannon Lawlor, "Frontier Fatherhood: Examining Paternal Masculinity in *Red Dead's* Old West," in Wills, *Red Dead Redemption*, 51.

⁵⁰ Lawlor, "Frontier Fatherhood," 46. The text states "Arthur does not have a son," but no indication is given that his son passed away. In the mission "Archaeology for Beginners," Arthur talks to Wapiti Chief Rains Fall about his son, stating, "You know... I had a son once. Years ago. I don't talk about him much." He also reveals that his son's name is Isaac, divulging to Rains Fall that Isaac and Isaac's mother, Eliza, were murdered over ten dollars. Similarly, in the final dialogue of the mission "The Fine Art of Conversation," a conditional interaction with Sister Calderón sees Arthur mention the death of his son.

Tore Olsson's *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past* provides the most comprehensive historical analysis of *RDR2* to date. Olsson writes mostly about *RDR2*'s portrayal of the Deep South though he also covers the West and Southern Appalachia. As *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* does, Olsson opens his first chapter by pondering what the West actually is and why people have long been fascinated with it. "For well over a century," he states, "Americans have marveled at the supposed "wildness" of the West while also worrying that it was rapidly coming to an end, uncertain what this closing might mean for the American character." He continues that this is the central theme of *RDR2*, saying, "The ending of an era—that is the basic story of the game."⁵¹ As previously mentioned, Olsson identifies anachronisms in the game including the Pinkertons, Ku Klux Klan, buffalo herds, and government-Indian relations. This is important because although *RDR2* does not shy away from controversial or sensitive topics, it demonstrates that *RDR2* is not a perfect replication of American realities in 1899, sometimes by a manner of two decades.⁵²

As this thesis argues for the educational value of *RDR2*, it is only fair to indicate where the game falls short. From an educational perspective, a player not familiar with the subject matter may erroneously believe that everything depicted in the game is accurate to its setting. As Olsson does throughout his book, it is the responsibility of educators utilizing the game in an academic setting to correct these instances. Despite some inaccuracies, the digital living world of *RDR2* is thriving with historical themes that every player has experienced. Among these are law and order, environmental pollution, and tuberculosis.

⁵¹ Tore Olsson, *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2024), 10.

⁵² Olsson, *Red Dead's History*, 8.

Chapter 2

Outlaws, Lawmen, and Legal Battles: Law and Order in *Red Dead Redemption II*

I have refrained from dwelling on the lawless characteristics of the frontier, because they are sufficiently well-known. The gambler and desperado, the regulators of the Carolinas and the vigilantes of California, are types of that line of scum that the waves of advancing civilization bore before them, and of the growth of spontaneous organs of authority where legal authority was absent.⁵³

—Frederick Jackson Turner

“By 1899, the age of outlaws and gunslingers was at an end,” the opening cutscene of *RDR2* reads. “America was becoming a land of laws...Even the West had mostly been tamed. A few gangs still roamed but they were being hunted down and destroyed.”⁵⁴ Though Western violence has long been glamorized through TV shows, movies, and, more recently, video games, the notion of a vast land void of any law and order is misconceived. Violence was prominent, but not to the degree portrayed in popular media. *RDR2* plays into this mythology as almost every mission results in the player killing an absurdly high number of people which can total more than one thousand by the end of the game. Gunfighters like *RDR2* protagonist Arthur Morgan did exist, as their myths spring from an element of reality, but no figure in the West approaches anywhere close to that number, with most gunfighters killing few people and shootouts a rarity.⁵⁵

⁵³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 32-33. Turner leaves this comment in a footnote explaining why he does not discuss law and order in his thesis.

⁵⁴ *Red Dead Redemption II*, PlayStation 5 ed., v1.32 (Rockstar Games, 2018), “Outlaws from the West.”

⁵⁵ Bill O’Neal, *Encyclopedia of Western Gunfighters* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 5-6. Determining true kill counts of Old West gunslingers is notoriously difficult, and different sources can provide vastly different numbers. What the different sources agree on, however, is an overexaggeration of kills. According to O’Neal, of verifiable kills, Jim Miller tops the list with twelve, followed by John Wesley Hardin and Bill Longley with eleven each. Names popularly associated with the Wild West, such as Billy the Kid (four), Doc Holliday (two), and Wyatt Earp (zero), participated in several gunfights due to their lines of work, but their reputations as prolific gunfighters are well overblown. O’Neal also includes “Possible Killings or Assists,” and provides five for Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp, and two for Doc Holliday.

This chapter focuses on three subjects in *RDR2*—Sam Freeman, Black Belle, and the Wapiti tribe—and how they fit into a mythologized version of the American West void of law and order, as well as educational approaches that can be garnered from their likeness and inclusion in *RDR2*. Sam Freeman elicits exploration and erasure of Black lawmen in the mythic West, Black Belle encourages study of women and their role in the settlement of the West, and the fictional Wapiti tribe exemplifies the struggles of American Indians and their battle with the US government over possession of their land and its resources, as well as tribal legal battles played out in the courtroom.

One of the earliest forms of Western myth were dime novels which often pitted perceived good versus evil such as cowboys versus Indians or the sheriff versus robbers, with the “good guy” overcoming some obstacles or complications along the way (narratives in the *Red Dead* universe follow a similar tale).⁵⁶ This early portrayal of Western heroes in print carried over into twentieth century film. The first American Western, *The Great Train Robbery*, features a posse of townsmen tracking down and capturing a group of outlaws. Contrary to later films, no Native Americans appear. This is not the case, however, for the first Western film ever produced, *Kidnapping by Indians*. Filmed in England in 1899 (coincidentally the same year in which *RDR2* is set), it features the cowboy hero defeating several American Indians in pursuit of justice. Though only one minute in length, it captures the essence of nineteenth century dime novels and platformed what would become the largest film genre for most of the twentieth century. The fact that the first Western film ever recorded was done so in Europe is a testament to the appeal of the Western myth and was no doubt aided by the popularity of Wild West shows overseas.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ John Williams, “The ‘Western’: Definition of the Myth,” *Nation* 193, no. 17 (November 1961): 402, <https://research.ebsco.com/plink/641443ae-8f51-3edc-ac83-555bcd45e598>.

RDR2 recognizes the impact of dime novels in Western lore as the fictional *Wild West Heroes* can be collected in-game. Number 132 features two characters that are still alive during the events of *Redemption* and can interact with the player—Jim Calloway and Landon Ricketts.⁵⁸ The in-game tale describes Ricketts intervening in Calloway’s attempt to revenge the death of his brother. The perpetrator is stationed at fictional Fort Ballard. The novel does not specify who occupies the fort, but it is presumably members of the American military. Interestingly, a small faction of the Mexican military is positioned outside, and Ricketts informs Calloway that members of the fort killed the wife of the nearby Mexican general and are holding his daughter captive inside. Fort inhabitants proceed to attack Calloway, Ricketts, and the Mexican militiamen, but the on-screen page cuts off before the conclusion. Nineteenth century dime novels and *RDR2*’s version of the same feature a defining characteristic—glorification of violence and lawlessness. Calloway and Ricketts survive their encounter even though taking up arms against the US military would mean certain death. Rockstar plays both sides of Western myth with this tale, though, as when the player meets Calloway in *RDR2* and Ricketts in *RDR*, it becomes apparent that stories attributed to them are greatly exaggerated. By including the dime novel with a mythical tale and the living characters to question popular stories told about their lives, Rockstar demonstrates that Western violence and heroic tales are based on real people and places but are shrouded in fiction.

⁵⁷ Renée Laegreid, “Finding the American West in Twenty-First-Century Italy,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 417, <https://doi.org/10.2307/westhistquar.45.4.0411>; Charles Eldridge Griffin and Chris Dixon, *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), xviii.

⁵⁸ “Wild West Heroes, No. 132,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 19, 2026, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Wild_West_Heroes,_No._132. Jim Calloway appears in the *RDR2* side mission “The Noblest of Men, and a Woman” and can be killed by the player in the second phase of that mission. Landon Ricketts is mentioned in *RDR2* but does not appear; he has a prominent role as a non-playable side character in *RDR*.

It is interesting that Rockstar plays both sides of Western storytelling. On one hand, the number of NPCs (non-player characters) that die on the receiving end of a bullet from the revolver of Arthur or John is comically high from a historical perspective. On the other hand, the game suggests through internal legends that much of the lore regarding gunslingers is fictional. Perhaps the exploits of Arthur and John, including their mass kills, are part of the Western lore and not canonical to the fictional history within the *Red Dead* universe. The amount of violence in *RDR2*, however, is most easily explained from a developer standpoint. A game about the Wild West with a main story requiring a minimum of sixty hours of playtime to complete that did not involve shooting hundreds of enemies would be a boring endeavor for the player. Rockstar freely breaks from realism in this aspect as their game is created for entertainment value, not as a history lesson, explaining why violence is so prominent in *RDR2*. Despite the absence of realism regarding violence, Rockstar went to great lengths to ensure historical accuracy in other areas, including likenesses of locations, people, and animals, that provide opportunities for academic research.⁵⁹

The primary antagonist of the Van der Linde gang in *RDR2* is the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Based on the real company of the same name, the *RDR2* version is hired by industrial magnate Leviticus Cornwall (who represents an amalgamation of Gilded Age robber barons) to stop the Van der Linde gang from robbing him. While the Pinkertons did make a name for themselves by chasing train robbers and outlaws, such as the James-Younger gang in the 1870s, by *RDR2*'s setting of 1899 they were “overwhelmingly devoted to breaking strikes, infiltrating

⁵⁹ As an example of historical accuracy regarding animals, the Carolina Parakeet, which was declared extinct in 1939, appears in *RDR2*'s version of 1899. Unlike other animals in the game, only twenty-five exist and none re-spawn. If all are killed, they no longer appear in the *RDR2* world. Similarly, in *RDR*, an achievement aptly named “Manifest Destiny” can be earned by killing all twenty bison in the game that also do not re-spawn. “Parakeet,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 25, 2026, <https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Parakeet>; “Manifest Destiny,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 25, 2026, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Manifest_Destiny.

labor unions, and undermining political radicalism,” which shifted public opinion of the agency from positive to negative due to their violent tactics.⁶⁰ The Pinkertons resumed hunting outlaws in 1899 following the robbery of a Union Pacific train. The culprit was Butch Cassidy but pursuing Butch and the Wild Bunch likely was to restore a tarnished image following decades of shifting reputation that saw the Pinkertons become America’s villains.⁶¹

Pinkerton agents play a critical role in *RDR2* as Arthur engages them face-to-face, meeting Andrew Milton and Edgar Ross in an early game mission, while a late game mission sees agents unleash a maxim gun at Arthur, and the game’s lengthy final mission includes agent Milton pointing a revolver in Arthur’s face. He survives those encounters but eventually dies with agents in pursuit to kill him. The storyline of *RDR* features former Pinkerton agent Edgar Ross, now leader of the Bureau of Investigation, holding John’s family hostage while he pursues his old gang members. He begrudgingly works with Ross but is rewarded by being shot to death while staring down seventeen gun barrels.⁶² The history of the Pinkertons and their role in *RDR2* have been discussed extensively in Tore Olsson’s *Red Dead History* and George Wills’ *Red Dead Redemption*, both devoting a chapter to the detective agency. This thesis takes a different approach to law and order in the game by analyzing Sam Freeman, Black Belle, and the Wapiti tribe to discover how they align with their historical counterparts and what can be gleaned from their inclusion in *RDR2*.

⁶⁰ Tore Olsson, *Red Dead’s History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America’s Violent Past*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2024), 70; Glenn Shirley, *Belle Starr and Her Times: The Literature, the Facts, and the Legends* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 2, 95; Robert Whitaker, “The Last Enemy That Shall be Considered: Law and Order in *Red Dead*,” in Wills, *Red Dead Redemption*, 67-68.

⁶¹ Olsson, *Red Dead’s History*, 78.

⁶² John’s son Jack exacts revenge by killing Agent Ross in 1914 as the final act of *RDR*, and Jack was fishing with Arthur in the early *RDR2* mission when the player first meets Ross in 1899. Jack Marston and Edgar Ross are the only characters in the *Red Dead* universe to appear on screen in 1899 and 1914.

Sam Freeman

A player exploring *RDR2*'s town of Tumbleweed is bound to encounter town sheriff Sam Freeman. An African American sporting a thick mustache, his physical appearance and tenacity bears striking resemblance to US deputy marshal Bass Reeves. Though long overlooked in the mythologized Wild West, he may have been the greatest lawman of the era with an "exemplary and outstanding" law enforcement record rivaling, and perhaps surpassing, that of legend Wyatt Earp. This is exceptionally remarkable considering he was illiterate, having been born into slavery and spending much of his childhood as a slave in Texas and Arkansas before escaping bondage (his *RDR2* surname, Freeman, is no doubt a reference to this). First appointed a US deputy marshal in 1875 by "hanging judge" Isaac Parker, Reeves worked extensively in Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma) where deputy marshals received little national attention, and records for many of the federal cases he worked are not found in archives.⁶³ Parker was granted authority in Indian Territory through his appointment as district judge for the adjacent Western District of Arkansas in Fort Smith and a treaty with the Cherokee nation:

The judicial tribunals of the nation shall be allowed to retain exclusive jurisdiction in all civil and criminal cases, arising within their country, in which members of the nation, by nativity or adoption, shall be the only parties or where the cause of action shall arise in the Cherokee Nation, except as otherwise provided in this treaty.⁶⁴

Despite the shortfall of records, Reeves' exploits have been discovered and highlighted long after the closing of the frontier, and in 1992 he became the first African American inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. He is also

⁶³ Art T. Burton, *Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 4, 7-8, 10. Fortunately, some archival documents of Reeves' work survive, such as arrest records: *Bass Reeves Telegram and Request for Writ of Arrest, 1885*, University of Arkansas, University Library, Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.uark.edu/digital/collection/p17212coll5/id/138>. Since Reeves could not write, someone transcribed this on his behalf.

⁶⁴ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1872* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 619, <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6627&context=indianserialset>.

recognized by the U.S. Marshals Museum with his portrait displayed at the Arkansas State Capitol.⁶⁵

RDR2's Sam Freeman presents an opportunity to not only study the life and legend of Bass Reeves, but also the often-forgotten legacy of African American lawmen in the West. Such lawmen often worked in Indian Territory under the jurisdiction of the US Marshals Service. Five of the most prominent African American deputy US marshals include Grant Johnson, an occasional partner of Bass Reeves with Muskogee Creek heritage who served twenty-two years in and around modern day Oklahoma; Rufus Cannon, who participated in the capturing and killing of notable outlaw Bill Doolin; Bill Colbert, of Choctaw heritage, who reportedly killed more than twenty outlaws in the line of duty; Zeke Miller, who never shot a man in the line of duty despite multiple outlaw arrests over thirteen years of service in Indian Territory; and Robert Fortune, who worked twelve years as a deputy marshal before achieving a law degree and relocating to Phoenix.⁶⁶ This is a small sample of the diversity represented in Western law enforcement that is often absent from mythologized versions of the American West, including *RDR2*. Out of the eight sheriffs or police chiefs in the game, Sam Freeman is the only African American. If the player becomes wanted and is pursued by the law or bounty hunters, posses that pursue the player are nearly exclusively white. While such groups could contain a high percentage of white participants, the lack of minority representation in these groups is not historically accurate. When factoring Indigenous, Mexican, and immigrant heritages in addition

⁶⁵ National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Hall of Great Westerners, "Bass Reeves," <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/collections/awards/great-westerners/inductees/bass-reeves/>; Art T. Burton, *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, s.v. "Bass Reeves (1838-1910)," updated February 11, 2026, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/bass-reeves-1747/>.

⁶⁶ Art T. Burton, "Lawman Legend Bass Reeves: The Invincible Man Hunter," *Wild West*, February 2007, 52.

to the Black population, a case could be made that white possemen would be in the minority.⁶⁷

For all that *RDR2* gets right about the West in 1899, its open world falls short in representation of racially and ethnically diverse characters.

One reason for the growth of Black deputies in the West, particularly in Indian Territory, was due to longstanding distrust of white deputies by American Indian populations stemming from abuse of power and decades of legislation and removal from tribal lands. Judge Parker commissioned Reeves in part due to his knowledge of Indian Territory, having lived there for much of his life as a runaway slave, as well as his demeanor and imposing stature at six feet two inches tall and one hundred and eighty pounds.⁶⁸ He and other African American deputy marshals in Indian Territory, such as Grant Johnson, grew up there and spoke the Muskogee Creek language unlike white marshals, for whom the region might as well have been a foreign country.⁶⁹ Reeves had a particular affinity for going above and beyond the line of duty, including changing his appearance to apprehend outlaws. He was known to dress as a cowboy, preacher, or farmer to get closer to his suspects, and one time even “disguised himself as a tramp.”⁷⁰ With some reports indicating Reeves killed at least fourteen people and apprehended thousands more over his thirty-two years as a deputy marshal, Art T. Burton, who has written more about Reeves than any other historian, says, “Nine decades after his death, Bass Reeves is still considered one

⁶⁷ Christine Bold, *The Frontier Club: Popular Western and Cultural Power, 1880-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181.

⁶⁸ Art T. Burton, “Bass Reeves: A Legendary Lawman of the Western Frontier,” in *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, On the Stage, Behind the Badge*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 204; *Oath of Office for Bass Reeves*, National Archives at Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas, Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21, May 29th, 1889, <https://docsteach.org/document/oath-bass-reeves/>.

⁶⁹ Daniel F. Littlefield Jr. and Lonnie E. Underhill, “Negro Marshalls in the Indian Territory,” *The Journal of Negro History* LVI, no. 2 (April 1971): 79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2716230>.

⁷⁰ Burton, *Wild West*, 53; Burton, “Bass Reeves,” in Glasrud, *Black Cowboys in the American West*, 206.

of the truly great American frontier heroes. The legend of Bass Reeves will live as long as people recall stories of bravery and courage in the American West.” Burton’s assessment is accurate, as Reeves’ likeness appears in *RDR2* and he might have been the inspiration for the Lone Ranger, despite that character being white.⁷¹

Christine Bold addresses this concept in *The Frontier Club*, stating, “The process by which [B]lack Westerners were displaced by, and even on occasion transformed into, white heroes is largely undocumented.”⁷² If Reeves is indeed the inspiration for the Lone Ranger, he was transformed into a white hero. This presents another talking point afforded by analyzing *RDR2*’s Sam Freeman—why is racial diversity largely absent from digital portrayals of the West when the real West was diverse? A possible explanation could lie in a writing by deputy US marshal Heck Thomas. Recounting an experience in Indian Territory on Christmas Day in 1887, Thomas details three outsiders that encroached on his camp. The first is a German man who encountered raucous cowboys by his home which prompted him to flee. Thomas quotes the man, “Iss der Fort Smith Deputy Marshal here? Der cowboys at White Bead iss drunk and iss shooting my house down und iss scaring mine vife to death,” ensuring the use of German mannerisms in his recording of the dialogue. Thomas settles the man’s nerves and invites him to stay for dinner. Thomas then details a second unnamed man who stumbles upon the scene bloody from head-to-toe with injuries reportedly sustained in a card game that turned violent. After getting shot, the man fled and discovered Thomas’ camp. Thomas indicates that he bandaged the man and offered him dinner but does not provide a quotation of the dialogue. Thomas then describes a third man,

⁷¹ *Britannica*, s.v. “Bass Reeves,” updated May 8, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bass-Reeves>; Burton, “Bass Reeves,” in Glasrud, *Black Cowboys in the American West*, 209; and Burton, *Black Gun, Silver Star*, 11.

⁷² Bold, *The Frontier Club*, 181.

Robin Grayson, who he says arrives at the site as “a long, gaunt Negro” and provides account of their conversation. “Is Cap’n Heck Thomas, de U.S. Marshal from Fort Smith here?” he recalls Grayson asking. After Thomas confirms his identity, Grayson asks for help, exclaiming “Please den, for God’s Sake, Mista’ Thomas, help me...dey tried to kill me, and dey shots dese holes in my overcoat...dey gwine kill me.” As with the German man, Thomas includes racist and pejorative dialect specific to the African American, later saying, “The old darky was a “blue-gum” Negro, with long wolf-like teeth. He was [b]lack outside with a good heart inside.”⁷³ Notably, Thomas provides unflattering quotations for the German and African American but not for the cowboy card player. Perhaps this sheds light on why media portrayals of the West often excluded such populations in favor of those more in line with the cowboy card player or Heck Thomas himself, as early representations of the era are reproduced from the accounts of those that could provide them, such as Thomas. Omitted are stories of former slaves such as the illiterate Bass Reeves, immigrant populations with English as a second or unlearned language, and Indigenous communities that are often portrayed negatively. *RDR2* reverses this trend somewhat by including a diverse cast within the Van der Linde gang, as well as including the likeness of Bass Reeves as Sam Freeman, but diverse representation in the open world is notably absent.

Black Belle

In the *RDR2* side mission “The Noblest of Men, and a Woman,” the player is tasked with tracking down four legendary gunslingers—Emmet Granger, Billy Midnight, Flaco Hernández, and Black Belle—to assist author Theodore Levin in compiling their stories for a novel. Game

⁷³ Heck Thomas and Bonnie Speer, “A Quiet Christmas in Indian Territory Days in 1887,” *Wild West*, December 1999, 56. The editor indicates that this undated account written by Heck Thomas is provided by Heck’s great-grandson.

context suggests Levin is from Baltimore. He shares similarities with W.W. Beauchamp in the 1992 Western film *Unforgiven* in that he is an easterner compiling stories about the life of a famed westerner, but both Levin and Beauchamp realize that many Western tales “have been embellished or entirely fabricated.”⁷⁴ The fascination that Levin and Beauchamp display for the West, however, is consistent with eastern lore of the West from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “From the early 1880s to the 1930s, hundreds of Wild West shows...provided don’t-miss entertainment for millions of Americans,” writes Betsy Golden Kellem. Festivities include “live demonstrations of horsemanship and rodeo skills, trick shooting, frontier animals both wild and domestic, and dramatic re-enactments of frontier history.” Despite their popularity and craftsmanship, the depicted heroism and events of the West were not always consistent with reality.⁷⁵ But that mythological nature of the West is precisely what piqued the interest of W.W. Beauchamp, Theodore Levin, and countless real-world easterners. A newspaper article within *RDR2* reinforces this eastern admiration for the West, saying, “Aspiring celebrity cowboys from across our region have traveled to New York City to perform in the Blackwater Wild West Show...Featuring a cow pony race, fancy roping, ladies bucking contest, Indian foot race, and Cow Boys to the Rescue, which depicts the dangers of the early settlers.” The article concludes that those on the east coast have been “sorely amazed at the more rustic skills us country folk have.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ “Theodore Levin,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 15, 2026, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Theodore_Levin.

⁷⁵ Betsy Golden Kellem, “The Triumphalism of American Wild West Shows,” *JSTOR Daily*, August 23, 2023, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-triumphalism-of-american-wild-west-shows/>.

⁷⁶ Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, Newspapers, *Blackwater Ledger* Issue #54, “Wild West Show Heads East,” https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Newspapers?file=Newspaper_27.PNG. The article also makes a reference to Native Americans, referring to them as “savages.”

This interest did not stop with America's East Coast. Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West shows were incredibly popular in Europe, garnering the fascination of Queen Victoria. The German film industry also took interest in the West, with its *Indianerfilme* genre producing Western content "orientated towards the perspective of Native Americans," which distinguishes it from Buffalo Bill's shows and the traditional American Western, which tend to focus on heroic cowboy exploits.⁷⁷ These demonstrations also made their way to Italy, helping launch the now iconic genre of Spaghetti Westerns that once again "captivated their audiences with images of an idealized myth of the American West" with "many of the conceptions and misconceptions of Italians about life on the plains, the lives of cowboys and ranchers and rangers, and the relationships between the West's native peoples and white settlers."⁷⁸ The underlying theme of Western productions, whether it be a Wild West show, European movie, or American video game, is the mythologized version of the West that glorifies lawlessness and is void of historical accuracy. *RDR2*'s "The Noblest of Men, and a Woman" plays into this mythological nature while simultaneously acknowledging its myth. As Black Belle tells Arthur during the mission, "Don't get what's famous confused with what's true."

The three men Arthur is asked to track down appear to be loosely inspired by real and fictional Western characters.⁷⁹ The woman, Black Belle, in name, appearance, and biography resembles notable Western outlaw Belle Starr. Born Myra Maybelle Shirley in Missouri on

⁷⁷ Matthew Wills, "Why East Germany Loved the Wild West," *JSTOR Daily*, September 23, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/why-east-germany-loved-the-wild-west/>.

⁷⁸ Aliza S. Wong, *Spaghetti Westerns: A Viewer's Guide* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 11.

⁷⁹ Granger's biography as gunslinger-turned-pig-farmer is similar to William Munny in the movie *Unforgiven*; Billy Midnight shares characteristics with Robert Ford, who killed Jesse James; and Flaco Hernández bears likeness to Mexican revolutionary Red Lopez. "Emmet Granger," Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Emmet_Granger; "Billy Midnight," Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Billy_Midnight; and "Flaco Hernández," Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Flaco_Hernández.

February 5, 1848, Starr is perhaps the West's most well-known female outlaw. One writer opined that she could "swear like a sailor, ride a horse as good as a Texas Ranger and shoot as quickly and accurately as a man from Arizona," a compliment of the highest order to an outlaw of the era.⁸⁰ In addition to her own exploits, she was associated with numerous popular names in Western lore, such as the infamous James-Younger gang.⁸¹ Her outlaw husbands James Reed and Sam Starr were killed in shootouts. In 1883 she was convicted of horse theft and sentenced by Isaac Parker. Though Sam Freeman and Black Belle do not cross paths in *RDR2*, it is possible that Bass Reeves, who worked alongside Parker, was pursuing Starr on the horse theft charge. Some reports indicate that Starr turned herself in when learning of Reeves' interest in finding her, but this cannot be corroborated.⁸² Unlike Reeves, Starr was not alive during *RDR2*'s setting of 1899 as ten years earlier she was killed by an unknown assailant. A newspaper report days after her death claims that she told her daughter the person who shot her was an eighty-two-year-old man named E.A. Watson. He was jailed but denied involvement and was never tried.⁸³

In addition to the life of Belle Starr, *RDR2*'s Black Belle opens a wider door to study women in the West who are often overlooked in favor of heroic cowboy stories. Unlike early tales of the West, modern scholarship has been proactive in highlighting efforts of women. One

⁸⁰ "Belle Starr Killed," *Butler Weekly Times*, February 13, 1889, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn89066489/1889-02-13/ed-1/?sp=6>.

⁸¹ Shirley, *Belle Starr and Her Times*, 96.

⁸² The uncorroborated account is portrayed in the 2023 film *The Legend of Bass Reeves and Belle Starr*. *Britannica*, s.v. "Bass Reeves," updated May 8, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bass-Reeves>; *Britannica*, s.v. "Belle Starr," accessed June 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Belle-Starr>; Nancy Hendricks, *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, s.v. "Belle Starr (1848-1889)," updated June 5, 2026, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/belle-starr-2406/>; Adriana G. Schroeder, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, s.v. "Starr, Myra Maybelle Shirley (1848-1889)," accessed June 13, 2026, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=ST018>.

⁸³ "Belle Starr, the Outlaw," *Shenandoah Herald*, February 15, 1889, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85026941/1889-02-15/ed-1/?sp=2>. She survived briefly after being shot, during which time her daughter was caring for her.

such publication is *Hidden Treasures of the American West*, wherein Patricia Loughlin explores the careers of Muriel Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott. The trio were under-the-radar historians covering Oklahoma and American Indian history in the early-to-mid twentieth century. Loughlin states that her book "explores the ways in which women have interpreted and left a visible record of historical interpretation in the American West."⁸⁴ These are the stories not told in early publications of the West, which relied on content from its players, such as the Heck Thomas writing above and the popular Wild West shows. One of the largest factors for the increase of female inclusion within the Western narrative is the modern influx of female historians into higher education after university employment for decades was generally reserved for men. Though many women wrote about the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "the professional writings of men," Loughlin states, "overshadowed much of the professional writing of women."⁸⁵ In chapter eight of her book, Loughlin provides a plethora of women from the first half of the twentieth century that write about the West, particularly about relations with American Indians. Branching from the life of Belle Starr, who spent much of her life in Indian Territory, *RDR2* can be connected to these publications of female writers that can be included when studying history via the game. Loughlin references over twenty women that can be researched or whose work can be utilized to help establish the role of women in the West.

Another publication that highlights women in the West is Laura Arata's *Race and the Wild West*, wherein Arata focuses on Black women, particularly Sarah Bickford, and their "invisibility in representations of both the reality and the mythology of the West."⁸⁶ *RDR2* is

⁸⁴ Patricia Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures of the American West: Muriel H. Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), xix.

⁸⁵ Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures*, 159.

⁸⁶ Laura J. Arata, *Race and the Wild West: Sarah Bickford, the Montana Vigilantes, and the Tourism of Decline, 1870-1930* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 1.

consistent in this trend. Of the twenty-three Van der Linde gang members following *RDR2*'s prologue, only one, Tilly Jackson, is a Black woman. Within the open world, Black women are populous in the community of Lagras, reminiscent of east Texas and western Louisiana swampland, and in and around Saint Denis (based on New Orleans). Both real-world locations had a substantial Black female population at the time, with Orleans Parish, Louisiana containing the third-highest Black female population as of the 1900 census.⁸⁷ The game is consistent in this regard, however apart from Lagras and Saint Denis, Black women are largely nonexistent on the *RDR2* map, supporting Arata's position on representations and invisibility of Black women in the West. "Overcoming silences in the historical record is not a new task for historians," Arata writes. "Sorting out deeply ingrained assumptions that relegated African Americans to being remembered as vague stereotypes in order to minimize their actual accomplishments is somewhat more complicated."⁸⁸ This is evidenced by Heck Thomas describing his encounter with Robin Grayson. Thomas' deliberate inclusion of Grayson's speech pattern likely meant to convey Grayson negatively. Juxtaposed with the (presumably white) cowboy card player, for which no dialogue was provided, and Arata's notion of vague stereotypes being utilized to minimize experiences is strengthened. This is especially true since both Grayson and the unnamed card player appear to have experienced similar circumstances, yet one is portrayed negatively and one as heroic. Arata makes a similar comparison by contrasting James Beckwourth and Frederick Jackson Turner. Beckwourth, who published an autobiography in 1866, "embodied all the elements of western legend—except for the fact that he was [B]lack."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ United States Census, 1900, Sex, General Nativity, and Color, Table 22, 586. Orleans Parish, Louisiana had 42,585 Black female residents. Washington, D.C. had the most with 48,354 (576). Baltimore City County had the second-most with 44,195 (586). Shelby County, TN was fourth with 42,556 (601). <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p10.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 1.

Meanwhile, Turner presented his infamous thesis twenty-seven years after Beckwourth's autobiography and epitomized the mythological West for decades while Beckwourth was relegated to an afterthought in the annals of Western history.

Black Belle affords learners a passage to study women in the West including and beyond her likeness of Belle Starr. Modern scholarship, such as that of Loughlin and Arata, highlight many female contributors to Western history that have only recently been offered due attention. They examine a wide array of roles played by women in the West, ranging from the outlaw Belle Starr to Sarah Bickford, a former slave who would later own a utility company and a location known as the "Hangman's Building" in Virginia City, Montana.⁹⁰ Using *RDR2* to observe female representations that exist—and do not exist—in the game provide the learner with a foundation to pursue the history of women in the West.

Wapiti Tribe

While the American West is famous for its lawlessness, this is a bit of a misconception as courtrooms played a prominent role as populations grew. Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma) became one of the most heated locations for legal battles. The land designated for Indigenous tribes quickly had its borders reshaped and sovereignty reimaged as non-Indigenous populations encroached on the land to capitalize on its abundant resources. Brian Frehner details this history in the book *Beyond the Borders of the Law: Critical Legal Histories of the North American West*. His chapter, "Jurisdictional No Man's Land," recounts the toils of Native Americans in modern-day Oklahoma to protect their land and its dominant resource, coal, through the American court system. The Choctaw Nation hired attorney Patrick Hurley to

⁸⁹ Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 1-2.

⁹⁰ Arata, *Race and the Wild West*, 30, 129, 181-182.

advocate on their behalf as he understood that “legal arguments would provide necessary weapons to combat the onslaught of Americans pouring into Indian Territory” to mine coal and construct railroads which accelerated the growth of other industries.⁹¹ In the final three decades of the nineteenth century, the Choctaw Nation passed laws attempting to protect their assets, but the federal government and private citizens found their way into possession of tribal resources. Outside populations controlling the production on their land led to infighting among the Choctaw regarding their best response to the influx of Euro-Americans. Another attorney on behalf of the Choctaw, Robert L. Owen (Cherokee), indicated how there was apparently no recourse for Americans thieving from tribal nations in Indian Territory.⁹² Ultimately, control of tribal lands would fall under the oversight of the federal government. The legal battle for property rights in Indian Territory that began shortly following the Civil War extended well into Oklahoma statehood, with the federal government finally paying the Choctaw Nation in 1947, but by that time the market value drastically decreased from decades earlier as coal had been replaced by oil as the greater extract.⁹³

The fight for coal rights in Indian Territory ending with benefit to Americans and detriment to the Indigenous community was commonplace among vast swaths of tribal land in the West. In northern locations, such as the Black Hills, resources on American Indian reservations became a target for white industrialists, but this was complicated since the land was inhabited by Native Americans through treaties with the federal government. In September 1874, the *Cheyenne Daily Leader* published a series of short articles touting the climate, resources, and

⁹¹ Brian Frehner, “Jurisdictional No Man’s Land: Choctaws, Lawyers, and the Coal Question in Indian Territory,” in *Beyond the Borders of the Law: Critical Legal Histories of the North American West*, ed. Katrina Jagodinsky and Pablo Mitchell (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 206, 210.

⁹² Owen would later be elected as one of the first two US senators from Oklahoma.

⁹³ Frehner, “Jurisdictional No Man’s Land,” in Jagodinsky, *Beyond the Borders of the Law*, 211, 213, 222.

attractions of Wyoming following discovery of extractable resources. The newspaper touts the state's healthy climate and surplus of gold, silver, copper, iron, and lead mines that are largely untouched due to the presence of "hostile Indians" in the area. Financial benefits will be untapped, the article claims, when the state is "relieved from the presence of our red brethren" by the federal government relocating American Indians to a reservation in neighboring Dakota Territory.⁹⁴ A following article explains that the land is split between white settlements and "Treaty Indians" that are free to hunt outside their borders, though that will likely change in a future congressional session by confining the tribe within its boundaries. Referring to the territory immediately outside the designated tribal borders as "unsafe and undesirable for settlement" due to hostility between the white settlers and "war-like tribe," future government legislation will bring "permanent peace and the civilization of these savages."⁹⁵ This mentality of American Indians being a hindrance to the advancement of American civilization in the Black Hills is consistent with the trials over coal rights in Indian Territory fought for by Hurley and Owen. These legal battles over land rights, resources, and profit are portrayed in *RDR2* via the game's Wapiti tribe and are still occurring today.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ "Resources," *Cheyenne Daily Leader*, September 22, 1874, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84022149/1874-09-22/ed-1/?sp=2>.

⁹⁵ "The Indian Question," *Cheyenne Daily Leader*, September 22, 1874, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84022149/1874-09-22/ed-1/?sp=2>.

⁹⁶ "Indians Claim Black Hills," *Black Hills Union*, February 10, 1911, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn97065835/1911-02-10/ed-1/?sp=1>; Tamara Chibe, "'Black Hills Are Not for Sale:' South Dakota Tribes Unite Behind Federal Land Return Proposal," *KOTA News*, June 10, 2026, <https://www.kotatv.com/2026/06/10/black-hills-are-not-sale-south-dakota-tribes-unite-behind-federal-land-return-proposal/>; Marnie Cook, "Treaty History and the Long Black Hills Lawsuit Driving Today's Landback Strategy," *Native Sun News Today*, June 11, 2026, <https://www.nativesunnews.today/articles/treaty-history-and-the-long-black-hills-lawsuit-driving-todays-landback-strategy/>.

Situated in *RDR2*'s northernmost state of Ambarino, the Wapiti Indian Reservation most closely resembles American Indian reservations in the Black Hills.⁹⁷ Though the reservation does not enter the main story of the game until its sixth and final chapter, a discoverable letter in one of the game's first missions reiterates this notion of American Indian removal for the sake of resource extraction. In the mission "Who the Hell is Leviticus Cornwall?," the player boards Cornwall's train wherein a letter can be found from the head of accounts at the fictional Leland Oil Development Company regarding Cornwall's interest in utilizing land occupied by the Wapiti tribe. "We are yet to receive payment of \$2,000 for the initial phase of exploration at the Wapiti Indian Reservation, Ambarino, as agreed in the contract between Cornwall Kerosene & Tar and the Leland Oil Development Company," the letter states. "On receipt of the funds, we will proceed with phases two and three of the project and present you with a detailed report of the findings within the month."⁹⁸ Later, in the chapter four mission "American Fathers," Arthur meets Wapiti Chief Rains Fall, the Chief's son Eagle Flies, and author Evelyn Miller, who is advocating on behalf of the tribe.⁹⁹ Referring to events described in the letter on the train from the earlier mission, Miller says to Arthur, "I believe there were some prospectors who were on their land a few months ago who have filed reports with Leviticus Cornwall and the State

⁹⁷ Wapiti is the name of an unincorporated community in northwest Wyoming for which the *RDR2* Wapiti tribe may take its name. Wapiti, Wyoming is located in the Shoshone National Forest and includes a ranger station that was the first ever constructed in the United States. Wapiti is also an Indigenous word for elk. U.S. Geological Survey Geographic Names Information System, "Wapiti, Wyoming," June 5, 1979, <https://eds.nationalmap.gov/apps/gaz-domestic/public/search/names/1603972>; "Wapiti Ranger Station," National Register of Historic Places, Way Back Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060925115935/http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/wapiti.htm>; Recreation.gov, "Wapiti Campground," <https://www.recreation.gov/camping/campgrounds/234606>; American Museum of Natural History, "Wapiti," accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/north-american-mammals/wapiti>.

⁹⁸ "Oil Company Letter to Cornwall," Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 18, 2026, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Oil_Company_Letter_to_Cornwall.

⁹⁹ Rains Fall is not based on a specific person but closely resembles Chiefs Red Cloud and Sitting Bull. "Rains Fall," Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 18, 2026, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Rains_Fall.

Government claiming huge reserves of oil under their land.” Clearly, Cornwall paid the two thousand dollars owed to finish exploring the Wapiti’s land and was no doubt pleased with reports of mass oil reserves underneath. Understandably, Rains Fall objects to this act, saying, “My people, if we are even a people anymore...we fought hard...we’ve made peace treaties...and those treaties were broken...and we’ve been moved and punished and...punished and moved...and now I am told we are to be moved again.” Miller informs Arthur that this conflicts with a treaty signed three years ago due to Cornwall’s desire to profit from oil on the reservation. In the game’s epilogue, set eight years later, the player can discover evidence of oil extraction attempts that appear to have been abandoned shortly after commencing.¹⁰⁰ This indicates that the reports of oil under the reservation may have been exaggerated at the expense of Wapiti removal. Arthur obtains the files from the factory in the second part of the mission, but they are not readable by the player, so it is uncertain what information they include. However, the forced removal of tribes from Indian Territory and tribal lands reflects the reality of legal battles over resources such as coal, gold, and oil in the latter nineteenth century. This mission as well as many of the chapter six missions regarding the exploitation of the Wapiti tribe can be utilized in conjunction with publications including Brian Frehner’s “Jurisdictional No Man’s Land” and newspaper reports to show hostility towards American Indian tribes on coveted land.¹⁰¹ *RDR2*’s depiction of hostility toward the Wapiti tribe is accurate to many Indigenous tribes in the nineteenth century in their interactions with the federal government over tribal rights

¹⁰⁰ “Wapiti Indian Reservation,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed June 18, 2026, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Wapiti_Indian_Reservation.

¹⁰¹ Such as several small articles in “Monday Evening,” *Daily Press and Dakotian*, July 7, 1879, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84022144/1879-07-07/ed-1/?sp=2>; and “Indian Police Disowned,” *Griggs Courier*, September 12, 1890; “Black Hills Coal,” *Griggs Courier*, September 12, 1890; “Indians to Go West,” *Griggs Courier*, September 12, 1890; “Short News Items,” *Griggs Courier*, September 12, 1890, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn88076998/1890-09-12/ed-1/?sp=3>.

to land and broken treaties. Playing through these missions may capture empathetic emotions from the player for the tribe, particularly the defeated yet peaceful demeanor of Chief Rains Fall. The game does not shy away from the realities experienced by Native Americans, and utilizing primary and secondary source material, such as that provided here, can provide an excellent educational opportunity for those interested in tribal relations of the American West.

Chapter 3

The Polluted Environments of *Red Dead Redemption II*

I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively instead of skeptically and dictatorially.¹⁰²

—E. B. White

When wandering around *RDR2*'s expansive map, players encounter locations with environmental contamination such as Cornwall Kerosene & Tar in the Heartland Oil Fields. Owned by oil tycoon Leviticus Cornwall, he is known to be a shrewd businessman concerned only with maximizing profits. The player can walk the premises to discover it has suffered from oil spillage with a lack of green grass and wildlife, contrasting with the lush green prairie, natural scenery, and prancing whitetail deer and pronghorn that surround it. Discarded wood planks, barrels, and steel beams add to the contamination of a once lush and fertile land. Unfortunately, these scenes are all too common around the *RDR2* map yet accurately depict settlements and industries of the nineteenth century American West.

This pollution stems from decades of manufacturing and mining when American wealth skyrocketed at the expense of environmental health. No locale was immune, as everything from rural mining to industrial production in cities contributed to the pollution. *RDR2*'s story narrative does not address these concerns directly, however the contaminants portrayed throughout the game's open world reflect the reality of nineteenth century practices on the environment by capturing the severity of disregarding the natural world in exchange for profits. These practices generated long-term issues that are still being wrestled with today as "westward expansion of

¹⁰² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962). This quote appears on an unnumbered page in the front matter.

settlers, traders, and trappers in the 1800s drove dramatic human-induced geomorphic and ecological change” seeking “unsustainable resource consumption” in many regions of the West.¹⁰³ The reproduction of these events in *RDR2* represents one of the key tenets of western migration that must be included in the history of the West. This chapter focuses on four polluted environments in *RDR2*—Annesburg, Elysian Pool, Butcher Creek, and Saint Denis—to analyze their source of pollution, its historical reality, and what educational opportunities may be extracted from environmental issues in *RDR2*.

Upton Sinclair and other Progressive Era muckrakers, deemed the “watchdogs of American society,” drew public attention by exposing abhorrent and detestable living and working conditions for many in America, particularly immigrants. His most popular work, *The Jungle*, described a fictional meat factory in Chicago that was based off his real experiences touring a meat packing plant in the city. The brutality of his novel led to federal food inspection laws.¹⁰⁴ In a similar vein, public outcry regarding environmental pollution peaked with Rachel Carson’s 1962 release of *Silent Spring*. Phrases such as “The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials”; “Chemicals sprayed on croplands or forests or gardens lie long in soil, entering into living organisms, passing from one to another in a chain of poisoning and death”; and “They pass mysteriously by underground streams until they emerge and, through the alchemy of air and sunlight, combine into new forms that kill vegetation, sicken cattle, and work unknown harm on

¹⁰³ David P. Dethier, et al., “Anthropocene Landscape Change and the Legacy of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mining in the Fourmile Catchment, Colorado Front Range,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, no. 4 (July 2018): 918, 934, doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1406329; Sara Dant, *Losing Eden: An Environmental History of the American West* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 105.

¹⁰⁴ Library of Congress, American Business: The Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, “Muckrakers,” accessed July 1, 2026, <https://guides.loc.gov/gilded-age-business/people/muckrakers>; *Britannica*, s.v. “Upton Sinclair,” accessed July 1, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Jungle-novel-by-Sinclair>.

those who drink from once pure wells” sparked environmental interest throughout the country as citizens began to realize how significantly their life is being impacted by pollutants.¹⁰⁵

Carson speaks extensively on pesticide use and how it seeps into every aspect of daily life. “In less than two decades of their use,” she states, “synthetic pesticides have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they occur virtually everywhere.”¹⁰⁶ This nationwide awareness of the harm of pesticides drew attention due to their impact on the health and lives of citizens. A leading culprit was DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane). First developed in the 1940’s, it deters insect-borne diseases, such as malaria, and is an effective pesticide. Decades later, as DDT use became more widespread and its harmful properties continually released into the environment, a link developed between its poisonous effects on humans and the land. The EPA discontinued use of DDT in 1972 and now classifies it as a possible carcinogen, but the long-term effects could not be reversed.¹⁰⁷ *Silent Spring* established the connection between environmental contamination and pesticide use.

A more overt connection lies in western settlements that were spurred by the land’s natural resources, with those already living on it considered subject to sale, exploitation, or conservation void of relationships or communities.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the most marginalized group in America during the nineteenth century in this context were American Indians. Too often their land was captured and reassigned for extraction purposes, commonly with approval of the US

¹⁰⁵ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ United States Environmental Protection Agency, “DDT - A Brief History and Status,” updated September 11, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/ingredients-used-pesticide-products/ddt-brief-history-and-status>.

¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Scott, *Land of Extraction: Property, Fracking, and Settler Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2024), 69.

government.¹⁰⁹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, this engagement is captured in the *RDR2* mission “American Fathers.” In starting the mission, the player encounters author and lecturer Evelyn Miller who sympathizes with *RDR2*’s Wapiti tribe that has been subjected to numerous broken treaties with the federal government. When asking Arthur if he will help, Miller claims that prospectors were on the Wapiti reservation and reported large oil reserves on the land which Leviticus Cornwall and the state want to access. Arthur accepts and steals the paperwork to save the reservation, but this liberty is short lived as *RDR2*’s epilogue reveals that the tribe has relocated (presumably by force) to Canada. In *Land of Extraction*, Rebecca Scott notes that this “mad dash to exploit natural resources for quick profit” is “all too familiar” to American Indians.¹¹⁰ In such cases after the land has been taken over, extraction of resources is often the generating factor that results in pollution. The Heartland Oil Fields and the removal of the Wapiti tribe are two examples in *RDR2* of the large impact that the abuse of land resources has on both the environment and people. By studying the four locations discussed in this chapter, *RDR2* may be used to gain an understanding of how manufacturing and mining practices in the nineteenth century negatively impacted the environment, remediation measures that occurred and are still taking place, and the long-term impact of those practices on human health.

Annesburg

Annesburg is the northeastern-most town in *RDR2*. A replication of a generic company mining town prominent during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is nestled along the game’s Lannahechee River, which also serves as the far east border of *RDR2*’s playable mainland. Van Horn, based on Natchez, Mississippi, and Saint Denis, based on New Orleans,

¹⁰⁹ Scott, *Land of Extraction*, 67-68. Legislation supporting the removal of American Indians from their homelands includes the Homestead Acts, the Indian Appropriation Act, and the Dawes Act.

¹¹⁰ Scott, *Land of Extraction*, 7.

Louisiana, are also nestled along the banks of the Lannahechee, just as their real-world counterparts are alongside the Mississippi River. This and other in-game context clues indicate that the Lannahechee is *RDR2*'s equivalent of the Mississippi. Lannahechee is a notable name for this river, as it most likely refers to the Muskogee word “lanahassee,” which means yellow or brown water that is stale or rancid.¹¹¹ This is certainly no coincidence by the game's developers, but it is one that can easily be missed as the average player is not aware of the translation. It is a suitable descriptor considering the conditions of the river in *RDR2* as well as the southern Mississippi in 1899.

A 1907 report by the Department of the Interior chronicled industrial pollution from Chicago following many years of sewage and sanitary drainage into the Mississippi, which was carried downstream impacting the cleanliness of the water in Missouri. Stemming from a legal battle in 1900, the State of Missouri indicates that water from the Mississippi River is used for “domestic, agricultural, and manufacturing purposes” and that the water is “indispensable to the life, health, and happiness” of thousands of Missouri's residents. The suit opines that continued pollution from Chicago “will cause sewage matter to flow into the Mississippi River past the homes and waterworks systems of the inhabitants” in Missouri, adding, “it will poison the waters of the Mississippi and render them unfit for domestic use, amounting to a direct and continuing nuisance that will endanger the health and lives and irreparably injure the business interests” of the community.¹¹² Chicago had long been a culprit of poor environmental practices mostly because “social and economic elites sought voluntary cooperation and public policies that

¹¹¹ William Bright, *Native American Placenames of the United States* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 249.

¹¹² United States Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, *Pollution of Illinois and Mississippi Rivers by Chicago Sewage* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), 6-7, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/wsp/0194/report.pdf>.

avored business practices and often exempted the largest sources of pollution” for over one hundred years. Chicago’s vast growth and industrial districts centered along waterways provided easy disposal of waste into the Chicago and Calumet Rivers, which eventually combine and flow into the Mississippi.¹¹³

Though this case involves a location hundreds of miles north of *RDR2*’s representation of the Mississippi and Chicago is significantly larger than Annesburg, the same effects are seen in the game as Annesburg, Van Horn, and Saint Denis are established along the Lannahechee and rely on its water to sustain their livelihoods. Unsanitary conditions in Annesburg are evident, matching descriptions by the State of Missouri in the Department of the Interior report. *RDR2*’s in-game catalog describes Annesburg as a coal mining town in which “the surrounding countryside and waterways are sooty and polluted from the mining operations which have been running for almost a century.”¹¹⁴ The nearby water appears reddish-brown and greasy, accompanied by used barrels, wood, and metal, fitting for a location on the “lanahassee.”

Annesburg and Van Horn are in *RDR2*’s state of New Hanover, with Saint Denis in the state of Lemoyne (loosely based on Louisiana). The toxic runoff produced in Annesburg flows downstream to Saint Denis, further tainting their water supply (which was already self-tainted, as discussed below). Water pollution along the Mississippi was a major point of contention at the turn of the century. In January 1900, the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce appointed a commission to investigate water pollution when such occurrence flowed from one state into a neighboring state. This probe involved rivers in the Midwest and northeastern United

¹¹³ Steven H. Corey, “Air and Water Pollution in the Urban-Industrial Nexus: Chicago, 1840s–1970s,” in *City of Lake and Prairie: Chicago’s Environmental History*, ed. Kathleen A. Brosnan, Ann Durkin Keating, and William C. Barnett (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 203-204.

¹¹⁴ “Annesburg,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed May 26, 2026, <https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Annesburg>.

States, including the Mississippi River. Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin are mentioned in the report, but Louisiana is not. This does not mean that water pollution is not a concern of the state, but that the government's efforts originated in other regions that contain a greater population and have a longer industrial history. Undoubtedly, the people of Louisiana also preferred clean water, evidence by forbidding actions that dispose of waste "into any navigable stream, bay, or lake...bagasse from sugar mills, ballast from vessels, sinking timber of any kind, or any other matter of a nature to form an obstruction to its free navigation."¹¹⁵ However, since large rivers pass by several states, and pollution can flow from one to the other, "it must be remembered that a State is absolutely powerless when its water is polluted by the action of the people of another State."¹¹⁶ For this reason, Congress intervened to establish protocol for clean water along interstate waterways. Therefore, congressional action from the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce would require the town of Annesburg to ensure it did not pollute the Lannahechee, because "polluting our rivers is menacing the health and lives of the people" downstream. Furthermore, "it is one of the inalienable rights of the people to have the water for drinking, for watering stock, for manufacturing, agricultural, and domestic uses...free from pollution or sewage...from other States or cities."¹¹⁷ Prior to this, a municipality had little remedy to offset pollution commenced in another state.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ United States Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, *A Review of the Laws Forbidding Pollution of Inland Waters in the United States*, 2d ed., 59th Cong., 1st sess., 1905, HR Doc. 233, 36. Though this 1882 law was more likely targeting commercial transport, by 1900 legislation strongly centered on public health.

¹¹⁶ United States Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *Pollution of Water Supplies*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 1900, HR Rep. 89, 3.

¹¹⁷ *Pollution of Water Supplies*, 2.

¹¹⁸ United States Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, *Sewage Pollution in the Metropolitan Area Near New York City and Its Effects on Inland Water Resources*, 57th Cong., 1st sess., 1902, HR Doc. 691, 11.

When examining the issue in *RDR2*, photos or videos from the game can be shown to demonstrate the pollution and toxicity of the water around Annesburg. Additionally, a boat can be floated downriver to follow the pollution transfer along the waterway. These can be used in conjunction with the cited government documents to explain the severity of water pollution and what measures were taken to address it.

Elysian Pool

Southwest of Annesburg is Elysian Pool, a small but substantial body of water located near an abandoned mine. Game content does not indicate how long the mine has been abandoned, but long-term effects from mining practices are evident and accurate to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The pool sits as a body of water within the game's Kamassa River and connects to a waterfall which acts as a door to an explorable cave. Within the cave there is evidence of environmental contamination, with a stream of polluted water funneling from the cave into Elysian Pool. This water is reminiscent of acid mine drainage (AMD), which the US Forest Service claims to be the largest environmental problem of the mining industry.¹¹⁹ AMD occurs when iron sulfide inside of a mine is exposed to air and water, resulting in a toxic stream that may appear red, orange, or yellow, is highly acidic, and detrimental to plant and animal life.¹²⁰ This side effect of coal extraction was long considered "a necessary and unavoidable evil connected with the essential work of producing that prime requisite of modern civilization" during the nineteenth century wherein essentially every economy nationwide centered on coal production in one way or another.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Acid Mine Drainage From Mines on the National Forests, A Management Challenge, Program Aid 1505* (March 1993), 1, <https://archive.org/details/CAT31108485/page/n1/mode/2up>.

¹²⁰ "Hands-On Experiments to Learn About Acid Mine Drainage," West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://dep.wv.gov/WWE/getinvolved/sos/Pages/AMD.aspx>.

The pollution of Elysian Pool's cave demonstrates the long-term environmental dangers of mining, such as toxicity of the water impacting nearby plants, animals, and humans, as well as dangers posed by the remains of the defunct mine itself.¹²² Players will find the fish living in Elysian Pool and the nearby animals that use it as a water source are not consumable in-game due to their contamination. These animals have a sickly appearance, with wildlife often inflicted with mange. Although fish live in Elysian Pool, many real-world water sources affected with AMD do not contain any fish at all, with one study finding an impacted river devoid of fish for a nineteen-mile stretch, so the in-game depiction of a body of water infiltrated with AMD and living organisms might not be historically accurate.¹²³ It is possible that the presence of aquatic wildlife in Elysian Pool could indicate the AMD runoff is recent and has not yet had morbid effects, however this is not likely as the AMD appears well-formed and the mine appears long abandoned with no signs of recent activity, therefore the infected water is likely to have existed for an extended period.

One thing the game fails to do is address how to treat and recover from the effects of AMD. The game is designed as a form of entertainment and not created to be educational, so fish living in Elysian Pool was most likely a choice by the developers to showcase the toxic effect on the living organisms rather than a more historically accurate depiction of eliminating them completely. A legendary perch may be fished from the pond, but upon reeling it in the player

¹²¹ J. Raymund Hoffert, "Acid Mine Drainage," *Industrial and Engineering Chemistry* 39, no. 5 (1947): 642, <https://doi.org/10.1021/ie50449a020>.

¹²² United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Abandoned Mine Site Characterization and Cleanup Handbook* (August 2000), 30, https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-09/documents/2000_08_pdfs_amsch.pdf.

¹²³ United States Department of the Interior, *Effects of Acid Mine Drainage on Fish and Macroinvertebrates of the Tioga River, Pennsylvania and New York* (May 1972), 15, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1972/0014/report.pdf>.

discovers the afflicted state of the fish and the toxicity evident in the water. This could be a more emotionally compelling event than a pond devoid of fish altogether, so in that respect the developers may have considered that to be a stronger message towards environmental concerns. An educator could use this information to instruct students on the environmental effects of AMD, point out that the water should be too toxic to sustain living fish, and provide source material for recovery and restoration programs, such as those provided by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.¹²⁴

AMD became a prominent issue in the decades following the California Gold Rush as the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported in January of 1888 that Congress established a commission “for the purpose of making a thorough examination and investigation of the mining-debris question in the State of California, and for a complete examination and survey of the complete and injured river channels, its tributaries, and the land adjacent thereto, with a view to their improvement.”¹²⁵ This remained a prominent issue in 1899, both historically and in the *RDR2* universe. As with the polluted waters outside Annesburg, the game’s narrative does not address AMD in Elysian Pool. Nonetheless, developers depicted pollution to raise attention to the issue which cannot be missed when exploring the area. This visual representation of AMD in Elysian Pool and runoff from the mine in Annesburg demonstrate the long-term environmental impact of nineteenth century mining practices.

One thing not included by game developers regarding Elysian Pool’s abandoned mine is the amount of debris that should be visible on the land. As with California following the Gold

¹²⁴ “Our Programs,” Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, United States Department of the Interior, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.osmre.gov/>.

¹²⁵ “Mining Debris Bill,” *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, January 18, 1888, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18880118.2.32&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->.

Rush, Colorado also suffered with pollution from a mining boom in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as extracted materials altered the environment by creating vast piles and debris dumps on land. This can be harmful to humans as mine waste has been linked to brain damage, developmental delays, heart disease, and cancer.¹²⁶ Also significant is what is not seen from land in the form of caverns and tunnels underground. These can endanger plant and animal life above if it collapses, and it can also shift underground waterflow. Additionally, the deeper and bigger a mine gets, the more supporting supplies are needed, such as wood for structural support and fuel burning, which increases deforestation.¹²⁷ This debris does not exist around Elysian Pool, but it must be included when discussing the environmental effects of mining. *RDR2* can be used to explore the role of mining pollution on the environment, including how it occurred and why, and source material from the USDA shows the planning, investigation, and evaluation steps of the remediation process, as well as solutions that will improve water quality, which is “the main goal of treating AMD from abandoned mines.”¹²⁸

Butcher Creek

Just south of Elysian Pool along the Kamassa River is the settlement of Butcher Creek. The game portrays Butcher Creek residents as poor, unkempt, and violent. Tore Olsson describes the community as “little more than a set of ramshackle shanties, populated by sickly white

¹²⁶ Dant, *Losing Eden*, 115.

¹²⁷ George Vrtis, “A World of Mines and Mills: Precious-Metals Mining, Industrialization, and the Nature of the Colorado Front Range,” in John Robert McNeil and George Vrtis, ed., *Mining North America: An Environmental History Since 1522* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 98-99.

¹²⁸ United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Technology and Development Program, *Treating Acid Mine Drainage From Abandoned Mines in Remote Areas*, John J. Metesh, Terrie Jarrell, and Steve Oravetz, (Missoula, MT, October 1998), 5-6, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-A13-PURL-gpo247775/pdf/GOVPUB-A13-PURL-gpo247775.pdf>.

residents whose beards are long, overalls in tatters, and shoes notably absent.”¹²⁹ Its citizens live off the land and utilize water from the Kamassa, which has been polluted by the Roanoke Mountain Fuel Company.¹³⁰ A player fishing the Kamassa in Butcher Creek will discover that all fish are poisoned and unconsumable. This is not surprising since AMD from Elysian Pool undoubtedly contaminates the waterway through Butcher Creek since AMD can toxify water for miles. If a player explores the river between the main shoreline of Butcher Creek and Elysian Pool, they will discover an outhouse above the river which empties into the Kamassa. Therefore, not only is AMD affecting the health of wildlife, plant life, and Butcher Creek residents, but so is human waste.

In 1905 Congress placed responsibilities on the public as well as municipalities to ensure they do not pollute waterways, stating that each member of the public “is charged with the duty not to pollute the natural waters upon which the community depends for life and health.”¹³¹ Butcher Creek falls short of this responsibility, although this legislation occurs six years after the main story of *RDR2*. However, visiting the area in *RDR2*’s epilogue, set in 1907, presents the same conditions, indicating that the legislation had no impact on public health for Butcher Creek residents. Olsson hints that the appearance of Butcher Creek is due to what he labels the “Appalachian hillbilly myth” of depicting the residents as “poor, backward, and different because of their geographic isolation.”¹³² While this does hold true regarding game development,

¹²⁹ Tore Olsson, *Red Dead’s History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America’s Violent Past*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2024), 207-208.

¹³⁰ “Contamination,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed May 29, 2026, <https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Contamination>. This in-game newspaper reporting on conditions at Butcher Creek states that “Contaminants were found and some accuse the Roanoke Mountain Fuel Company of fouling the local drinking water, resulting in large goiters, rashes, sores and psychosis” of its residents. The article adds that residents are pale and weak, similar to victims of lead poisoning.

¹³¹ Department of the Interior, *A Review of the Laws Forbidding Pollution*, 142-143.

the isolation of a sparse rural area like Butcher Creek would lack federal oversight. The downside of this is the impact of people downstream, whose water supply is contaminated with AMD and human waste, which causes typhoid.¹³³ Butcher Creek may be too small to command federal attention, however the refuse carried into a large city would be notable and the residents would be numerous enough to draw attention to the issue.¹³⁴ Additionally, the transported waste is considered a public nuisance and it is “the duty of authorities to cause its abatement.”¹³⁵ Therefore, federal authorities would be mediators in requiring the residents of Butcher Creek to prevent their waste from flowing downstream to Saint Denis since it passes a state boundary, though the federal government would likely encourage the states to reach an agreement and only intervene if that cannot be accomplished.¹³⁶

The unsanitary conditions of Butcher Creek demonstrate the harm of a contaminated water supply. Following the flow of the Kamassa River downstream into Saint Denis, it can be shown in-game how the contaminants originating upstream impact the wellbeing of Saint Denis residents. To use this as an educational opportunity, congressional reports such as those cited on national public health and sewage pollution in waterways should be shown in conjunction with on-screen evidence. One of the best accompanying sources is the congressional effort to institute a Department of Public Health, wherein President Taft offers his support:

¹³² Olsson, *Red Dead's History*, 208.

¹³³ National Public Health, 61st Cong., 2d sess., 1910, Sen Doc. 637, 16.

¹³⁴ Department of the Interior, *Sewage Pollution in the Metropolitan Area Near New York City*, 9. The report notes that water cleanliness efforts sparked when “a group of mourners has become large enough to demand attention.”

¹³⁵ Department of the Interior, *A Review of the Laws Forbidding Pollution*, 23.

¹³⁶ Alyssa Sieja, “Can We Agree to Agree? Forming Interstate Agreements to Address Water Pollution,” *George Washington Law Review* 90, no. 4 (2022): 992. Annesburg, Elysian Pool, and Butcher Creek are in the *RDR2* state of New Hanover; Saint Denis is in the in-game state of Lemoyne.

It is through such as enlistment of public interest that Congress may be expected to enact the legislation necessary to enlarge the activities of the Federal Government in respect to public health. I hope to live to see the time when the increased efficiency in the public-health service—Federal, State, and municipal—will show itself in a greatly reduced death rate.¹³⁷

The new department was not universally supported despite advocacy from the president, as the same document notes, “Of course we must expect opposition from unscrupulous parties who now prey upon suffering humanity and whose guilty conscience tells them that any real health movement will seriously interfere with their pecuniary gains.”¹³⁸ In other words, government regulation prohibiting corporations from polluting waterways would require those companies to incur additional expenditures and alter production methods, affecting revenue. Congress, in proposing the new department, foresaw pushback from corporations and reiterated that the health and wellbeing of all Americans supersedes corporate profits. Additionally, the report notes that a healthy community is a profitable community, stating that “every dollar spent in the effort to prolong human life would bring back to the community \$100 worth of health.”¹³⁹ This is understandable as healthy working citizens in a community will spend more than ill members of a community, which leads to a greater total economy. Therefore, corporations should be in favor of the proposed legislation as it will have greater long-term economic gains. These sources show the decades-long fight for clean interstate waterways and government advocacy for pollution regulations, which can be utilized in conjunction with visual representations in and around Butcher Creek to demonstrate the necessity of federal oversight.

¹³⁷ National Public Health, 6.

¹³⁸ National Public Health, 18.

¹³⁹ National Public Health, 18.

Saint Denis

Downriver from Butcher Creek along both the Kamassa and Lannahechee Rivers is the largest city in *RDR2*—Saint Denis. Another location with notable environmental contamination, Saint Denis is an incredibly detailed recreation of New Orleans in 1899. As the epicenter of the *RDR2* map, Rockstar describes Saint Denis as a “lively, 200-year-old melting-pot city where industry magnates, socialites, traders, sailors, workers, beggars, and thieves all live side by side. With good rail, road, and river connections for sugar, cotton, and other commodities trading, and a new electric power plant, business is booming.”¹⁴⁰ Though the use of power is not generally affected by polluted water, household and public health is, as “with social and commercial progress come modern improvements, and eventually the public sewer is laid to the nearest and most convenient body of water.”¹⁴¹ This is true of Saint Denis, as large drainage pipes can be observed on the outskirts of town emptying into the river with broken wood, trash, and dead animals among the contaminants.

The contamination washed downstream from Annesburg, Elysian Pool, and Butcher Creek, along with Saint Denis’ own pollution, mimics a real concern for New Orleans in 1899. That year the city established a Sewerage and Water Board intended to create a permanent and public improvement to the city’s water system.¹⁴² Though this detail is not included in-game, if the player wanders around bordering waterways, the need for such a commission and the dire pollutive state the city is in become evident. The new infrastructure approved by the Sewerage

¹⁴⁰ “Saint Denis,” Red Dead Wiki, Fandom, accessed October 5, 2025, https://reddead.fandom.com/wiki/Saint_Denis.

¹⁴¹ United States Department of the Interior, *Sewage Pollution in the Metropolitan Area*, 9-10.

¹⁴² State of Louisiana, Act No. 6., *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Louisiana at the Extra Session*, Baton Rouge, 1899, 16-17, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d02228783n&view=1up&seq=7>.

and Water Board proved a success for New Orleans as conditions improved after the act was passed and within fifteen years the city built nearly seventy miles of drainage canals and seven pumping stations to prevent overflow.¹⁴³ Assessed value of taxable property increased from one hundred and forty million dollars to two hundred and fifty million dollars, the average death rate dropped from around twenty-seven per one thousand to under twenty per one thousand, and rates of various diseases dropped anywhere from half to ninety-five percent. Martin Behrman, mayor of New Orleans in 1914, claimed, “No city in the country can exhibit a more satisfactory bill of health than the New Orleans of the present day, in which the successful operation of sewerage, water and drainage has been a most potent factor.”¹⁴⁴ Behrman’s enthusiasm and pride demonstrate government commitment to environmental efforts has a positive effect not only on the environment, but also on the people using its resources. Residents had long considered the river dirty and commercially oriented with little aesthetic or pleasurable appeal, much like an interstate highway in the modern day, but New Orleans demonstrates that commitment from the government and community, adequate resources to carry out the project, and a detailed planning and execution stage can overcome decades of pollution.¹⁴⁵

Saint Denis provides an excellent opportunity for environmental historians to showcase the harmful effects of pollution and recovery efforts that can be made to reverse those trends. It can also be an asset while studying the history of city development by demonstrating the significance of proper sanitation and cleanliness efforts. While it is ideal to account for waste

¹⁴³ Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006): 154.

¹⁴⁴ Martin Behrman, “A History of Three Great Public Utilities: Sewerage, Water, and Drainage, and Their Influence Upon the Health and Progress of a Big City,” *Louisiana Anthology*, accessed October 5, 2025, https://louisiana-anthology.org/303_download/texts/behрман--history_of_drainage_system/behрман--history_of_drainage_system.html.

¹⁴⁵ Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 146.

control in the planning process, New Orleans in the early twentieth century demonstrated that it is possible to recover after years of contamination by turning a putrid environment into a healthy and prosperous one. Though the cleanup efforts are not featured in *RDR2*, when exploring the city, the player encounters various environmental contaminants. This includes the condition of the water outside town, which contains debris and pollutants from upstream as well as Saint Denis' own refuse being dumped into the water. One random encounter features an NPC disposing of human waste in the street, indicating that health issues reverberate far beyond the exterior waters and citizen percipience is also important.

Annesburg, Elysian Pool, Butcher Creek, and Saint Denis provide a glimpse into environmental issues in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were often pushed aside for corporate means. All pollution at these locations is caused by humans due to manufacturing, mining, or disregard for the necessity of clean water, and venturing around each area permits the player to visualize the extent of environmental contamination. These pollutants exemplify rapid industrial growth through the nineteenth century and showcase the impact that environmental practices have had not only on the health of the environment, but also on the wellbeing of humans. As these issues became a prevalent and major concern for society during *RDR2*'s setting at the turn of the century, the game can be used in conjunction with the cited source material to demonstrate the severity of the concern, what was proposed to address the issues, and what was done to reverse the harm. In this manner, *RDR2* is an effective tool to learn about environmental concerns in the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 4

Tuberculosis, the Salubrious West, and the Death of *Red Dead Redemption II* Protagonist Arthur Morgan

It's not good news... You got tuberculosis. I'm really sorry for you, son, it's a hell of a thing.¹⁴⁶

—*RDR2*'s Dr. Joseph Barnes

Undoubtedly one of the most emotional moments in *RDR2* occurs in the mission “A Fork in the Road” when Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis (TB) by Dr. Joseph Barnes. This takes place in the main story either at the end of chapter five or beginning of chapter six depending on the order in which available missions are played. The mission itself is a surprise to the player, as it engages as a hidden cutscene when traveling to Doyle’s Tavern in Saint Denis to begin the mission “Icarus and Friends.” Shortly before reaching the destination, the player will lose control of Arthur as he enters a coughing fit accompanied by blood and dimness. A passerby assists Arthur to the doctor’s office, where he receives news of his impending fatality. This moment shifts game mechanics as food and drink consumed by the user generates less benefit and partaking in either too frequently can initiate a coughing sequence by the protagonist. Additionally, Arthur’s physical appearance changes drastically by becoming sickly with notable weight loss and discoloring around his eyes. This event also triggers Arthur’s redemptive arc, as his primary focus from this point forward is not about his survival but establishing a new life for John, Abigail, and Jack Marston. He accomplishes this in the last mission of chapter six, seeing the Marstons escape the gang just before succumbing to his illness.

¹⁴⁶ *Red Dead Redemption II*, PlayStation 5 ed., v1.32 (Rockstar Games, 2018), “A Fork in the Road.” Quote by Dr. Joseph Barnes when diagnosing Arthur with tuberculosis.

RDR2 makes evident how Arthur contracted TB. In the chapter two mission “Money Lending and Other Sins III,” he is tasked with recovering a debt from Thomas Downes. Per his routine custom on a usury mission, Arthur exhibits intimidation and force to reclaim the funds. When Downes explains that he does not have the money, Arthur instructs him to sell his house. Downes explains that they owe more on their house than it is worth and he has no means to repay the gang for the loan. Unsatisfied with this response, Arthur proceeds to beat Downes, who, already infected with TB, spits blood onto Arthur’s face. Eventually Downes’ wife intervenes to stop the tussle, but Arthur’s mortal fate is sealed from this moment.

Given the significance of TB in *RDR2*, it is worth examining how accurately it is portrayed and what the player may learn about it, including the role of the West in TB treatment. Though not fully explored in *RDR2*, Dr. Barnes suggests Arthur move west to assist in his recovery. Western locations, particularly those in high arid climates such as Colorado and New Mexico, became noteworthy for their connection with TB treatment. The *RDR2* state of Ambarino, based largely on the Rocky Mountains, would have been an ideal location for a TB sanitorium due to its crisp open air and sunny climate, but one is not included in the game.¹⁴⁷ This chapter assesses the interaction between Dr. Barnes and Arthur, and how Arthur’s diagnosis and death can be used to learn why the West was a desired location for TB sufferers.

Tuberculosis is a contagious disease that spreads when a person inhales air contaminated with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. These are “aerobic microorganisms, which mean that they need oxygen in order to grow and reproduce, and they are pathogenic, which means that they are capable of causing disease.” In many cases, the immune system of a healthy person is strong

¹⁴⁷ This is understandable for story purposes, as Arthur’s lack of treatment and desire to see John Marston and his family leave the gang despite his impending fatality is a crucial storyline in the game’s final chapter. If Arthur relocated to a sanitorium, he would never have achieved his redemption.

enough to withstand the bacteria and avoid infection. However, infection begins if the body is too weak to fight the microorganisms or if the bacteria is more powerful than the response of the immune system. When infection occurs and attacks the lungs, this type of TB is known as pulmonary TB.¹⁴⁸ This is the variant suffered by *RDR2* protagonist Arthur Morgan, evidenced by regular coughing and expulsion of blood. It is also the cause of death for notable Western outlaw Doc Holliday.¹⁴⁹ Coincidentally, Arthur and Doc both died from pulmonary TB at age thirty-six, demonstrating the severity of the disease.

TB was the deadliest disease in America in the nineteenth century, claiming the lives of one hundred thousand Americans annually.¹⁵⁰ At the time it was thought that TB may be hereditary, and though we now know that is not the case, the mode of spread once made this a reasonable assumption.¹⁵¹ For example, in the case of Doc Holliday, his mother died of TB when he was a teenager and presumably transmitted the disease along to him before she passed.¹⁵² The prevalence of such cases among family members could lead one to conclude a hereditary aspect to TB, but by the end of the nineteenth century this hypothesis was superseded by the germ theory of disease.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Carol Dyer, *Tuberculosis* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010), 2.

¹⁴⁹ Vernon R. Maddux, *American National Biography*, s.v. "Holliday, Doc," February 2000, <https://www.anb.org/display/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-2001640>. For a review of Doc Holliday's TB in cinema, see José Elías García Sánchez, María Lucila Merino Marcos, and Enrique García Sánchez, "The Tuberculosis of "Doc" Holliday in the Cinema. *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957)," trans. Meg Zarlengo, *Revista de Medicina y Cine* 1, no. 4 (2005): 115-125.

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Owen Lewis, *Chasing the Cure in New Mexico: Tuberculosis and the Quest for Health* (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016), 35, 44.

¹⁵¹ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 40.

¹⁵² Maddux, *American National Biography*, "Holliday, Doc."

¹⁵³ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 8.

Though germ theory is largely attributed to the works of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch, the first instance of the spread of tuberculosis between living organisms was demonstrated in 1865 by Frenchman Jean Antoine Villeman. Familiar with horse diseases that could be passed on to humans, Villeman hypothesized that TB could do the same and attempted to demonstrate this with several experiments. He first took lung tissue from a deceased human with TB and implanted it into two healthy rabbits. Two months later, he examined the rabbits and discovered they had developed pulmonary TB. Several more experiments involving material from humans and cows infected with TB injected into healthy organisms demonstrated transferal of the disease. Despite the results, his findings were largely rejected by the scientific community until 1882 when developments from Pasteur and Koch vindicated Villeman's discoveries.¹⁵⁴ With knowledge that TB is spread via microorganisms the medical community began to establish treatments, but it would take fifty years to discover a cure.¹⁵⁵

During Arthur's visit to Dr. Barnes the player observes various aspects of the medical assessment. One of these involves placing a stethoscope on Arthur's chest. This became one of the primary avenues to diagnose TB, as lungs infected with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* sound different from healthy lungs.¹⁵⁶ Following Arthur's description of coughing and blood, this audible chest exam likely confirmed to the doctor that a case of tuberculosis was present. Dr. Barnes then places a tongue depressor in Arthur's mouth to observe his throat. Though what the doctor observes is not shown on screen, his immediate reaction and facial expression suggest concern and indicate an abnormality. Though it is possible for pulmonary TB patients to show

¹⁵⁴ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 8-13.

¹⁵⁵ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 43.

¹⁵⁶ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 44.

symptoms in the throat, it is rare. (Laryngeal TB, on the other hand, will show symptoms in the throat.)¹⁵⁷ Given Dr. Barnes' response to the throat inspection, Arthur could have been one of these rare cases for pulmonary TB.

Though Arthur was diagnosed by audible chest exam and throat inspection, by the late 1890s Wilhelm Konrad von Röntgen's invention of the x-ray made TB confirmation visual and provided the severity of TB upon diagnosis.¹⁵⁸ It is interesting that Dr. Barnes only utilized the stethoscope and throat exam and made the diagnosis without use of an x-ray, but perhaps he received all of the information necessary for diagnosis through manual inspections. Even if an x-ray was not needed for verification of infection, it would still be useful to determine the severity of Arthur's condition. Alternatively, it is possible that Dr. Barnes does not have an x-ray machine as one is not visible in the room during the cutscene (though one corner of the exam room is not shown). It is also possible that an x-ray machine exists in an adjacent room. The first x-ray machine in New Orleans arrived at Charity Hospital in 1896, so if Dr. Barnes did not possess one, he could have sent Arthur there for imaging.¹⁵⁹ However, x-ray technology was still in its infancy at the turn of the century and saw major improvements over the next two decades, including shorter exposure times, clearer images, and lower radiation doses, all aspects that lower risk to the patient.¹⁶⁰ Perhaps it was not a matter of affordability or necessity for Dr.

¹⁵⁷ Gamal Youssef, Bassam-Hasan Mahboub, and Safinaz-Nagib Azab, "Laryngeal and Voice Disorders in Patients with Pulmonary Tuberculosis," *Iranian Journal of Otorhinolaryngology* 33, no. 2 (March 2021), 98, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8052486/pdf/ijo-33-97.pdf>. The authors indicate that the incidence of pulmonary TB patients producing symptoms in the throat is .08-5.1%, though they note the actual occurrence may be higher.

¹⁵⁸ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 45-46.

¹⁵⁹ Edward I. Bluth, "The Early History of New Orleans Radiology and Its Practitioners," abstract, *Southern Medical Journal* 116, no. 1 (January 2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.14423/SMJ.0000000000001495>.

¹⁶⁰ Matthew Lavine, "The Early Clinical X-Ray in the United States: Patient Experiences and Public Perceptions," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 67, no.4 (October 2012): 619, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24632081>.

Barnes, but of practicality, as he would certainly be aware of the rise medical malpractice lawsuits during that time, which may make him hesitant to obtain an x-ray machine.¹⁶¹ Given that Dr. Barnes makes no motion towards imaging, the most reasonable conclusion is that he does not have an x-ray machine and was confident in his manual diagnosis. However, since an x-ray machine is not required for diagnosis, perhaps it was the choice of developers to not include one as this would have unnecessarily extended the scene (which lasts about six minutes) and the emotion of the scene is effectively captured as shown.

In the cutscene, following Dr. Barnes' diagnosis of Arthur, the two dialogue about the best path forward for Arthur's health as TB could be paramount to a death sentence.¹⁶² In *RDR2*'s setting of 1899, treatment options for TB were minimal as the first progress towards a cure was not made until 1943 and not fully realized until 1945.¹⁶³ Once this antibiotic was developed, TB could be successfully treated and cured.¹⁶⁴ Prior to this, however, the most common form of treatment involved patients fleeing westward seeking relief in spacious open-air climates considered favorable to health, which led to the West playing a critical role in TB recovery throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁶⁵ Dr. Barnes supports this notion by telling Arthur the best thing for him is rest, getting somewhere warm and dry, and taking it easy.

¹⁶¹ Lavine, "Clinical X-Ray in the United States," 614.

¹⁶² Arno Görgen, "The Medicalization of Arthur Morgan: Tuberculosis as the Good Death in *Red Dead Redemption 2*," in *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, ed. George Wills and Esther Wright (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), 99.

¹⁶³ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 63-64. An antibiotic known as streptomycin was first developed to fight against TB in 1943. It initially showed promise in various animal species, but an experimental test in 1944 on a 21-year-old woman known as "Patricia T." proved unsuccessful and was accompanied by harsh side effects. Increasingly suffering from the disease, she volunteered for a second round of an improved streptomycin the following year. This attempt was successful, as her symptoms improved and her TB remained dormant years later.

¹⁶⁴ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 3-4.

¹⁶⁵ Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 41.

Arthur sarcastically responds that he can spend his winters at his country club in California before informing the doctor that he is unable to relocate. Despite Arthur's sarcasm, the advice given by Dr. Barnes is consistent with medical practices of the era as open air and spacious climates became a prescription for TB patients due to their perceived ability to enlarge lung capacity and increase respiration. It was also noted that "it is unlikely that any one particular factor is the really essential thing in the climatic treatment of tuberculosis," so a variety of treatment was beneficial in recovery for TB victims, such as more exposure to sunlight, fresher air, and outdoor activities that are not available in densely populated areas.¹⁶⁶ Sunlight exposure may be the most critical factor for minimizing the effects of TB, as a 1907 study determined that two to ten minutes of "active sunlight are efficient to kill (tuberculosis bacteria) when directly exposed."¹⁶⁷ This discovery adds scientific support for the benefit of dry and sunny climates of the West in fighting against TB. Western newspapers supported this idea by noting that death rates are higher in crowded urban areas, with the sparse populations of the spacious West helping hinder transmission of the disease, adding that the "hospitalization of tuberculosis is urgent and will not long be withheld."¹⁶⁸ Conversely, heavily populated eastern locations, such as in Massachusetts, discovered that TB mortality has a "definite relation" to population density.¹⁶⁹ These studies demonstrate the ability of TB to impact large communities and highlights the

¹⁶⁶ Robert Dec Ward, "Tuberculosis and Climate," *Bulleting of the American Geographical Society of New York (1901-1915)* 41, no. 1 (1909): 22, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/tuberculosis-climate/docview/125723872/se-2>.

¹⁶⁷ John Weinzirl, "The Action of Sunlight upon Bacteria with Special Reference to B. tuberculosis," *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 4, no. 3 (May 1907): 152, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30071744>.

¹⁶⁸ "What the Doctors Decree," *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 22, 1899, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn99021999/1899-02-22/ed-1/?sp=9>.

¹⁶⁹ S.W. Abbott, "The Decrease of Consumption in New England," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 9, no. 65 (March 1904): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15225437.1904.10502808>.

urgent care and recovery of TB patients, with many desiring to move to the spacious, open, and sunny West. The conversation Dr. Barnes has with Arthur is consistent with medical practices of 1899, a point that should not be overlooked when considering the historicity of TB in *RDR2*.

During the initial diagnosis Dr. Barnes informs Arthur that TB is progressive and his body will continue to deteriorate. (This is why TB was also referred to as “consumption” during much of the nineteenth century, as the progressive nature of the disease appeared to consume the body.)¹⁷⁰ If Arthur returns to Dr. Barnes’ office, the doctor will again recommend he move west to a sanatorium. With a cure still decades away, many states or territories were pitching their environments as ideal conditions for TB recovery as climatic treatment and rest persisted as the preeminent recommendations for patients well into the twentieth century.¹⁷¹ Perhaps the most prominent was New Mexico, as its “climate, clean air, clean water, and remote location were regarded as critically important prerequisites for regaining health.”¹⁷² William Ritch, author of *Illustrated New Mexico* and president of the Bureau of Immigration, who himself had relocated to New Mexico for health purposes, began touting New Mexico’s “salubrious climate and its effectiveness in treating tuberculosis.”¹⁷³ In 1899, the same year Arthur is diagnosed with TB, the federal government established the first national sanatoriums in New Mexico utilizing two abandoned military forts. By this time, it was known that TB was communicable, but the value of New Mexico’s clean air and sunshine were still deemed therapeutic and suggested treatment.

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, *Chasing the Cure*, 3.

¹⁷¹ Frank F. D. Reckford, “A Further Study of the Relation to Housing to Pulmonary Tuberculosis. Report on 18,891 Cases,” *American Journal of Medical Sciences (1827-1924)* 160, no. 2 (August 1920): 259, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/further-study-relation-housing-pulmonary/docview/125236188/se-2>.

¹⁷² Karen D. Shane, “New Mexico: Salubrious El Dorado,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 56, no. 4 (October 1981): 389, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/new-mexico-salubrious-el-dorado/docview/1301818158/se-2>.

¹⁷³ Lewis, *Chasing the Cure*, 14.

Additionally, the abandoned forts were isolated from the general population, which helped curb spread of contagious disease.¹⁷⁴ New Mexico also has a host of hot springs that were utilized by TB patients, including Doc Holliday and Catherine Antrim, mother of Billy the Kid.¹⁷⁵ Not everyone was a benefactor of this remedy, however, as studies showed that climate best provided treatment in early stages of the disease.¹⁷⁶ Given Dr. Barnes' indication that Arthur's illness had already progressed to terminal, the western environments may not have provided much benefit to extending his life though it may have helped calm or ease the symptoms. When pressed on the matter, Arthur tells Dr. Barnes that he cannot afford to move west (which is ironic considering Arthur contracted TB by beating a man that could not afford to pay back a loan). The doctor responds by telling Arthur not to wait too long even though he was likely well beyond the benefit stages of climatic treatment.¹⁷⁷

When assessing Arthur's TB from a historical perspective, it is important to recall that a medical cure for TB would not be established until 1945, forty-six years after the events of *RDR2*. Arthur would have been eighty-two years old then and most certainly succumbed to his illness long before, even had he heeded Dr. Barnes' advice of moving west. The best medical information for TB in 1899 is depicted accurately, though that knowledge would change in future

¹⁷⁴ Lewis, *Chasing the Cure*, 43-44.

¹⁷⁵ Lewis, *Chasing the Cure*, 6-7; *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, s.v. "Holliday, Doc (1852-1887)," <https://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ii.035.html>. Note that this entry incorrectly lists Doc's birth year as 1852. He was born August 14, 1851.

¹⁷⁶ "Campaign on the White Plague Has Been Started in Earnest in Albuquerque," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, May 1, 1911, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84031081/1911-05-01/ed-1/?sp=4>.

¹⁷⁷ Frederick W. Price, "The Prognosis and Treatment of Early Pulmonary Tuberculosis," *Edinburgh Medical Journal* 17, no. 5 (1905): 451-452; S. Edwin Solly, "Neglect of the Early Diagnosis and Treatment of Pulmonary Tuberculosis," *Medical News (1882-1905)* 62, no. 5 (February 1893): 117; H. B. Moore, "The Early Recognition and the Climatic Treatment of Pulmonary Tuberculosis," *Transactions of the American Climatological Association* 11, (1895): 41.

decades.¹⁷⁸ One of the prevailing thoughts of the time was connection between TB and the atmosphere due to high rates of TB in cities as opposed to rural communities, supporting the notion that open-air climates in the West were beneficial for TB, specifically New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado.¹⁷⁹ In reality, the communicative nature of the disease is a more reasonable explanation for high concentration rates in cities. A positive side effect for cities, therefore, of infected patients moving west is the decrease of spread within the city. Consequently, as it became accepted that TB was passed from person-to-person, patients in advanced or untreatable stages of the disease would be dissuaded from relocating to otherwise welcoming locations for early-stage patients.¹⁸⁰

One aspect of TB not apparent in *RDR2* is the prevalence of the disease in cattle, which was a serious issue in the late nineteenth century. TB in cattle, known as *Mycobacterium bovis*, is transmittable to humans and can affect the lungs, lymph nodes, and other parts of the body.¹⁸¹ The primary risk factor of TB spread from bovine to human is through consuming milk from an infected cow. A February 1897 article in the *Portland Daily Press* (Maine) found several doctors

¹⁷⁸ While climatic treatment was generally accepted, it was not universal as some medical professionals did not connect climate with TB recovery. Medical doctor S.A. Knopf wrote an article in *North American Review* that was published under the title “Climate and Consumption” in newspapers around the country, disagreeing with climate as a treatment for TB. “Climate and Consumption,” *Florence Daily Tribune* (CO), March 8, 1899, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn90051342/1899-03-08/ed-1/?sp=2>; “Climate and Consumption,” *Pioneer Express* (ND), March 24, 1899; <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn88076741/1899-03-24/ed-1/?sp=5>; “Climate and Consumption,” *Bridgeton Pioneer* (NJ), March 16, 1899, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn87068192/1899-03-16/ed-1/?sp=3>; “Climate and Consumption,” *Brownsville Daily Herald* (TX), April 10, 1899, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn86099906/1899-04-10/ed-1/?sp=3>. The same article also appeared in newspapers in Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Oklahoma, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, and Vermont.

¹⁷⁹ Eric J. Rubin, “The Bert and Peggy Dupont Lecture: Tuberculosis and the Building of the American West,” *Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association* 133, (2023-01): 198-199, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10493767/>.

¹⁸⁰ Mary Swanson, *Colorado Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Tuberculosis,” accessed May 20, 2026, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/tuberculosis#id-field-author>.

¹⁸¹ United States Centers for Disease Control, “About Bovine Tuberculosis in Humans,” May 20, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/tb/about/m-bovis.html>.

describing cases of TB in humans connected to drinking cow's milk. A Dr. Stang noted a case of a five-year-old child in good health contracting TB and passing away within a few weeks. The family cow was then killed and discovered to have advanced TB. A Dr. Demme reported four children in a hospital that died upon drinking milk from infected cows. Also featured in the article is a Scotch family of four children, two sons and two daughters. The two sons refrained from drinking milk, but the daughters consumed milk from the family's herd of infected cows. Both died from TB. Regarding drinking milk from cows, a Dr. Stanwood said, "Milk has been and is now one of the best foods that we prescribe, especially for persons troubled with indigestion. Strange as it may seem to some we have by the use of milk been inoculating into the symptoms the germs of tuberculosis instead of infecting a cure."¹⁸² A follow-up article in June 1897 includes farmers, the local cattle commission, local board of health, and medical professionals debating the best course of action to target bovine TB. The board of health implemented preventative measures such as requiring farmers to prove their cows are free from TB. In response, farmers suggested that the board must prove their cows are infected. Debate then transpired over whether TB is contagious, with some parties not agreeing with the recent medical findings. In retort, a doctor states, "If the gentleman wants to discuss the pathology of tuberculosis, it will take more time than this meeting has to devote." Unperturbed, another farmer jibed, "If this man thinks he finds tuberculosis in a cow, he has got to support his reputation." The article concludes with a letter from a doctor disputing TB as the cause of death for both people and cattle in the area, though he does not rule it out.¹⁸³

¹⁸² "Bacilli Fared Hard," *Portland Daily Press*, February 9, 1897, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016025/1897-02-09/ed-1?sp=2&st=image>.

¹⁸³ "Our Milk Supply," *Portland Daily Press*, June 7, 1897, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016025/1897-06-07/ed-1/?sp=3>.

In 1894, the first instance of TB in cattle was suspected in Arizona, causing great alarm to the community. The cattle were purchased in Missouri and accompanied with a certificate indicating their positive health. A local veterinarian became suspicious that TB was present after a cow became ill. Suspecting the worst, sixteen cows were killed and it was discovered that all had advanced TB.¹⁸⁴ Contrary to the previous story, great care was taken in this instance to minimize the risk of a TB outbreak. These articles demonstrate the severity bovine TB has to humans and why monitoring and controlling TB is crucial for a healthy society. Though this is not covered in *RDR2*, assessing TB using the game must include the pervasiveness of TB in cattle and the detrimental effects it can have when transferred to humans.

Contrary to most game mechanics where the protagonist gets stronger as the game progresses, Arthur gets weaker. His regular bouts with coughing and his deteriorating appearance evoke empathy for the player, triggering a reflection on Arthur's condition, especially as Arthur (and the player) "realizes that only through tuberculosis that he, his identity, and his morality are not endangered by civilization (as he initially assumes), but that he bears a moral responsibility to society."¹⁸⁵ Arthur discusses this in a conditional cutscene with Sister Calderón at the conclusion of the mission "The Fine Art of Conversation." Reflecting on his recent diagnosis and life choices, he says, "I'm dying, sister. Yeah, I got TB. I got it...beating a man...to death...for a few bucks." Arthur's tone coupled with additional dialogue indicates that he laments his past actions and ponders whether his choices were worth the consequences, which, in this case, means his death. After telling Sister Calderón that he has lived a bad life, she encourages Arthur

¹⁸⁴ "A Dread Disease," *Arizona Republican*, July 14, 1894, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84020558/1894-07-14/ed-1/?sp=3>; "Slaughter of Diseased Cattle," *Arizona Republican*, August 2, 1894, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84020558/1894-08-02/ed-1/?sp=3>.

¹⁸⁵ Görgen, "The Medicalization of Arthur Morgan," in Wills, *Red Dead Redemption*, 105, 107.

to try to help someone and find meaning in his last days. This conversation not only helps Arthur come to grips with his impending death from TB but also strikes emotion into the player to make the most of Arthur's final moments.

Observing Arthur's struggles with TB makes the player aware of the severity of the disease and might make one ponder if cures for TB existed in 1899. *RDR2* was released in October 2018. Interestingly, Google Trends indicates a spike in searches related to tuberculosis with November of that year setting a then-record high for search queries.¹⁸⁶ This could be coincidental, however the increased search rate of TB that month could be correlated to the release of *RDR2* and users seeking more information on the disease inflicting Arthur. This is an example of the societal and cultural impact that a video game like *RDR2* has on the player, and why utilizing the game as an education tool is worthwhile.

RDR2 provides a compelling avenue to study TB. Protagonist Arthur Morgan offers physical and visual representations of the disease as his persistent struggles to breathe and changing appearance have a significant impact in the latter stages of the main story, permitting the user to actively experience TB "via aesthetics, narrative, or gameplay."¹⁸⁷ The scene in which Arthur is diagnosed by Dr. Barnes demonstrates medical treatment consistent with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the doctor's recommendation of getting somewhere warm and dry and taking it easy was the primary prescription for TB patients. This is corroborated by medical journals and newspaper reports, which coincide with the advice from Dr. Barnes. These accounts should be included and compared for consistency and accuracy when

¹⁸⁶ "Tuberculosis," Google Trends, Google, accessed May 20, 2026, <https://trends.google.com/explore?q=tuberculosis&date=all&geo=US>. November 2018 saw the highest number of searches related to TB since search trend data was first recorded in December 2003. The November 2018 search rate was not surpassed until December 2024, following a year which saw more than 10,000 TB cases in the USA, the most since 2011.

¹⁸⁷ G6rger, "The Medicalization of Arthur Morgan," in Wills, *Red Dead Redemption*, 98.

analyzing the scene's historicity. It is also important to detail the most popular locations for climatic treatment and what patients were instructed to do upon reaching the location.

Sanatoriums in New Mexico and Colorado became primary scenes for early-stage TB sufferers and were the most likely places to be recommended for patients. Accompanying reports should be provided that include recommendations to stay active outdoors and utilize sunshine to combat TB.¹⁸⁸

Arthur's diagnosis of pulmonary TB is a major turning point in the *RDR2* narrative which sees him grappling with his fatality and purpose for the short time he has remaining. Arthur's fate is a common tale among settlers in the American West as TB was the leading cause of death in America through the early 1900s.¹⁸⁹ Visualizing Arthur's suffering helps the player understand the severity of the disease and how crippling it can be even to the healthiest individuals. Combining Arthur's struggles with medical journals and newspaper reports about TB, such as those provided throughout this chapter, provide an avenue for academic inquiry of TB in the American West, including treatment options, medical advancements, and settlements purposed for TB treatment.

¹⁸⁸ Such as "What the Doctors Decree," *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 22, 1899, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn99021999/1899-02-22/ed-1/?sp=9>; "The Climate Cure," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, June 17, 1899, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84020630/1899-06-17/ed-1/?sp=3>; "Science the Victor," *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, July 3, 1895, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn89051168/1895-07-03/ed-1/?sp=3>; Rubin, "Tuberculosis and the Building of the American West," 198-199; Weinzirl, "The Action of Sunlight upon Bacteria with Special Reference to B. tuberculosis," 152; Shane, "New Mexico," 389; Dyer, *Tuberculosis*, 41; F.C. Smith, "Tuberculosis Sanitorium, Fort Stanton, N. Mex.: A Report for the Year Ended June 30, 1914, of the Sanatorium Maintained by the Public Health Service for the Treatment of Tuberculous Patients," *Public Health Reports* (1896) 29, no. 35 (1914): 2250-2255, doi.org/10.2307/4571261.

¹⁸⁹ United States Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Mortality Statistics 1907* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 94, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsushistorical/mortstatsh_1907.pdf.

Conclusion

It was hard not to marvel at the ways that this blockbuster game, made purely for commercial entertainment purposes, so often touched upon dilemmas that are usually the domain of academic historians and few others.¹⁹⁰

—Tore Olsson

RDR2 is a video game set during the final days of the American frontier. Featuring a fictionalized version of the American West in 1899, the game's detail and realism touches on several historical themes. This thesis analyzes how *RDR2* may be utilized to explore the historicity of law and order, environmental pollution, and tuberculosis in the West by coupling game content with primary and secondary sources that can be used in an educational setting. An educator knowledgeable of the historical subject matter and in-game content may consider using *RDR2* as a hook to engage students in learning about the history of the American West.

Law and order is a prominent aspect of *RDR2* and may be approached academically from a few perspectives. In particular, the evaluation of Sam Freeman (inspired by Bass Reeves) opens larger doors to review African American lawmen in the West and the portrayal of minorities in popular Western media, of which Black figures are often omitted. Freeman's tenacity and demanding approach to law reflect Reeves' complexities of working as a lawman in Indian Territory, a space on the edge of government control and rife with racial tensions. One crucial benefit to the inclusion of Sam Freeman as Bass Reeves is attempting to understand why white heroes became the prominent figurehead of Western justice despite diverse populations permeating the West and being involved in every facet of its settlement. Primary source documents such as the Heck Thomas writing provide a glimpse into how Western history was

¹⁹⁰ Tore Olsson, *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2024), 241.

recorded and later featured on the silver screen. As the Western genre grew in popularity, the narrative remained constant despite its lack of historical accuracy.

Black Belle provides a glimpse into Western gunslinger mythology, Western gangs, and eastern fascination with Western lore. In addition to the life of outlaw Belle Starr, the character of Black Belle highlights the influence of women in the West that is often overlooked within Western mythology. Writers such as Patricia Loughlin and Laura Arata highlight women that deserve recognition for their contribution to Western literature and expose the shortfall of recognition for both women and African Americans in the settlement of the West. This elicits discussion for why *RDR2*'s open world features few ethnic minorities and essentially no women.¹⁹¹

One of the most significant storylines in *RDR2* is the plight of the Wapiti tribe. *RDR2* attests to broken treaties and mistreatment of Indigenous populations at the hand of the federal government and correctly establishes a history of Indian removal for the sake of resource extraction but fails to display the extent to which such issues were wrestled in court. This is also anachronistic as battles regarding displacement were fought and ended before *RDR2*'s setting of 1899. Despite the error in chronology, the game's Wapiti tribe permits the study of government-tribal relations and those advocating on behalf of the tribes, such as attorneys Robert Owen and Patrick Hurley. Lastly, the game encourages the study of tribal rights, such as those regarding coal production detailed by Brian Frehner.

¹⁹¹ This refers to roaming between settlements as most settlements contain diverse and accurate representations of race and gender. There is at least one female NPC that spawns, but it is rare as the lack of female representation in the open world is likely due to Rockstar discouraging violence against women. This does not, however, explain why there is a lack of racial diversity among male NPCs. For more on African Americans in the settlement of the American West, see: Sarah Gallagher, *Black Wests: Reshaping Race and Place in Popular Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2025).

One of the more notable but silent depictions in *RDR2* is environmental pollution that is evident in nearly every location but hardly alluded to by the game's narrative. Water waste in the form of sewage and trash permeates the game's Lannahechee River and flows north-to-south along the waterway's settlements. Reports from the Department of the Interior in the early 1900s show that this became a major factor for locations along the Mississippi River (equivalent to *RDR2*'s Lannahechee). *RDR2* can be used to showcase the vast amount of pollution in the river and how its flow downstream impacts communities in another state. The Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce considered this a key issue in 1900, and the in-game depiction can be shown alongside the report of the committee to demonstrate the severity of health concerns stemming from the polluted water.

Acid mine drainage (AMD) also became a significant health factor in the 1900s stemming from toxic runoff in abandoned mines. *RDR2* replicates AMD and showcases its toxicity to local plants and wildlife. This on-screen representation in conjunction with government reports and efforts to reverse AMD's harmful effects provide another form of environmental pollution investigable in *RDR2*. The US Forest Service, Environmental Protection Agency, and academic journals all contain supporting material provided in chapter three of this thesis that can be employed to support the severity of AMD and recovery efforts instituted to reverse its harmful effects.

Saint Denis provides a study opportunity for waterway pollution since its inspiration, New Orleans, took measures to improve the city's sanitation in 1899, the same year of *RDR2*'s setting. Reports from the Department of the Interior and legislation from the State of Louisiana are excellent supplemental materials to reference when observing the vast water pollution crisis in Saint Denis. The 1914 report from Mayor Behrman touting the city's recovery efforts

demonstrates that proper commitment and support can reverse negative trends and improve lives of citizens.

The final subject explored in this thesis is the role of the West in climatic treatment for tuberculosis (TB). As Arthur being diagnosed with TB is a core aspect of *RDR2*'s story, the West's prominence in TB recovery is worth investigating. *RDR2*'s Dr. Barnes recommends Arthur relocate to somewhere warm and dry, which is consistent with medical practice of the time and supported by publications such as "Tuberculosis and Climate" by Robert Ward, whose findings advocate the benefits of sunlight exposure, fresh air, and light activity, which were available at sanatoriums in the West. The benefits of western sanatoriums, particularly those in New Mexico and Colorado, were subject to numerous studies such as Karen Shane's "New Mexico: Salubrious El Dorado," John Weinzirl's "The Action of Sunlight upon Bacteria with Special Reference to B. tuberculosis," and Eric Rubin's "The Bert and Peggy Dupont Lecture: Tuberculosis and the Building of the American West." These can be combined to show that Dr. Barnes' advice is consistent with medical guidance in 1899 as well as the extent of the West's role in TB recovery. It can also be demonstrated that sanatoriums built for TB recovery helped establish Western settlements. Sanatoriums are not shown in *RDR2* but can be extrapolated from Arthur's TB and (lack of) treatment. Bovine TB also does not appear in *RDR2* but was a major medical concern of the nineteenth century. Newspaper reports, such as those provided in chapter four of this thesis, demonstrate this and can be used to address further implications that TB outbreaks have on communities.

This thesis serves to not only emphasize the historical value of *RDR2*, but the potential of the video game industry to provide realistic and historically accurate works of art. One roadblock many game developers will incur is the long development cycle necessary for creating detailed

open-world games. *RDR2* was developed over eight years with production beginning shortly after its predecessor *RDR* was completed (*RDR* itself had a five-year development cycle).¹⁹² Unlike *Redemption* developer Rockstar, most production companies do not have the personnel or financial backing to produce a game over several years, but that is why games produced by Rockstar are incredibly detailed and immersive. Other games that provide a glimpse of history in various fields and eras include *Assassin's Creed* (multiple eras/locations), *Call of Duty* (World War II – present), *Ghost of Tsushima* (1274 Japan), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (1403 Medieval Europe), *Sid Meier's Civilization* (pre-CE – present), and *Total War* (1205 BCE to 1876 CE). These games are available on various gaming platforms and offer a range of worlds and time periods for the player to explore. Most comparable to *RDR2* is Ubisoft's collection of *Assassin's Creed* games which span from 431 BCE to 1868 CE with most games set during the Middle Ages. Though gameplay and features of *Assassin's Creed* are not always realistic, the games do include historical people, places, and events, much like *RDR2*.¹⁹³

Emily Graham, medieval historian and Associate Professor of History at Oklahoma State University, features *Assassin's Creed* and other medieval-based games in the course “From Assassin's Creed to Witcher: Medievalism in the 21st Century World,” assessing the portrayal of Middle Ages “through historiographical readings and critical analysis of modern media sources.”¹⁹⁴ The regularity of this course and inclusion of primary and secondary source content

¹⁹² Daniel Krupa, “How Rockstar Is Making Its Open Worlds Even Better,” *IGN*, updated May 4, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/05/04/how-rockstar-is-making-its-open-worlds-even-better>; Robbie Mitchell, “Rockstar Games That Had the Longest Development Cycles, Ranked,” *GameRant*, May 24, 2024, <https://gamerant.com/rockstar-games-with-longest-development-cycles-ranked/>.

¹⁹³ Hrvoje Milakovic, “All Assassin's Creed Games in Order: Chronologically and by Release Date,” *Game Horizon*, April 11, 2025, <https://fictionhorizon.com/assassins-creed-games-in-order/>.

¹⁹⁴ “Teaching Summary,” Emily Graham, Faculty Profile, Oklahoma State University Department of History, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://experts.okstate.edu/emily.e.graham/teaching>.

demonstrate that using video games as the foundation for learning about the past is achievable with an adequate structure and approach. The accompaniment of resources that Graham utilizes in her class is precisely the method recommended by Olsson when discussing the format of “Red Dead America.” An instructor knowledgeable in both game and historical content is key to generating a suitable educational experience utilizing a video game. *RDR2*’s content lends itself to academic study and a historian with knowledge of the game and themes therein, as modeled by Olsson and Graham and discussed in this thesis, can combine primary and secondary sources with the game to discover an array of engaging teaching opportunities. This is not limited to historians, as political messaging, labor, economics, and a plethora of other subjects are rampant throughout *RDR2* and can therefore be utilized by several academic disciplines in conjunction with relevant source material.

This work demonstrates the efficacy of using *RDR2* for the academic study of law and order, environmental pollution, and tuberculosis, and how educators and public historians can implement the realistic themes into class curriculum or other educational settings in conjunction with primary and secondary sources. With the popularity of video games at an all-time high and with *RDR2* considered one of the greatest video games ever, using the game as a hook for teaching American history can attract the attention of students that otherwise would not be invested in learning the subject. The market for historical video games has proven to be successful and hopefully will continue to improve to the delight of gaming historians.

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