American Studies: Master of Arts by Research (MRes)

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'More ghosts than people': The decline and deconstruction of the American Dream in contemporary videogames

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Contents

Introduction

The American Dream has constantly adapted and evolved ever since its inception. From the early years of homesteading and westward movement, where the American Dream symbolised freedom from traditional forms of persecution, to the 1950s where ideas about consumerism and the nuclear family reigned supreme, the American Dream has empowered generations of Americans for different reasons. The American Dream has moved into the twenty-first century where at the very least, financial autonomy and personal freedom are major tenets of the concept. More recently the medium of videogames has used digital landscapes to comment on the American Dream in its current form.

During recent years, the increasing popularity of videogames makes them appropriate as a register of cultural interests and ideas. This dissertation explores three specific blockbuster videogames that address the rise, fall, and possible future of the American Dream through a digital medium; *Red Dead Redemption 2* released by Rockstar in 2018, *The Last of Us* originally released in 2013 by Naughty Dog, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* from Guerilla Games in 2017. The huge commercial success of each of these titles indicates the importance they hold and how much they speak to contemporary consumers of digital culture. The first example, *RDR2*, harks back to the American West of the late nineteenth century where supposedly "The End Of The Wild West Era Has Begun", the second title, *The Last of Us*, tackles contemporary America and its transformation into a post-apocalyptic dystopian landscape, and finally, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, presents a futuristic post-post-apocalyptic world set amongst the ruins of humanity.[1] In these three digital landscapes we can see how different digital environments and spaces can be used to create varying

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[1] Rockstar Games Production, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018

depictions and perceptions of the American Dream and help to chart its continual evolution. Although the American Dream may not always be the main focus of these videogame titles, there are points in each title where they delve into the core ideals of the United States as a nation, and therefore have much to offer to any scholar of American Studies.

To provide some sense of clarity, it is crucial to spend some time understanding how this study will tackle the American Dream. Can an immutable definition of the American Dream ever be reached, or is the term a fluid concept, one that has changed and evolved dependent on a variety of factors and contextual information? It is possible to see the American Dream as a robust concept that has lasted since the birth of the American nation, however, it is also an ideal that has changed and adapted throughout history, different eras and generations constantly creating new ideas that eventually come to comprise a part of the greater American Dream as a whole. Scholarship on the power and influence of the American Dream is extensive.[2] Academics ranging from Frederick Jackson Turner and James Truslow Adams, to Patricia Nelson Limerick and more recently Jim Cullen and Melanie and Roderick Bush have all devoted time exploring the influence of the American Dream. The broader scholarship of the American Dream, most recently summarised by Sarah Churchwell in *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*, has explored the power of upward social mobility and national promises of endless individual progress that were instrumental in capturing the nation's founding values. There also continues to be

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[2] R. H. Fossum, *The American Dream* ([n.p.]: British Association for American Studies, 1981). See Also: Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); H. W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921); Melanie E. L. Bush and Roderick D. Bush, *Tensions in the American Dream* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. by Gerard Bouchard (New York: Routledge, 2013); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, Norton reprint edn (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006); Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018)

debates about the role of the American Dream in contrast to the continued endurance of American Exceptionalism and how these may have shaped American domestic and international policies in the early twenty-first century.[3]

A look at the initial years of the American Dream is marked by visions of wild landscapes, free from the burden of humanity. This dream is deeply rooted in frontier exploration and independence from colonial powers. John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" and his invoking of America as a shining "city upon a hill" in the 1600s is often cited, which Cullen has argued provided a great source of inspiration for much later Americans, especially Ronald Reagan.[4] This established an enduring sense of pride in the Puritan roots of the country and the lofty ideals that it aimed for during its creation. Despite being an Eastern concept, the ideals espoused by Winthrop later became increasingly associated with the landscape of the American West.

This was a landscape where the ideals of Manifest Destiny drove a burgeoning population westward across the expanse of the North American continent fulfilling the divine right of the American people to colonise the land. As William Deverell so eloquently writes, "This is one West, a well-known West, a much-photographed, much-painted, awe-inspiring place, the West of Manifest Destiny, the Big Sky, a dreamscape accepted as fundamental to America and fundamentally American."[5] One of the most prominent visual representations of the sentiments of the American Dream during the nineteenth century is

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[3] Ian Tyrell, "The myth(s) that will not die: American National Exceptionalism", cited in, *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. by Gerard Bouchard (New York: Routledge, 2013)

[4] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp.23-24

[5] William Deverell, "Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the History of the United States", cited in, *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. by Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p.33

American Progress painted by John Gast in 1872.[6] This iconic piece of art depicts the period of westward movement during the early nineteenth century when migration dramatically increased due to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Trains, carriages, telegraph wires, and people herald the expanse of civilisation, freedom, and progress towards the Pacific coastline. This is further emphasised by the different shades of light used by Gast in the painting, which serve as metaphors for the progress of American civilisation. The East is suffused with a golden light, emanating from the great technological progress and the rising of the sun. The West is at a complete contrast, dark foreboding mountains cover much of the landscape to which both Native Americans and Buffalo are fleeing in the face of the onward march of the homesteaders. The use of such contrasting colours by Gast is indicative of contemporary attitudes towards the westward spread of civilisation.

Visual culture has always had a major role in depicting the shifting attitudes of the American Dream and in recent years videogames have taken over the mantle from landscape paintings. The role of western expansion and the fate of the American Dream are issues addressed in Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2* and consequently a portion of the first chapter will be dedicated towards discussing its complicated history. Ultimately, the proliferation of expansionist attitudes, depicting the West as a place to be conquered by American civilisation, resulted in the decline of the Native American population and the widespread destruction of the natural environment during the nineteenth century. However, the work of Gast presented a different picture to Americans; it helped to cement freedom, technological progress, and the superiority of American civilisation as some of the core ideals of the American Dream during the latter stages of the nineteenth century as well

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[6] John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872 [See Appendix: Image 1]

as their continued prevalence and survival. Some of these dreams "weren't always sunny and hopeful; some were darkly forbidding. But they drew America consistently forward, enticing us toward the horizon of the future."[7] This particular style of contrasting dreams is prominent throughout *Red Dead Redemption 2* where elements of the American Dream are often achieved by both players and characters at the expense of others.

The future continued to remain bright for Americans and their dreams, despite the numerous pitfalls of the early twentieth century. Starting with the First World War in the early twentieth century, followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and then ending with the Second World War from 1939-1945 the American Dream suffered a crisis-of-confidence that left many questioning its longevity.[8] Nevertheless, by the 1950s the American Dream had been re-established under new terms after the end of World War II. No longer solely predicated on the views of the nineteenth century, the rise of twentieth-century consumer culture and the nuclear family took control of the dreams of many Americans. This generation would come to be known as the "Baby Boomers", who grew up experiencing an unprecedented period of growth and wealth that ensured many comforts their parents had not experienced. As H. W. Brands has argued, desire for home construction, automobile manufacturing, electrical appliances and recreational equipment was tied directly to "the physical needs and wants of the Baby Boomers and their families."[9] Desire for material wealth and personal comfort flourished in a society dominated by capitalist consumerism. This maps the continued evolution of the American Dream through

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[7] H. W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011) p.ix
[8] Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018) p.284
[9] Brands, *American Dreams*, p.71

the twentieth century, a clear departure from the pioneering dreams of the nineteenth century that sought the freedom of the American Dream on the frontier plains of the West.

These two examples, westward expansion and the consumer culture of the 1950s, indicate that the American Dream as a concept experienced a paradigmatic shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. These adaptations have continued into the twenty-first century where the digital landscapes of popular videogames are used to explore how the American Dream may change and adapt in the future. Perceptions of the future are often connected to contemporary dreams, for example, the cultivation of a positive relationship with the natural world is explored throughout *The Last of Us* where the plight of Joel and Ellie and the decisions they are forced to make represent contemporary fears surrounding the future of the American Dream as a set of ideals. The future of the American Dream within post-apocalyptic landscapes is further addressed by *Horizon: Zero Dawn* where fears of technological progress, consequences of environmental degradation, and criticisms of utopianism are all explored.

It is clear then the American Dream did not have a single crystallised definition for any extended period of time. For the purpose of this thesis, I argue that each distinct digital title that is explored is connected with a fluid, but temporally based, definition of the American Dream that is influenced by a number of factors. These factors are notable because it is possible to see their influence in each title. Each title is influenced by the context that they explore, historically, contemporary, and futuristically. As such, they are also affected by the different biases for the time periods in question, this is most noticeable when exploring popular culture and how it has evidently influenced developers. In a broader

context it is also possible to see that conventional aspects of videogame design have restricted the way players are allowed to play the game.

The high-fidelity landscapes of digital videogames have managed to provide an interesting take on conventional depictions of the American Dream in popular culture. Rather than always subscribing to the views of popular culture, some videogames manage to provide more nuanced arguments, sometimes even inverting popular stereotypes completely. Due to the vital role of popular culture in holding onto and embracing aspects of the American Dream it forms the foundations for the following sections. By exploring the ways in which digital culture has helped to expand depictions of the American Dream, a concept deeply rooted in the origins of the nation, it is possible to see how digital landscapes can depict and map the continued progress of the American Dream. Despite the eminence of popular culture, and its importance in this study, this area is still under-studied and under-appreciated. Therefore, academic arguments from the fields of history and games studies will be crucial to understanding the entire picture. Videogames manage to shed some new light on how the Dream has transformed over the course of the twenty-first century and how contemporary cultural issues have shaped public perceptions of it. Although digital games are one of the most popular mediums in the increasingly digital society of the twenty-first century, it would be presumptuous to assume that everyone has either heard of, or played, the three titles that are going to be discussed. Therefore, it would seem prudent to set aside a short section of the introduction to introduce each game and provide a brief overview of the narratives of each title. The first chapter will focus primarily on *Red Dead Redemption 2*, while the second chapter will focus on *The Last of Us* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, these chapters will add additional information to supplement that which is provided in this introduction.

The digital titles used in this study, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *The Last of Us*, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, were chosen specifically because of the depth and quality of their writing and intricate, especially for videogames, narratological structures. Although these titles are branded as videogames, the depth and complexity they show throughout their narratives, sometimes offering players well over 30 hours of story-oriented gameplay, resembles an entire season of a network show rather than the shorter form of a Hollywood film.[10] Although this study does not posit that all videogames have to be considered as an artistic object, the three titles that have been chosen merit particular consideration because of the multitude of artistic qualities that they possess.[11] Therefore for the purpose of this study, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *The Last of Us*, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* will all be considered as digital creations that require the same stringent academic scrutiny that films or literature often receive. The academic scholarship that has been produced on these three titles is understandably sparse, however, there are three specific articles that stand out. Amy Green's 'The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in *The Last of Us*', 'Caring about the Past, Present and Future in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and Guerilla Games' *Horizon: Zero Dawn*' by Janine Tobeck and Donald Jellerson, and Esther Wright's '*Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Battlefield V*: the real history behind 3 popular videogames,' are articles that address the lack of academic scholarship on these specific videogames and attempt to mitigate this. Green discusses the complex moral decisions players are forced to bear witness to throughout *The Last of Us*, while the second half of the article is dedicated to detailing the development of naturalism from the early

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[10] Amy Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in *The Last of Us*', *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media*, Vol. 11, (November 2016) p.746

[11] Janine Tobeck and Donald Jellerson, 'Caring about the Past, Present, and Future in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and Guerilla Games' *Horizon: Zero Dawn*', *Arts*, Vol. 7, (December 2018) p.15

twentieth century and then comparing and contrasting it to the work of environmental authors such as Edward Abbey. The article written by Janine Tobeck and Donald Jellerson explores the connections between popular science fiction films such *Blade Runner* (1982), which is loosely based on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick, and literature such as William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and how these both relate to the progression and perceived dilution of the term 'cyberpunk'. This is notable due to the recently increased relevance of the term, 'cyberpunk', which is being re-introduced into the videogame vernacular thanks to the highly anticipated release of *Cyberpunk 2077* developed by CD Projekt Red. The article concludes by viewing *Horizon: Zero Dawn* as a progression of the cyberpunk movement in a digital landscape and how aspects of the game successfully connects the past, present, and future of America. Esther Wright's article explores the real history that helped inspire three popular videogames, *Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Battlefield V*. Wright argues that although these games often twist the truth of historical facts, they do provide effective digital battlegrounds on which people can fight for their differing perceptions of the past.

As the field of Games Studies has matured, there have been an increasing number of works that discuss the connection between the virtual playgrounds of videogames and America. Alongside this, there are many Games Studies works that have helped to establish the discipline which were used in the course of writing this thesis. These works have been used alongside the three aforementioned articles to create a more comprehensive understanding of how scholars from a variety of different disciplines are beginning to probe how games relate to America and the past. Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (2015) has provided a number of interesting theoretical viewpoints on the connections between history and

gaming, arguing that the medium itself offers a particularly well suited bridge between the realms of academic thought and popular history in the contemporary cultural climate.[12] However, most importantly, Chapman encourages gamers to critically appraise the historical games they play to begin to truly engage with history as a practice. Chapman raises an important argument, namely that a part of establishing Games Studies even further relies on the engagement and willingness of players to interact with the nuanced arguments historical games are trying to make. Another indispensable resource from the realm of Game Studies was *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007) by Ian Bogost. *Persuasive Games* explores the variety of ways that procedural rhetoric, the practice of using processes persuasively, has been used within digital landscapes that rely heavily on rule-based interactions. Bogost also argues that rather than viewing games as an expression of the machines they are created and designed on, they must be seen as expressions of being human making claims about, "who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become."[13] Finally, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (2019) by John Wills was used extensively to inform the relationship between mythology, popular culture, and gamic depictions of the American West while examining how the American Dream was portrayed in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. In *Gamer Nation*, Wills critically appraises the rise of America as a nation of gamers, driven by a world that has shifted from visual to virtual culture. However, this gamic nation is far too unstable and ephemeral, a world that is always open to re-envisioning or reprogramming, "Like a Gold Rush town passing from boom to bust, it exists as a place vulnerable to disappearance as much as appearance."[14] It

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[12] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015) p.281

[13] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007) p.340

[14] John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019) p.234

should also be noted that a wide variety of other works spanning Games Studies and American History have been drawn upon in the construction of this thesis. For instance, the comprehensive *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (2013) by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew Elliot, Zach Whalen and Laurie Taylor's *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (2008) explored and tackled the emerging concept of digital history. In regards to more conventional historical studies, the works of historian Richard Slotkin in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600 – 1800* (1973) and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth–Century America* (1998) and Patricia Nelson Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (2006) were invaluable in understanding the role of mythology, violence, and conquest in the American West. Similarly, for the discipline of environmental studies, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1982) by Roderick Nash contributed to a greater depth of understanding while examining the complexities of the American wilderness.

It should be noted that the majority of this thesis focuses on the case study of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the historical setting of the title provides a variety of avenues to investigate which can be supported by the wealth of academic scholarship available on the American West during the nineteenth century and the continual evolution of the American Dream. As such, there is a significant weight provided to arguments made while discussing *RDR2* and its representations of the American Dream as they are supported by prominent academics from a range of different disciplines. It therefore seemed appropriate to spend a significant portion of the thesis dissecting and examining the title that had access to such a wide array of academic insight. Consequently, *The Last of Us* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* are grouped together in the final section as neither title has access to as much academic

scholarship as *RDR2* due to the setting of both games in the future. Despite the lack of academic material available discussing either *TLOU* or *HZD*, the small number of journal articles that touch on these titles have been included to lend the support of academics to the arguments being made in relation to the portrayal of the future American Dream by Naughty Dog and Guerilla Games.

The first title that we shall briefly explore is the most recent, *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Widely hailed as a modern masterpiece, this game is a prequel to the highly popular game of the same name.[15] *Red Dead Redemption 2* continues the story of John Marston by exploring his outlaw past and expanding upon the decline of the American Dream in the early twentieth century. Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2* is the latest offering from a company that is known for its unique, and often highly satirical, style of storytelling. This conventional Rockstar style is present in a variety of encounters with eccentric characters present in the landscape. Ranging from the flamboyant British animal wrangler, Margaret, to the incredibly eccentric French Artist Charles Châtenay who specialises in adultery and erotic drawings, both scandalous pastimes in late nineteenth century America. These characters reaffirm Rockstar's commitment to providing satirical and stereotypical

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[15] Metacritic, *Red Dead Redemption 2 for PlayStation 4 Reviews*, In Metacritic.com [online]. 26 October 2018 [cited 1 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/red-dead-redemption-2>. See Also: Luke Reilly, *Red Dead Redemption 2 Review*, In uk.ign.com [online]. 25 October 2018 [cited 1 June 2019], Available from: <https://uk.ign.com/articles/2018/10/25/red-dead-redemption-2-review>; Kirk Hamilton, *Red Dead Redemption 2: The Kotaku Review*, In Kotaku.com [online]. 25 October 2018 [cited 1 June 2019], Available from: <https://kotaku.com/red-dead-redemption-2-the-kotaku-review-1829984369>; David Meikleham, *Red Dead Redemption 2 Review: "When the credits roll, you'll have created enough incredible memories to fill ten lesser games"*, In Gamesradar.com [online]. 25 October 2018 [cited 1 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.gamesradar.com/uk/red-dead-redemption-2-review/>; Kallie Plagge, *Red Dead Redemption 2 Review – Wild Wild West*, In Gamespot.com [online]. 29 October 2018 [cited 1 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/red-dead-redemption-2-review-wild-wild-west/1900-6417019/>

depictions of other nationalities in their titles. However, the majority of the game and its narrative is overwhelmed by the sombre retelling of the life of the outlaw Arthur Morgan.

Branded as the tale of the outlaw at the end of the nineteenth century, players are left to see this developing world through the eyes of a character who has become disillusioned with the American Dream that he used to believe in. This is inspired by the enigmatic Dutch Van der Linde, a close friend of Arthur, who ultimately destroys the very dream that he has inspired for much of the Van Der Linde gang. The quintessential nineteenth-century American Dream that drives Arthur during the early chapters of the game transforms into something entirely different. It becomes a dream driven by self-sacrifice to ensure that the next generation has a narrow chance to accomplish their own American Dream. Ultimately, it is a highly unselfish dream motivated by an idealistic hope that there is a future for the American Dream. As players discover during the early segments, the particular dream that calls to Arthur throughout his life is actually one of freedom, independence, and prosperity - three very stereotypical conventions of the American Dream during the nineteenth century. However, it is made very clear by Rockstar that Arthur's initial dream is slowly dying. In late nineteenth century America, there is no place for a band of outlaws robbing trains and holding up stagecoaches for a livelihood in order to move West and become affluent ranchers. Interestingly, Arthur is one of a handful of characters who appears to realise this fact, spending much of the latter part of the main narrative trying to convince others that the supposed freedoms of the West are gradually ebbing away, and that life as an outlaw has become a walking anachronism. This proves to be very much true as a series of mishaps and run-ins with a railroad magnate, Leviticus Cornwall, the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and a pair of powerful Southern families, signal the rapid decline of the Van der Linde gang. By the penultimate chapter of the main

narrative it is made clear by Rockstar that although Arthur has acted too late to save his

own dream, and his own life, he has managed to give the next generation a chance to follow

their dream.

The second videogame that has a connection to the decline of the American Dream

and therefore requires a short synopsis is *The Last of Us* (2013). Widely regarded by critics

as one of the greatest titles produced for the third generation of consoles, Naughty Dog's

iconic title showcased the possibility of storytelling in videogames to reach a filmic quality.[16]

Such was the popularity of the game that it received a remastered version with updated

graphics in July 2014 after the release of the PlayStation 4. The start of the narrative situates

Joel and his daughter Sarah on the outskirts of Austin, Texas during September 2013, prior

to a disastrous fungal outbreak.[17] When controlling Sarah initially, players can hear

television reports track the outbreak of a fungal infection that is turning people into zombie-

like creatures. Joel and his brother Tommy take Sarah and attempt to escape the city before

it is too late. Unfortunately for the trio, it appears as though it may be too late for them,

thousands of other people are attempting to flee the city resulting in a car crash which

injures Sarah and puts the group in grave danger. Despite escaping the chaos around them

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[16] Metacritic, *The Last of Us for PlayStation 3 Reviews*, In Metacritic.com [online]. 14 June 2013 [cited 25 February 2019], Available from: <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/the-last-of-us>. See Also: Kirk Hamilton, *The Last of Us: The Kotaku Review*, In Kotaku.com [online]. 29 July 2014 [cited 26 June 2019], Available from: <https://kotaku.com/the-last-of-us-the-kotaku-review-511292998>; Tom McShea, *The Last of Us Review*, In Gamespot.com [online]. 15 October 2014 [cited 26 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-last-of-us-review/1900-6409197/>; Oli Welsh, *The Last of Us Review*, In Eurogamer.net [online]. 31 July 2014 [cited 26 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-07-28-the-last-of-us-review>; Paul Sartori, *The Last of Us – review*, In TheGuardian.com [online]. 5 June 2013 [cited 26 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/jun/05/the-last-of-us-ps3-video-game-review>; Philip Kollar, *The Last of Us review: dead inside*, In Polygon.com [online]. 5 June 2013 [cited 26 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.polygon.com/2013/6/5/4396286/the-last-of-us-review>

[17] Scott Lowe, *The Last of Us: Outbreak Day 2018*, In naughtydog.com [online]. 26 September 2018 [cited 25 February 2019], Available from: <https://www.naughtydog.com/blog/the_last_of_us_outbreak_day_2018>

Joel and Sarah are shot at by a soldier, wounding Joel and claiming the life of his daughter and with it his American Dream.

The Last of Us now jumps forward twenty years into the future. American civilisation is on the brink of collapse, held together in small quarantine zones where a strict brand of military law is enforced, the American Dream is no longer free and open, it has been trapped and confined. Introduced to Joel once again, we see how much the death of his daughter and the last twenty years have taken an extreme toll on his dream. Partnered with Tess, a similarly disillusioned individual, the two work together as smugglers, lending aid to revolutionary groups that struggle to remain independent amidst strict military control. The main resistance group, known as the 'Fireflies', are led by the mysterious Marlene, who hires the pair to smuggle valuable contraband out of Boston. Interestingly, the journey that players embark on during the main narrative of the game is comparable to that of settlers expanding westward across the continent, except in this modern example the journey is made between large cities. However, the pair quickly discover that they have been hired to escort a teenage girl, Ellie, out of the city rather than their usual assortment of guns and ammunition. While escaping the confines of Boston, players discover that Ellie is one of a fortunate number who are immune to the infection; despite being bitten a handful of weeks in the past she has not been infected. Instead, she is part of a new generation who have the agency to pursue their own dreams, free from the suffocating control of the quarantine zones. Unfortunately, Tess is bitten in an encounter with infected and succumbs to her wounds, forcing Joel to re-evaluate his vision of the American Dream and continue the journey in search of the Fireflies with Ellie alone. What ensues for players is a trek across three large metropolitan areas, Boston, Pittsburgh and Utah, and a handful of small rural towns to escort Ellie to a Firefly research lab to discover the source of her immunity. As the

narrative progresses so does the relationship between Joel and Ellie as they slowly begin to establish a father-daughter dynamic while travelling together and experiencing the hardships of the post-apocalyptic world. Along the journey they encounter various dangerous groups of hostile survivors, commonly referred to as 'hunters', inhabiting the wilderness that have sprung up to control the ruins of humanity, as well as numerous infected. When they finally reach the research lab in Salt Lake City, Joel has to decide what to do now that he has obtained a new and more hopeful vision of the American Dream. As the narrative has progressed Joel has formed a new American Dream for himself that revolves around his familial bond with Ellie. To let her go, even if it is supposedly to save the human race, would mean sacrificing this new dream, something that Joel is not willing to do. What follows is an extremely dramatic final conclusion, with one of the most debated endings to any videogame which raises questions about the role of authenticity, deception, and violence in the future of the American Dream in a post-apocalyptic world.

The final title that requires an introduction is *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. Released exclusively for the PlayStation 4 in 2017 by Guerrilla Games, best known for their *Killzone* series, this new title was first introduced during the fourth generation of consoles. Despite being the first entry in a new franchise, the game was critically acclaimed reaching an average score of 89 on Metacritic. It was praised for the power and depth of its narrative storytelling and the enjoyable exploration of a lush, post-apocalyptic, digital America.[18]

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[18] Metacritic, *Horizon: Zero Dawn for PlayStation 4 Reviews*, In Metacritic.com [online]. 28 February 2017 [cited 11 June 2019], Available from: <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/horizon-zero-dawn>. See Also: Lucy O'Brien, *Horizon Zero Dawn Review*, In uk.ign.com [online]. 20 February 2017 [cited 4 July 2019], Available from: <https://uk.ign.com/articles/2017/02/20/horizon-zero-dawn-review>; Peter Brown, *Horizon Zero Dawn Review*, In Gamespot.com [online]. 2 March 2017 [cited 4 July 2019], Available from: <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/horizon-zero-dawn-review/1900-6416620/>; Casey Newton, *Why Horizon Zero Dawn is my game of the year: It's more than robot dinosaurs*, In Theverge.com [online]. 14 December 2017 [cited 4 July 2019], Available from: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/14/16774390/horizon-zero-dawn-game-of-the-year-2017>; Patricia

Horizon: Zero Dawn is a modern reimagining of the conventional post-apocalyptic tale of the twentieth century. Much like other open world titles of the PlayStation 4 era, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* combines wide-ranging world exploration with fast-paced combat against a wide variety of robotic foes. Alongside these more conventional genre elements is an in-depth skill progression system that introduces players to Aloy's unique abilities, creating a gaming experience that feels surprisingly refreshing. Set in a futuristic world populated by organically created machines and the remnants of humanity, players follow Aloy on her quest to discover her mysterious heritage and uncover the reasons behind the disappearance of the "Old Ones".

As the game is set far in the future after an apocalyptic event has almost wiped humanity from the face of the earth, a large part of the narrative is spent exploring the connections between the post-apocalyptic landscape and the deleterious effects of environmental degradation. Throughout the narrative arc, players explore a revitalised American landscape that is lush and verdant, recalling the untouched and wild nature of colonial America, an aesthetic that belies the grim apocalyptic destruction that led to the creation of such a landscape. The prominence of the natural environment is key as it plays a major role in both the past and the present. In the long-forgotten past, one that players are able to explore at length, environmental degradation is revealed to be the initial cause of the entire apocalypse. The adverse effects of climate change on the planet during the twenty-first century have wrought unimaginable havoc upon the natural environment resulting in increasingly destructive natural disasters. To offset these issues and restore the

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Hernandez, *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Kotaku Review*, In Kotaku.com [online]. 28 February 2017 [cited 4 July 2019], Available from: <https://kotaku.com/horizon-zero-dawn-the-kotaku-review-1792538336>; Nick Pino, *Horizon: Zero Dawn Review*, In Techradar.com [online]. 20 February 2017 [cited 4 July 2019], Available from: <https://www.techradar.com/uk/news/horizon-zero-dawn-review>;

relationship between humanity and nature to a more harmonious one, the gifted Ted Faro

works with a prominent environmentalist, Elisabet Sobeck, to produce a line of

environmentally friendly clean-up robots. However, the hubris and capitalist greed of

humanity, a common trope in post-apocalyptic scenarios, is the downfall of humanity.[19]

Faro's attempts to commandeer the technology for military purposes creates an artificial

intelligence so advanced and dangerous it decides that humanity is in fact the most

immediate threat to the planet. Sobeck and a team of gifted scientists work tirelessly to

preserve the legacy of humanity, in the hopes that they can one day learn from the mistakes

of their ancestors and create a more harmonious civilisation. This past conflict is explicitly

connected to the plight of Aloy as she struggles to protect the fledgling remnants of the

newly-birthed humanity in the wake of another robotic apocalypse that is once again

seeking to cleanse humanity from the face of the earth.

Despite the game being set over a thousand years in the future, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*

explores contemporary fears surrounding rapid technological progress and the connection

this may have with unavoidable environmental degradation. Guerrilla Games spends much

of the main narrative exploring the similarities and differences between the present and the

past, with players exploring structures of the ancient world to discover exactly what led to

their destruction. This is a major theme throughout the game as playing on contemporary

anxieties creates a sense of familiarity for players of the game, even though the setting is so

unfamiliar and alien. This links the game to both *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *The Last of Us*.

The exploration of the relationship between past and present is an issue that all three titles

touch on, but none more so than *Horizon: Zero Dawn* which probes exactly how modern

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[19] William H. Katerberg, *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas) p.164

anxieties could be instrumental in bringing about the end of the American Dream as we know it.

Each game focuses on different aspects of what shapes the American Dream. Although they are very much rooted in the time periods in which they are set, they all manage to touch on contemporary fears and anxieties. They cannot fully escape the fears of the twenty-first century, even when they are set a thousand years in the future. As Sarah Churchwell argues when investigating the history of the American Dream, "but when it emerged, the American dream worked as an exhortation, urging all Americans to do better, to be fairer, to combat bigotry and inequality, and strive for a republic of equals."[20] The key point to understand is that each title explores how these dreams have declined and how this is crucial a process for new aspects of the American Dream to emerge and take shape. The American Dream in videogames is a topic which deserves to be explored in greater detail, not just in terms of a ludological perspective but also in terms of their narratological merits. A point that Amy Green has made when discussing the academic merits of games such as *The Last of Us* is that their filmic depth and quality of writing deserves the level of scrutiny that films and literature currently receive.[21] Each of these games has the depth and quality to deserve academic research and scrutiny. This study is an attempt to understand how *RDR2*, *TLOU*, and *HZD* explore the wider historical concept of the American Dream and how it has changed over time while also indicating its slow decline. Despite all of this, it is important to note that in many cases there is a hopeful tone for the future of an ideal which has arguably driven the American nation since its inception. Ultimately the American Dream

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[20] Churchwell, *Behold, America,* p.306
[21] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.746

is a, "mythic image cultivated by all sorts of entities, from journalists to politicians to

corporations, and it is a view fiercely protected by nostalgia and sentiment."[22]

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[22] Deverell, "Fighting Words", p.32

Chapter 1 – *Red Dead Redemption* and the Decline of the American Dream

The American West can be understood as the crucible in which a number of key themes of the American Dream were forged and perpetuated. This was often regardless of whether or not the origins of these themes retained any semblance of truth, creating the impression that much of the American Dream is influenced by myths rather than facts. Within this iconic part of America, both as a geographic region and cultural landscape, lies a concept which continues to endure, built upon the foundations of upward social mobility and the national promise of endless individual progress established in the East during the era of independence.[23] Somehow the American Dream continues to linger, influencing and shaping America as a country, indelibly affecting the American people and the popular culture that they choose to consume.[24]

In this initial chapter, we will be investigating the American Dream in the American West, concentrating primarily on the late nineteenth century, and when necessary venturing into the early twentieth century. Due to this historical focus, one of the main academic arguments that will be explored will be the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner.[25] Despite its various shortcomings, the work of Turner still holds sway over the popular culture of the American West and is therefore a vital academic resource when studying the region. The same sentiment holds true for the movement of the New Western Historians, most notably the work of Patricia Nelson Limerick, and their efforts to

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[23] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, p.2
[24] Cullen, *The American Dream*, p.5
[25] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921)

revolutionise the scope of Western American history and broaden its reaches.[26] By

reframing the history of the American West as one of conquest and violence, Limerick and

her fellow historians successfully argued during the 1980s that the region had fallen victim

to a popular, but painfully inadequate, creation myth that bore, "little resemblance to the

events of the Western past."[27] This was a reference to the scholarship of Frederick Jackson

Turner, arguing that the "meeting point between savagery and civilisation," failed to

appreciate the various groups that had played an active role in the colonisation of the

West.[28] However, it should be taken into account, as Wills and Jones have argued, that by

the time the New Western history came on to the scene the Turnerian frontier had arguably

faded from the forefront of popular culture.[29] The other argument made by the pair that

counters the New Western Historians is that a fundamental issue with their stance against

Turner is that they judged him by contemporary standard.[30] As academics continue to

struggle with the history of the American West it is vital to understand that they are

contending with a concept that is foundational to the development of America. As William

Deverell has argued, "Scholars who study the American West find themselves up against

powerful images that inform a protected narrative embedded in the national psyche."[31]

Red Dead Redemption 2 is a videogame that provides a contemporary look at the

historical weaknesses of the American Dream through the lens of a popular culture

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[26] Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, Norton reprint edn (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006). See Also: *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992); *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. by Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own" A New History of the American West*, reprint edn (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993)

[27] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.323

[28] Turner, *The Frontier*, p.3

[29] Karen R. Jones and John Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) p.50

[30] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.50

[31] Deverell, "Fighting Words", p.47

medium.[32] This creates a connection to existing academic scholarship that maps the initial

decline of the concept and hints at the possibility of its future struggles. Within this initial

chapter we shall discuss three key themes of the American Dream, and how *RDR2* explores

them within a digital landscape. The three thematic threads that run throughout this

chapter are authenticity, the natural landscape, and the role of violence within the

American Dream. These three themes are the bullets in a metaphorical chamber that pierce

the seemingly invincible aura of the American Dream, exposing its flaws and weaknesses.

This invincibility has reigned supreme in the popular culture of recent years. However, the

work of revisionist historians like those of the New Western movement have helped to

create a grittier, darker, and ultimately more realistic American West, with differing

perceptions of what can constitute the American Dream.

Before turning to the three main themes, it is important to note the sophisticated

portrayal of the Dream, as well as its fluidity, offered in *RDR2*. When exploring the narrative

progression of *RDR2*, we can see how Arthur's American Dream, of fleeing westward to

become a rancher, adapts over the course of the game, charting a path from westward

expansion in order to achieve independent freedom, to self-sacrifice to ensure the future of

the American Dream for others. This adaptation forces Arthur's initial American Dream to

change in order for a new one to emerge. During one of the earliest missions Arthur

unknowingly contracts tuberculosis while beating an innocent settler pursuing his own

dream of independence, Thomas Downes, thereby sealing his own fate. The irony of the

situation is not lost on Arthur when it is revealed how he contracted the deadly disease. This

particular mission in question requires players to pursue debtors who owe the Van Der

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[32] Hereafter all mentions of *Red Dead Redemption 2* will be shortened to *RDR2*.

Linde gang money, using violence and coercion to obtain the required capital from hapless homesteaders in order to fund their own dreams of heading West and building a new life as ranchers. To have the chance to experience independence and liberty, Arthur is willing to harm others who are trying to pursue a similar dream, albeit through more legal and historically acceptable methods. This initial dream that overwhelms much of the early narrative is inherently self-centred. Ultimately, Arthur spends the remainder of the narrative trying to repent for his past crimes by using the last few months of his life to help others in achieving their vision of the American Dream, rather than clinging on to the fading embers of his own. Due to this extreme change-of-heart, Arthur decides to help John Marston and his young family escape the doomed fate of the Van der Linde gang, buying them a chance to escape and pursue the American Dream on their own terms.

The final handful of missions is where Rockstar as a studio truly shines with the narrative arc of *RDR2*, showing just how extensively Arthur's dream and character have developed over the course of the narrative. Rising to an emotional crescendo, the final three missions are played in rapid succession, forcing players to see for an extended period of time how committed Arthur has become to his new vision of the American Dream. These missions culminate in Arthur discovering who betrayed the gang as well as reaffirming his loyalty to Dutch as his body slowly deteriorates. However, despite reiterating his commitment to Dutch, he abandons any pretence of supporting the initial dream of westward expansion and independence that he used to believe in, a dream that was for the most part inspired by Dutch. Galvanised by this realisation he sacrifices his own life, thereby fulfilling his new dream, in order to allow John Marston time to pursue his own vision of the American Dream.

We will be using *RDR2* as a means to explore the initial signs of decline in the American Dream, as well as providing criticism and commentary on the popular iconography of the West. Set during the final decade of the nineteenth century, *RDR2* is a title that at turns manages to invert some of the conventional stereotypes and themes of the American Dream in the West, while simultaneously reinforcing others. The setting is a crucial part of the game. Not only does it situate the American West at the turn of the twentieth century, during a period of turbulent change and industrial development, it is also during the very decade that Turner published his Frontier Thesis revolutionising academic thoughts surrounding the role of the West in the history of the nation. Set during a period of such widespread change, both academically and societally, the game posits itself as a way to explore an America of a bygone era from the comfort of your own living room. *RDR2* signifies a nostalgic digital snapshot of a historical world that is designed to emanate pride and patriotism for many Americans. This continued nostalgia for the American West also provides today's gamers with a way of connecting the troubled present to an unattainable and seemingly innocent past. Being able to engage with videogames that provide access to these time periods creates a means to "address our loss of innocence by temporarily allowing us access to that innocent condition."[33] This innocent condition that Taylor and Whalen discuss can be used by gamers as a means of escapism, often to idealised digital landscapes that are seen in popular culture as instrumental to the creation of the United States and its core ideals.

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[33] Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen, "Playing the Past: An Introduction", cited in, *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, ed. by Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008) p.12

Rockstar have managed to invert conventional explorations of Western landscapes. Rather than adhering to the more stereotypical conventions of the American West, *RDR2* is a tough, gritty, and overwhelmingly melancholic dissection of America's troubled frontier past. The hold nostalgia has on the American West in popular culture is overwhelming. From Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West Show, John Ford and early Western epics, to Clint Eastwood and the gritty Westerns of the late twentieth century, popular culture has been dominated by an overpoweringly mythological vision of the American West. It would be incorrect to say that Rockstar avoids engaging with these themes in *RDR2*, in fact in many instances the title adheres closely to stereotypical Western conventions. However, as a digital title consumed by millions of eager gamers, it manages to convey a range of interpretations and nuanced viewpoints highlighting a complex history of the region that goes beyond the traditional narratives offered by other forms of popular culture.

Authenticity and the American Dream

Authenticity is a major theme that influences both the mythical and literal American West as well as the American Dream. Richard Slotkin has argued that the power of authenticity within the American Dream traces its roots all the way back to the work of Buffalo Bill Cody and his immensely popular Wild West Show, "Cody himself was primarily responsible for establishing the Wild West's commitment to historical authenticity and to its mission of historical education."[34] The argument made by Slotkin here is true to some extent. However, Cody presented a deceptive authenticity, one that promoted the role of violence

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[34] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) p.67

and pandered to contemporary popular culture, rather than revealing the entire story of the

American West which was much more peaceful in comparison. This representation of the

mythical American West was by no means an accident. Cody himself, "was of course well

aware that his representation of historical events was inaccurate to say the least. But he

seems to have been sincere in his belief that the Wild West offered something like a poetic

truth in its representation of the frontier."[35] The mixture of violence and adventure on the

frontier was crucial to the budding mythology of the American West that Cody helped to

cultivate. The complimentary themes of violence and savagery were not actual ideals of the

American Dream during the nineteenth century, especially as "violence proved the

exception not the social norm."[36] The perception of violence as instrumental to the frontier

experience was perpetuated by Cody, as the show itself was an eclectic mix of "western

skirmishes, Indian raids and dazzling pieces of horsemanship all before an enraptured

audience."[37] The themes of deception, selectivity, even showmanship, can be extended to

other historical figures such as P.T. Barnum who helped to establish the legacy alongside

showman like Cody. A point that is especially relevant considering the attention Barnum

recently received thanks to the release of *The Greatest Showman* in which he is depicted by

Hugh Jackman.[38] The musical biopic starring Jackman is an instance of extreme artistic

license, creating a cheerful and endearing reputation for Barnum that seems to fall far short

of reality. What *The Greatest Showman* did briefly for the life and reputation of P.T.

Barnum, Buffalo Bill Cody did extensively more so for both the American West and the

American Dream with his iconic Wild West Show. As Slotkin has also argued, "If the Wild

[35] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p.77
[36] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.69
[37] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.52
[38] *The Greatest Showman*, Dir. Michael Gracey, Hugh Jackman, and Zac Efron, Twentieth Century Fox, 2017

West was a "place" rather than a "show", then its landscape was a mythic space in which past and present, fiction and reality, could co-exist; a space in which history, translated into myth, was re-enacted as ritual."[39] The authenticity that Cody espoused was an intoxicating blend of mythology and reality, a landscape in which everything and anything could be seen as true.

Throughout the nineteenth century, westward movement propelled the nation forward, driving waves of American citizens across the continent in search of a brighter and more prosperous future. However, this was not all they were searching for. Lured by the promise of a better and more affluent life they were attempting to capture one of the most elusive ideals ever envisioned, the American Dream, as a real experience. Alongside their pursuit of the American Dream, settlers moving westward were also searching for an authentic American way of life that was promised by the frontier experience. At this stage in history, the American Dream was an ideal that promised both personal and political freedom, moving westward across the nation would re-establish a 'golden past' in which "they could return to the Jeffersonian fantasy of a village of happy yeoman farmers, despite living in an industrial age."[40] A concept that in many ways differed from person to person, it nevertheless galvanised countless scores of Americans to abandon their homes and their livelihoods. But the dreams that they searched for and expected to encounter so often failed to live up to their expectations. The authenticity of expansion was a far cry from what many Americans believed it could be, namely a life of freedom and supposed safety where conditions such as, "lust for land, the fear of contagious disease, and, one surmises, a desire for freedom from the burden of community" were present. Ultimately, the idea of

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[39] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p.69
[40] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, p.35

expansion and its rural charm was so enduring because it was blessed with, "the undeniable charm of simplicity."[41] This simplicity came from the belief that moving Westward was a completely dependable way to improve the quality of living as well as providing access to a bygone era of simple agrarian farming.

The expansionist attitude of white American settlers was continually reinforced and encouraged by the concept of Manifest Destiny. This successfully instilled westward-bound American settlers with the belief that it was their God-given right to travel across and populate the entire American continent. This attitude was further encouraged by the historical power of Jeffersonian ideals that argued, "Westward expansion would keep Americans in possession of property, agrarian, independent, and responsible. To maintain the vision, Jefferson looked away from some of the most crucial and problematic aspects of expansion."[42] As Limerick has argued, the idea that westward expansion was crucial to the future and survival of the nation undermined the extremely problematic nature of the process. An issue that is further complicated with the understanding that, "Few white Americans went West intending to ruin the natives and despoil the continent. Even when they were trespassers, westering Americans were hardly, in their own eyes, criminals; rather, they were pioneers."[43] This is an argument that is especially controversial when it comes to the history of the American West. Pioneering suggested progress and prosperity, not the wanton destruction that it often inspired. It's hard to disagree with Limerick here, that a sense of pioneer naivety was born from the imperialistic arguments of Jeffersonianism which consequently empowered white Americans and justified a multitude

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[41] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.323
[42] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.94
[43] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.36

of their more morally questionable actions. When they went West, the authentic experience that some settlers searched for came in the form of material wealth, land, and Indian souls. Despite this, "white Americans went West convinced that their purposes were as commonplace as they were innocent."[44] Although the aforementioned purposes may have been commonplace, it was mainly for white Americans, and others rarely got the chance to pursue such ambitious goals. The positive perception of pioneering, and the patriotic exhortations of Manifest Destiny promised an authentic experience within the American West bristling with possibility and excitement, however, the reality of this supposedly authentic experience was bleaker. Conquest was the authenticity experienced by many in the American West, a landscape where, "the brutal massacres come back along with the cheerful barn raisings, the shysters come back with the saints, contracts broken come back with contracts fulfilled."[45]

Another theme that had a connection to authenticity within the American West was that of violence. The sensationalist violence of the West that many believed to be the norm was overexaggerated by contemporary newspapers and dime novels, although land was plentiful it came with its own set of challenges, and Native Americans continued to defy cultural constructions that portrayed them as a vanishing race.[46] For example, during the late nineteenth century, conflicts with Native American tribes were still ongoing. During the years following the American Civil War, conflicts were provoked, especially on the southern plains between 1867-69, "often deliberately and officially, by the whites in order to justify the expropriation of Indian lands for use by the railroads and their associated land

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[44] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.41
[45] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.330
[46] George Miles, "To Hear an Old Voice: Rediscovering Native Americans In American History", cited in, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992) p.55

companies."[47] Clearly the native population had not vanished just yet, they were an authentic and very real part of the landscape of the American West. As historian George Miles has passionately argued, "When we fail to recognize that the 'Silent Indian,' like the 'Vanishing American,' is an imaginative construction of a particular epoch of white cultural history, not a fact of Native American history, we contribute to the historical amnesia of twentieth-century popular culture."[48] As the dime novel emerged, "as the dominant form of public literature between the 1860s and 1890s," it promoted a fictive landscape where cowboys and Indians clashed constantly, therefore creating the perception that violence was an authentic part of life in the American West.[49] The existence of a number of factors also helps to explain why violence was perceived as a mainstay of an authentic Western life, "basic food acquisition through hunting; fear of Indians; isolated living; the attractiveness of the West to criminals and misfits; competition between settlers; a lack of an effective justice system; and the lure of alcohol."[50] Violence was glorified and framed as an ongoing struggle between the heroic cowboy and the savage Indian. As Jones and Wills have argued, "Arguably on a basic level, Western life suited gun culture."[51] As Jones and Wills go on to later point out contemporary popular culture in the form of dime novels, rather than revealing the true and somewhat drab nature of the frontier experience, "showed what the East wanted the region to be."[52] Contemporary popular culture, in the form of the dime novel, glorified the prominence of violence within the American West, leading to the perception that it was a real, everyday, and authentically Western phenomenon. However,

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[47] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) p.562
[48] Miles, "To Hear an Old Voice", in, *Under an Open Sky*, p.69
[49] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.73
[50] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.67
[51] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.67
[52] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.76

this was not the case, as we have evidenced through various academic sources, violence was more often than not a rarity, rather than a formality. The portrayal of violence as an authentic aspect of the American West was created primarily by the dime novelists and artists of the East, they romanticised a region that was far less exciting and dangerous than the reality.

Authenticity and the American Dream is an issue in filmic representations of the historical American West. Despite numerous attempts to capture the heart and soul of the frontier, and the pioneering successes of western expansion, films have continually struggled to create representations that feel truly authentic. Often, filmic representations of the West overemphasise mythical aspects of the frontier in an attempt to pander to the public interest. The power of the dime novel lay in its, "capturing and promoting a mass vision of the nineteenth-century West, broadcasting a coded mythology of the frontier for mainstream America to absorb."[53] The Western film genre is the twentieth century equivalent, attempting to reinforce the coded mythologies established by the dime novel, admittedly to a much larger and international audience. As historian David Lewis has argued, authenticity is a common issue in the film industry, especially in the way that films often repurpose the landscape of natives to continually perpetuate myths about the American West. For example, "The landscape and Indians of Arizona became our cinematic projection of a savage West, the "real" West."[54] This depiction of a "real", authentically "savage", West in cinematic landscapes, both in films and videogames, has been influenced by their filmic predecessors as they attempted to make meaning out of an increasingly

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[53] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.83
[54] Lewis, "Still Native", cited in, *A New Significance*, p.220

complicated historical past.[55] As Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger have argued,

authenticity within videogames is often tempered by a variety of factors. For example,

"Selective authenticity may be understood as a form of narrative license, in which an

interactive experience of the past blends historical representation with generic conventions

and audience expectations."[56] In videogames the interactive experience is blended with

generic conventions and audience expectations due to the increased influence that players

are given by games developers within their digital landscapes. Audiences of films are passive

onlookers to the events happening on-screen, unable to influence where the protagonist

goes, who they talk to, or what course of action they should pursue. Videogames and their

developers grant players this level of control and are therefore are expected to understand

the interests of their audiences on a much more complex and personal level. Although *RDR2*

does fall into the trap of furthering a handful of common American West stereotypes and

tropes, it is a videogame that consistently tries to invert them if possible. The rolling digital

plains of the frontier see their fair share of violence and death, as do the civilised towns and

cities that supposedly represent progress but are portrayed as complex political spheres

where scum and villainy thrive.

One recent cinematic example that skilfully broaches the topic of authenticity is

Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015), starring Samuel L. Jackson and Kurt Russell.[57]

Set after the end of the American Civil War, the film is an exploration of the role of

deception and deceit in an America shattered by sectional and societal conflict. At the same

time Tarantino explores racial tensions between the North and South after the American

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[55] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p.7

[56] Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, "Selective authenticity and the Playable Past", cited in, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.154

[57] *The Hateful Eight*, Dir. Quentin Tarantino, Samuel L. Jackson and Kurt Russell, The Weinstein Company, 2015

Civil War, with Jackson portraying African American Major Marquis Warren, formerly of the

Union army, and Walton Goggins as Chris Mannix, a Confederate marauder turned newly

appointed Sheriff.[58] Throughout the narrative, the theme of authenticity and the American

Dream continuously reoccur, first with Mannix claiming he is a newly appointed lawman,

then with the various identities of other characters who turn out to be members of a

notorious gang, and finally the authenticity of a "Lincoln letter" in the ownership of Major

Warren.[59] Although Mannix never directly appears to deceive anyone, he is trying to forge a

completely new life for himself out of the ashes of the American Civil War, by the

culmination of the narrative it is never made clear to the audience whether he was actually

appointed Sheriff as he constantly professes to be. The gang members on the other hand

spend the entire narrative openly deceiving the other characters as they attempt to achieve

their dream of reuniting their leader, Jody Domingre (Channing Tatum) with his murderous

sister, Daisy Domergue (Jennifer Jason Leigh) so they can rampage across the West leaving a

bloody trail of corpses behind them. Each character, aside from Ruth, Mannix, and Warren

are revealed to be deceptive copies of authentic Western characters who they must play in

order to deceive anyone who happens to take refuge at the haberdashery during the

blizzard. As their authenticity is slowly stripped from them, so are their dreams which are

extinguished one-by-one as they are killed. The idyllic setting of the haberdashery, which

acts as a physical metaphor for America as a nation, a location where all manner of

characters combine and socialise together despite their differences; which at first it seems

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[58] Stephanie Zacharek, 'Tarantino's *Hateful Eight* finds beauty in snow – not so much in people', *TIME Magazine*, 18 January 2016, p.52
[59] The "Lincoln letter" in *The Hateful Eight* is a letter written directly to Major Warren from President Abraham Lincoln during his time serving in the Union Army throughout the course of the American Civil War.

quaint and comfortingly Western, is eventually revealed as a place where no one is who they say they are and death is rapidly approaching all.

In *The Hateful Eight*, Quentin Tarantino explores authenticity within the American Dream. This is achieved through a plot device referred to as the Lincoln letter, which is used specifically by Tarantino to explore the power of authenticity within the American Dream and what place that has in its future. In *The Hateful Eight* the decision to believe something to be authentic and therefore to crystallise a personal vision of the American Dream is portrayed by Kurt Russell's John Ruth who is fascinated by the Lincoln letter carried by Major Warren. Ruth is a loud-mouthed, physically violent, and intimidating bounty hunter, whose personal and physical characteristics are designed to portray him as the embodiment of the negative connotations of rugged individualism and frontier masculinity which were usually seen as highly valued qualities. His brash, aggressive attitude and uncouth manners are an explicit representation of the decline of the democratising powers of the frontier after the violence of American Civil War and the rapidly deteriorating character of those who inhabit the region. Ruth's American Dream revolves around a desire for monetary gain, which he intends to claim by collecting a large bounty in exchange for handing over Miss Domergue to the local sheriff. His desire for personal wealth is juxtaposed by a captivation with the Lincoln letter carried by the African American Major, which he repeatedly asks to see and read, deriving great satisfaction from examining the words supposedly written by President Lincoln himself. Despite the extremely far-fetched claim made by Warren that he had a personal correspondence with Abraham Lincoln, Ruth makes a conscious choice to believe him and accepts that the letter and its contents are indeed authentic. By making this decision, Ruth indicates that an authentic American Dream can also be a subjective concept, but that does not make it any less real or powerful. Ruth accepts that the dream of racial

equality and liberty proposed by Major Warren's correspondence with Lincoln, is just as much of a true and authentic American Dream as that of the land of wealth and opportunity that he believes in.

The representation of a subjective American Dream portrayed by the relationship between Warren and Ruth is juxtaposed directly by the views of by Mannix. The wary sheriff-to-be represents a modern and cynical view of the American Dream after the horrors of the American Civil War. Mannix ridicules Ruth, portraying him as a naive dreamer in an uncompromising and unforgiving world. An argument which is reinforced when Warren eventually reveals that the letter is a forgery. The letter, which symbolises the easing of racial tensions and a brighter future, is just a lie, a simple ruse that Warren uses to ingratiate himself with white Americans after the Civil War because of his colour. The letter is therefore problematic because its initial presentation as an alternate, subjective, yet still authentic American Dream is damaged by the realisation it is an inauthentic object. After this is uncovered, the rest of the film is devoted to the slow but steady decline of authenticity within the American Dream as the characters in the haberdashery are revealed one-by-one to be lying about who they are and why they are there.

The digital landscape of *RDR2* offers both authentic, and inauthentic experiences of the American Dream during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Players have access to a virtual world that presents a historically accurate and seemingly authentic portrayal of the American Dream that was present on the frontier conditions of the American West. However, the virtual world created by Rockstar is one where a number of inauthentic and historically inaccurate experiences can also be found, the most noticeable example being the overwhelming presence of violence and the prevalent use of the six-shooter as a

common solution to these situations. In the following paragraphs, we will explore how *RDR2* offers both mythologically constructed, and therefore inauthentic, experiences of the American Dream, while simultaneously offering genuinely realistic, and therefore authentic, experiences of the Dream. *RDR2* is a complex digital landscape that manages to offer a nuanced and thought-provoking perspective on the authentic aspects of the American Dream. At the same time, it should be recognised that Rockstar deliberately play into the inauthentic and stereotypical experiences of the American Dream as the main aim of the game is to generate revenue, and the inclusion of popular myths and symbols are keys to driving engagement with gaming audiences, especially when using a setting as popular and mythologised as the wild west.

A notable example of *RDR2* offering an authentic experience of the American Dream is through the portrayal of hunting as a crucial part of life in the American West. Many settlers moved westward across the continent searching for the American Dream, a concept which entailed grandiose visions, "settlements as a refuge from the tyranny and corruption, a safety valve for metropolitan discontents, a land of golden opportunity for enterprising individualists, and an inexhaustible reservoir of natural wealth on which a future of limitless property could be based."[60] The endless possibilities supposedly afforded by the American Dream situated in the American West promised an experience full of success and prosperity. However, the authentic experiences of the American Dream were a stark contrast to the hazy dreamscape settlers imagined awaiting them. The juxtaposition between idyllic expectations and authentic experience of the American Dream is captured in *RDR2* by one stranger encounter in particular, as well as the prominence of hunting. In *RDR2* players can

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[60] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p.30

interact with various strangers while exploring the digital landscape, one encounter in particular offers an authentic experience of the American Dream. While exploring the densely forested northern regions of *RDR2* players are able to encounter a woman living alone, in a cabin called Willard's Rest, in the wilderness.[61] When players interact with the stranger grieving for her late husband, who introduces herself as Charlotte Balfour, they come to learn her story and discover how her authentic experience of the American Dream has been very different to what was seemingly promised by moving westward. Charlotte migrated westward with her husband in search of a more peaceful and prosperous lifestyle, full of freedom and away from the suffocating lifestyle of a larger city. However, the dangerous wilderness conditions encountered by the married couple leads to the untimely demise of Charlotte's husband, who laments to players how she will be able to survive in such a threatening landscape. *RDR2* singles out the wilderness as a landscape full of hardship and fear, which historically by the end of the nineteenth century had become an increasingly rare phenomenon.[62] Players consequently teach Charlotte how to hunt and survive in the wild, stalking animals, collecting plants, and learning how to shoot are all included as key pursuits necessary to pursue an American Dream of a peaceful existence within nature. Players can then encounter Charlotte a number of times after this, experiencing the American Dream of a peaceful and prosperous life in the wild, all thanks to being able to provide for herself. The importance of hunting and learning to live off the land in *RDR2* offers an authentic experience of the American Dream. This is a theme that is directly reinforced through gameplay. For instance, hunting animals results in a various array of positive outcomes, meat that can either be cooked, sold, or traded, pelts that can

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[61] IGN, *Willard's Rest*, In ign.com [online]. Last Edited 21 December 2018, [cited 9 September 2020], Available from: <https://www.ign.com/wikis/red-dead-redemption-2/Willard's_Rest>

[62] Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) p.57

be sold, or turned into items of clothing that protect against harsh weather conditions. The importance of hunting is also emphasised for the Van Der Linde gang. All members, men and women, are expected to contribute by hunting animals and then either sharing the profits from selling pelts, or the meat from animal carcasses to create meals for the entire group. The meals go towards sustaining energy and maintaining morale, while the money is supposedly saved in order to purchase land after moving further West. No matter what aspect of the American Dream is being pursued, *RDR2* uses hunting to provide an authentic experience of it. The American West was a source of abundance for settlers and *RDR2* manages to recreate an authentic digital landscape where this is portrayed, even though "the process of providing this living," was neither smooth nor equal.[63] From the very beginning of the game, Rockstar repeatedly offers hunting as an authentic experience of the American Dream within the digital landscape of *RDR2*.

One way in which *RDR2* offers an inauthentic experience of the American Dream is through its repeated emphasis on the importance of guns and violence in the American West. As discussed previously, depictions of violence in contemporary popular culture helped to mythologise its role as an authentic experience of the Dream in the American West. Put simply, the mythological function of guns and the violence they enacted, "explained how the West was made."[64] Famous historical figures such as Buffalo Bill Cody helped to glorify and authenticate the role of violence and the use of guns as a regular occurrence in the West. The myth that helped establish Cody as a public figure and national celebrity revolved around shooting a Native American, "Cody extricated himself from the

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[63] Margaret Walsh, 'Revisiting the American West', cited in, *A New Introduction to American Studies*, ed. by Howard Temperlay and Christopher Bigsby (London: Routledge, 2013) p.103
[64] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.61

saddle, took a kneeling position and deliberate aim, and shot the charging Indian from his horse"[65] This scene would be depicted over and over and formed the basis of a legend where Cody would be hailed as, "the man who took "The First Scalp for Custer.""[66] This fascination with the gun continued into the twentieth century through the film screen, where the portrayals of John Wayne in films such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* (1992) continued to fictionalise the role of the gun and violence as key tenets of an authentic experience of the Dream in the American West. Many videogames, such as Midway's two western themed titles, *Gun Fight* (1975) and *Boot Hill* (1977), have replicated the mythological iconography originally made on canvas, paper, and celluloid, and *RDR2* is no exception.[67] Rockstar regurgitate the myths of the old West in an effort to create an authentic experience for players. However, the prevalence of guns and violence throughout *RDR2* actually offers an inauthentic experience of the American Dream. The lens of the outlaw experience that players are forced to see through is unrepresentative of the frontier and the Dream, "but such is the power of western imagery – especially in Wild West shows and movies – that its become an ingrained part of our global cultural memory."[68] Guns and violence, are ingrained into cultural memory of the American West and are employed in *RDR2* to offer an inauthentic experience of the Dream. Players routinely find themselves staring down the barrel of a repeater, resolving complex legal disputes with six-shooters, and gunning down seemingly endless hordes of rival outlaws, federal agents, and hired thugs as a matter of course. We should note at this point that the prominence of gun play in

[65] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp.71-72
[66] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp.71-72
[67] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, p.66
[68] Esther Wright, '*Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Battlefield V*: the real history behind 3 popular video games', In historyextra.com [online]. 20 November 2018, [cited 14 August 2019], Available from: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/red-dead-redemption-l-a-noire-and-battlefield-v-the-real-history-behind-3-popular-video-games/>

RDR2 is symptomatic of the genre, a third-person shooter, but Rockstar repeatedly rely on missions and encounters that result in a bloody shoot out. While pursuing the Van Der Linde gang's Dream of moving westward, guns and violence are the first solution to any problem and players repeatedly bear witness to inauthentic experiences of the American Dream. *RDR2* envisions both the West and the American Dream as, "an eminently violent domain," which ignores a wide range of evidence, "that points to a more peaceful and complex," experience.[69] As Jones and Wills have argued, violence made geographical locations exceptional, "it placed the town on the map," and Rockstar have populated their digital landscape with locations that take advantage of this realisation, the locations that fill the virtual landscape are exceptional and therefore violent.[70]

    RDR2 also offers an authentic experience of the American Dream through its portrayal of homesteading, specifically the construction of Beecher's Hope by John Marston. Owning land and building a homestead were mainstays of the American Dream during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[71] The beckoning plains and wide-open spaces of the American West appealed to countless number of settlers who journeyed across the nation seeking a new life. This experience of the American Dream is authentically reflected in *RDR2* through the experiences of John Marston as he builds his own homestead at Beecher's Hope. Of course, it should be noted that the situation presented in *RDR2*, that a large plot of land is freely available just a small way away from a rapidly developing town with a port, would be highly unlikely. This adheres to the mythological perception that land, "could move smoothly into the hands of new owners, transforming wilderness to farmland, idle

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[69] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.69
[70] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.70
[71] Turner, *The Frontier*, pp. 297-298

men to productive citizens."[72] During the epilogue of *RDR2* players are presented with the

opportunity to purchase an unused plot of land on the Great Plains region of the West

Elizabeth territory. The plot of land is unkempt and wild, overgrown with tree stumps, and

seemingly devoid of anything that could support human habitation. Rockstar provides a

historically authentic digital portrayal of the experience of the American Dream in the West;

the arid landscape provides a suitable obstacle for players and must be overcome in the

process of pursuing the Dream. In the process of turning Beecher's Hope into a fully-

fledged, working homestead, players must negotiate a loan with the nearby bank, purchase

plans, recover sufficient lumber, and finally construct the quaint dwelling. The process is

arduous but surprisingly fulfilling, though the actual task of building is relegated to 5

minutes of cutscenes, and the occasional button press, all accompanied by a characterful

tune. Players are forced to interact with the entire process of settling land in the American

West as they help John Marston pursue his authentic experience of the Dream. Wrapped up

amongst all of this authentic experience of the American Dream is a mythological

stereotype of the American West, namely that it was, "heroic, grand, tough, and above all,

ruggedly masculine."[73] While players are constructing Beecher's Hope, there is a noticeable

lack of involvement from any female characters. In fact, the entire reason that Marston buys

and builds a homestead is to provide a safe and secure home for his wife Abigail, one of the

few female characters with a presence in the entirety of *RDR2*. By ignoring the role of

women in authentic experiences of the American Dream, *RDR2* appears to discard the more

rounded and socially relevant history developed by the New Western Historians.[74] Although

this does not entirely dispel the authenticity created for players through the in-depth

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[72] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.60
[73] Deverell, "Fighting Words", p.36
[74] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.44

experience of homesteading, Rockstar's digital landscape feel less nuanced, more mythologised, and offers a less authentic, and therefore more problematic experience of the American Dream.

Land Ahoy: Nature, Natives, and the American Dream

The second theme that resonates throughout the narrative arc of *RDR2* is the relationship between the representation of land as an invaluable resource that must be acquired through territorial expansion, the power of the natural world, and Native Americans. These themes are important because they present the inherent difficulties of the American Dream within the American West. Land slowly transitions into a form of currency; the natural world is continually exploited in the pursuit of economic gain and all of this is framed by an increasingly aggressive attitude towards Native American tribes because they didn't fit into the boundaries of the nineteenth-century American Dream. The dreams of settlers migrating across the country are affected by the presence of Native Americans who are repeatedly forced to change and adapt, or else perish in the face of industrial expansion, an issue which is closely examined by Rockstar. Although this is based in a fictional digital landscape, the themes explored by Rockstar throughout the game are undoubtedly influenced by the historical past of the nation. Therefore, these themes which are present in *RDR2* can be linked to academic scholarship to indicate how the American Dream has often been forced to change and adapt over time.

The acquisition of land through territorial expansion is a theme that *RDR2* directly and repeatedly addresses throughout the narrative progression of the game, rather than

shying away from the difficulties of expansion and the issues that it caused for settlers and

Native American tribes. Main missions and side missions (missions within the game that do

not further the main narrative but develop their own unique stories) are both used to

address the fundamental injustices created by the expansionist attitude of American settlers

and industrialists.[75] Rockstar uses the Van Der Linde gang, a nomadic band of outlaws and

social pariahs, to explore this problematic part of westward expansion. Led by the enigmatic

Dutch Van Der Linde and his trusty right-hand-man Arthur Morgan, the group is constantly

forced to relocate to new areas of land as they are pursued by the infamous Pinkerton

Detective Agency. These relocations force players to five different camps throughout the

course of the main narrative. Although it could be argued that the constant relocations are

simply a function of game design to force players into exploring the entirety of the virtual

environment, the open-world design of *RDR2* contradicts this and suggests that there is a

deeper meaning to the constant travelling and forced relocations. The constantly changing

landscapes players experience while travelling through the digital American West of *RDR2*

initially portrays the natural land as an abundant resource waiting to be claimed by the next

eager settler to happen by. However, this notion of an abundance of free land is increasingly

challenged by Rockstar each time the Van Der Linde gang is forced to relocate to a new

location. As the narrative progresses, the gang is forced to displace innocent foreign

settlers, rival gangs, and groups of misfits to carve a home for themselves in the landscape

of the digital American West. For example, when the gang is forced to relocate to a new

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[75] *Red Dead Redemption 2* is a narrative-focused game that fills its world with a variety of side missions to entertain players who spend significant amounts of time in the game world. What sets Rockstar apart from other game developers is their attention to detail and storytelling depth when creating side missions. This creates a multitude of narrative threads from larger and smaller missions that combine to develop characters and help explain their actions and motives. This is a major part of an open-world game where players are free to choose what they want to do with their time.

residence at the ramshackle manor of Shady Belle, players have no choice but to violently

remove the former tenants. Once a stately manor located on the edge of the swamps,

Shady Belle has become run down and ramshackle, a foreboding reminder to players that

the American Dream of land ownership often falls apart.

Each successive camp inhabited by players as the narrative progresses marks the

dwindling condition of the gang, the futility of resistance in the face of rapid industrial

progress, and the declining possibility of acquiring large swathes of land through territorial

expansion. This is evident when examining the aesthetic of the camps as they become

increasingly depressing and dilapidated after each forced relocation. This stark contrast is

most apparent when making comparisons between the very first camp the gang inhabits,

Horseshoe Overlook, and the final one before it ultimately dissolves, Beaver Hollow. During

the early stages of the narrative, the camp at Horseshoe Overlook acts as a central focal

point for players where they can encounter and interact with the various members of the

Van Der Linde gang as they relax and socialise with one another in a beautifully

orchestrated, organic virtual landscape. This creates an overwhelmingly positive

atmosphere for players to experience as they are being introduced to some of the vital

game mechanics that comprise the digital American West created by Rockstar in *RDR2*. As

the very first camp players encounter, Horseshoe Overlook is light and spacious giving

players plenty of room to explore, tents, wagons, and campfires are spread liberally

throughout the entire clearing while the various steeds used by the gang are picketed on

the outskirts encompassed by a protective ring of pine trees.[76] The overwhelmingly positive

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[76] Raj Shrivastava, *Eastward Bound Walkthrough | Red Dead Redemption 2*, In Gamepur.com [online]. 27
October 2018 [cited 25 October 2019], Available from: <https://www.gamepur.com/guide/30110-red-dead-redemption-2-eastward-bound-walkthrough.html> [See Appendix: Image 2]

atmosphere of the first camp is also conveyed through the use of light, the blazing sun

illuminates the camp during the day and the dancing campfires continue to keep it bright

and cheerful during the clear and starry western nights. A feeling which is often exacerbated

when members of the gang gather around the campfire to drink and sing together. All of

this works together to represent the belief held by the Van Der Linde gang, and hopefully by

players at this stage, that during the initial stages of the narrative their American Dream of

land acquisition and territorial expansion is still alive and well as they near the end of the

nineteenth century. Therefore, we can see that the first camp is a digital landscape created

by Rockstar to introduce players to the game mechanics as well as the American Dream of

land as an abundant resource. The large digital space that Horseshoe Overlook encompasses

and its overwhelmingly positive atmosphere, combined with the use of light, hints at the

enduring power of freedom and access to land that the American West was believed to be.

However, this perception of the West and its supposed encouragement of territorial

expansion is juxtaposed by the final camp the Van Der Linde Gang inhabits, Beaver Hollow.

The final camp, Beaver Hollow, is an inverse of the digital landscape of Horseshoe

Overlook and what it attempts to represent for the American Dream of free land and

territorial expansion. The dark and foreboding aesthetic combined with the cramped

physical dimensions of the camp is indicative of the dire future and eventual downfall of the

Van Der Linde Gang. This dark aesthetic also hints at the astonishingly rapid decline of the

nineteenth-century American Dream of territorial expansion for the Van Der Linde gang

which they are forced to experience first-hand.[77] This particular portrayal of the digital

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[77] Christopher Atwood, *Red Dead Redemption 2: How to find and beat every gang hideout*, In Gamecrate.com [online]. 08 November 2018, [cited 31 October 2019], Available from: <https://www.gamecrate.com/red-dead-redemption-2-how-find-and-beat-every-gang-hideout/21338> [See Appendix: Image 3]

landscape of the American West by Rockstar is an overwhelmingly negative one. This argument can be strengthened by examining a screenshot taken directly from gameplay, where players, controlling a sickly Arthur Morgan, are yet again forced to violently relocate a rival gang who are also struggling to adapt in the rapidly changing world of the late nineteenth century American West. The digital space during this mission is cramped and dark, dimly lit by makeshift fires, and covered by broken wagons and discarded tents, remnants of the digital West. Violence and displacement are the main themes here, as both Arthur and Charles ruthlessly dispatch any adversary that does not immediately flee, either with a knife, gun, or bow and arrow. It is evident therefore, that Rockstar, especially during the latter stages of the main narrative, portray the American West as a rapidly diminishing landscape, where groups have to contend with one another to claim an area of land to call their own. This is a direct representation within *RDR2* of the decline of the dream of territorial expansion and freedom of movement that the Van Der Linde gang is initially so intent, even dependent, upon.

Another aspect of the digital landscape of Beaver Hollow that is used to portray the decline of the American Dream of territorial freedom is its representation to players as the last bastion of true freedom in the American West. What is meant by this is that Beaver Hollow is portrayed as the final place where the Van Der Linde gang, among other groups of outlaws, can hide from the constantly expanding tendrils of industrial progress and the encroachment of federal law enforcement portrayed by the infamous Pinkerton Detective Agency. A point that Esther Wright has noted when discussing technical innovations in the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise as a whole, "New technologies like telephone, the railroad and automobiles have changed the landscape of the west, and federal law enforcement

agent have encroached on even the most remote frontier outpost."[78] Wide open landscapes

and freedom can therefore both be seen as resources, concepts that appear to be unique to

the wide open spaces of the American West, but are being slowly being depleted and

diminished as contemporary civilisation draws near. This is portrayed in Beaver Hollow

where progress and freedom are constantly struggling with one another. The juxtaposition

of these themes, freedom in nature and destructive industrial progress, results in an

inevitable clash of American Dreams, between the dreams of a small group of outlaws

clinging to the anachronistic mythological past, and the supposedly forward-thinking dreams

of a nation intent on progress no matter the cost. The conflict between different dreams

that takes place within the digital landscapes of *RDR2* reflects a wider understanding by

Rockstar of the divisions within the American Dream that were present during the latter

stages of the nineteenth century. As Sarah Churchwell has argued when examining the

connections between American exceptionalism and the American Dream, "America wasn't

supposed to be an exceptional place because its citizens had dreams, or even because those

dreams sometimes came true. That's true of everyone. It was supposed to be exceptional in

being a place dedicated to the proposition of helping those dreams to be realised – but the

nation's dreams were meant to be exceptional, too."[79] Within the confines of *RDR2*,

Rockstar explores the growing conflict between the dreams of the people, freedom, and the

dreams of the nations, industrial progress, at the end of the nineteenth century. As

Churchwell indicates, eventually "The 'American dream' would be associated with a

recognition that dreams of endless progress could be as socially destabilising as unregulated

competition or vast economic inequality."[80] The dream of endless progress that is shown

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[78] Wright, '*Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Battlefield V*'
[79] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, pp.6-7
[80] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, p.36

throughout *RDR2* is portrayed as a socially destabilising force that negatively influences the lives of many settlers. The dreams of freedom and territorial gain that define the Van Der Linde gang, and to some extent the Native American tribe from the Wapiti Reservation, cannot exist in the same world as that of endless progress. Churchwell expands her arguments to discuss the failings of the American Dream and what this results in, "We know that dream – its assurances, its betrayals – so well that we think they're the only meanings available to us, that these ever-receding promises are all the American dream ever meant."[81] The "ever-receding promises" is how the Van Der Linde Gang eventually comes to view the American Dream of territorial freedom. This is encapsulated by the camp at Beaver Hollow as their dream has ultimately become as cramped and restricted as the physical limitations of their hideout. The hope engendered by Horseshoe Overlook is ultimately diminished as the Van Der Linde gang is forced to accept the reality that their American Dream of territorial freedom cannot persist in the face of progress.

Within *RDR2*, the acquisition of land through territorial expansion treats the natural environment as a resource to be claimed, which consequently influences the treatment of Native Americans by white settlers and government officials. This aggressively consumer-capitalist attitude towards the natural environment is also applicable to Native Americans lands, a place that is inherent to their cultural practices, consequently treating them as a commodity to be bought and sold in pursuit of their own visions of the American Dream. The treatment of Native Americans throughout the history of America is one of the most disturbing aspects of the American Dream. From countless broken treaties, to battles in court, the history of Native Americans at the hands of the United States government has

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[81] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, p.11

been one of, "military violence, dispossession, and impoverishment."[82] Rockstar approaches

the issue in the late nineteenth century as one that revolves primarily around the interests

of capitalist industrial progress which resulted in a desire to remove Native Americans from

their ancestral lands. The conflicts that take place between the federal government and

Native Americans in *RDR2* are motivated by the realisation that the land occupied by the

natives, which sits atop a lucrative reserve of oil, is a possibility to gain immense wealth and

power. This depiction of American progress by Rockstar closely represents the Turnerian

ideals, following the closing of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century, and the

subsequent demands for the future that it brought with it.[83] The American people, and its

government, are represented as on a capitalist crusade that will do almost anything for the

dollar, all in the name of progress. As Turner contended in one of his later essays, "In place

of old frontiers of wilderness, there are new frontiers of unwon fields of science, fruitful for

the needs of the race; there are frontiers of better social domains yet unexplored. Let us

hold to our attitude of faith and courage, and creative zeal. Let us dream as our fathers

dreamt and let us make our dreams come true."[84] The repeated use of "us" and "our" is

important to examine here, as Turner is directly addressing those who had the most access

to the American Dream during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white

heterosexual men. This completely excludes women of all races, as well as all other

ethnicities present in America during the nineteenth century. In the context of the twenty-

first century, this reveals the overwhelmingly ethnocentric and nationalistic attitude of

Turner; he fails to include anyone else aside from white men in the future of the American

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[82] Gail D. MacLeitch, 'Native Americans', cited in, *A New Introduction to American Studies*, ed. by Howard Temperlay and Christopher Bigsby (London: Routledge, 2013) p.99
[83] Turner, *The Frontier*, p.306
[84] Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.149

Dream.[85] This argument is also supported by the use of the phrase, "dream as our fathers

dreamt", the use of fathers may of course be a reference to the Founding Fathers of the

American nation, or Turner could alternatively be reinforcing a connection between men

and the dreams of their fathers. Of course, this must be juxtaposed with the understanding

that these attitudes were very prevalent during the late nineteenth century, however, in the

context of the twenty-first century the arguments made by Turner are somewhat

anachronistic to say the least.

In *RDR2* it is evident that Native American cultural identity is drawn primarily from

the connection to a small area of ancestral land the tribe occupies. The cultural identity that

is present in *RDR2* is a mixture of spiritual and material, the land is primarily a source of

subsistence as well as a place to continue to practice ancient cultural traditions. As David

Rich Lewis has argued in his essay, 'Still Native: The Significance of Native Americans in the

History of the Twentieth-Century American West,' Native Americans saw their land as

culturally and spiritually significant.[86] Although Lewis is relating this to the historiographical

evidence, *RDR2* posits a comparable viewpoint despite being in a digital landscape. The

landscapes of the digital American West, much like the historical landscapes of Native

American tribes during the nineteenth century, provide a source of cultural identity, "Their

land base holds them together physically and culturally as identifiable groups, separate and

safe from the national mainstream that has swept along other ethnic groups."[87] Access and

control of land was, and still is, enormously significant, as Slotkin writes, "What

differentiated the Indian hunter from Davy Crockett was, not a racial antipathy for

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[85] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.21

[86] David Rich Lewis, "Still Native: The Significance of Native Americans in the History of the Twentieth-Century American West", cited in, *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. by Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp.213-240

[87] Lewis, "Still Native", cited in, *A New Significance*, p.218

capitalism and trade, but a sense of belonging to the world one exploited."[88] This sense of belonging to the land is palpable throughout the game, as tribal land is used to hunt and gather meat and herbs, for sustenance and healing properties. Ludically this helps to engage players with the digital landscape as he/she associates wellbeing and physical health with the natural world. As the health of the protagonist, Arthur, deteriorates rapidly, this style of play is further reinforced as players are encouraged to gather herbs and hunt animals to keep Arthur somewhat healthy, despite the physically draining nature of tuberculosis. A connection that is further reinforced when Rains Fall, the Native American Chief, takes Arthur to gather medicinal herbs to alleviate his worsening symptoms.

Although belonging to the world is a component of the American Dream, the attraction of capitalism to Native Americans is also evident in *RDR2*. When the first-time players encounter the major Native American characters, they are trying to get an estimation for how much their land is worth. The sense of belonging to the natural world, for white settlers, can be addressed by the views of Roderick Nash when he discusses James Fenimore Cooper, "Attraction to wilderness and sadness at its disappearance was only a part of his thinking. Cooper knew that civilisation also had its claims and that they must prevail. The elimination of wilderness was tragic, but it was a necessary tragedy; civilisation was the greater good."[89] By the close of the nineteenth century the few people, mostly prominent academics and preservationists, who openly appreciated the value of wilderness, were being opposed by those who believed that for American society to progress, nature and therefore wilderness, had to be conquered and eliminated. The American West promoted, and continues to promote, a historical landscape where, for the capitalist-

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[88] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p.559
[89] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.77

oriented dreams of white settlers to prevail, the dreams of Native Americans had to adapt

or die.

The detrimental treatment of ethnic groups and their dreams within the digital

landscape of *RDR2* is endemic, African Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans meander

throughout the frontier struggling to find a place to truly belong. Interestingly, the only

ethnicities that appear to find a home where their dreams are accepted are those that have

become a part of the Van Der Linde gang, however, even in this example racial tensions still

have the potential to bubble over in times of hardship. Rockstar creates a Darwinian

"survival of the fittest" society where small towns and cities on the digital frontier are

dominated by white settlers looking to start a new life, and they give almost no thought to

others around them who are also struggling to survive. Even within the white settler

community certain genders and professions are treated with disdain and accordingly

shunned, this only becomes more pronounced in metropolitan areas where any immigrants

from Europe are treated as second-class citizens. As Melanie and Roderick Bush have

argued, "Nothing is clearer to those who have historically been excluded from the benefits

of the American Dream than the fact that the United States is a deeply divided society in

which inequalities are justified by the supposedly different cultures of some groups, which,

in turn, isolate them from the economic mainstream and its values."[90] As Bush and Bush go

on to argue later in their lengthy examination of tensions within the American Dream,

"Rather, exclusion was the rule; it was systemic and systematic; structurally and

institutionally embedded."[91] Despite the example being a digital landscape rather than a

physical one, it creates and sustains the same message. *RDR2* represents a landscape where

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[90] Bush and Bush, *Tensions in the American Dream*, p.16
[91] Bush and Bush, *Tensions in the American Dream*, p.24

the desire for land creates a society festering with exclusion and hostility. The nineteenth—century American Dream of land ownership is evident in this digital landscape, however, for many it feels like a dream that is nigh impossible to achieve.

The Wapiti Reservation that players can explore in the game is the cultural and physical home for the sole Native American tribe in the vast digital landscape created by Rockstar.[92] As such it is used to represent how the relationship between Native Americans and American civilisation is perceived by audiences in the twenty—first century. Therefore, it provides a commentary by Rockstar on the crucial differences between the two cultures and how they interpret the core ideals of the American Dream. Of course, this interpretation is influenced by the capitalist society of nineteenth—century America, because the importance of financial prosperity to provide security and comfort becomes a common ideal for both white settlers and Native Americans. Slotkin has previously argued that, "The Indians' love of personal liberty and freedom soon became proverbial among the colonists; and as we shall see, the passion of the Revolutionaries for independence was often traced, by friend and foe alike, to their having imbibed the Indian passion."[93] The differences between the two cultures is represented by Rockstar in the digital landscape of *RDR2*. While Slotkin argues for love of freedom and liberty becoming infused through contact with Native American culture, Rockstar instead contend that white settlers and Native American have vastly different attitudes towards land. This is represented by a conflict that takes place between settlers and the Native American tribe. Settlers wish to use the tribal land for personal wealth and influence due to its situation atop a large reserve of

[92] IGN, *Wapiti Indian Reservation*, In uk.ign.com [online]. Last Edited 21 December 2018, [cited 8 May 2019], Available from: <https://uk.ign.com/wikis/red-dead-redemption-2/Wapiti_Indian_Reservation>
[93] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p.45

oil, however, the Native Americans wish to protect the land for its cultural value and pass it

down to the next generation. This commitment to protecting cultural heritage is shown

when players first encounter the primary Native American characters, Rains Fall and Eagle

Flies, attempting to evaluate their tribal land. In order for them to do this they have to seek

the help of wealthy settlers based in the large city of Saint Denis, heavily inspired by

nineteenth century New Orleans, which is a hub of financial development and trade. They

understand the value of their land because of the oil deposits and are afraid for what that

might mean for its future. In regard to the diegetic elements of the game, the cutscenes

depicting their attempts to obtain official deeds for their lands is used to ludically inform

players of the repeated attempts of Native Americans to integrate themselves with

American society during an era of expansion without explicitly mentioning it through

character dialogue. This is yet another instance of *RDR2* and Rockstar exploring how some

of the core ideals of the American Dream differ between cultures.

The battle over the digital landscape of the Wapiti Reservation is representative of

the many conflicts that Native Americans are forced to navigate while attempting to survive

on the outer edge of videogame American civilisation. The digital landscape of the small

reservation in *RDR2* portrays nature in the American West as shabby and worn, a

description that can also be extended to the small group of Native Americans that still

inhabit the area. This landscape, therefore, is the metaphorical stage upon which the

relationship between settlers, the natural world, Native Americans, and industrial progress

is challenged and dissected. Ultimately this complex mix of factors leads to the land being

wrested from the control of the Native Americans, mainly due to the differences between

the two cultures, which mirrors historical events that have unfortunately taken place, such

as Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act (1830) and the resulting displacement of Native

Americans that took place. A particularly cruel act that forced Native Americans away from ancestral lands, "Put in practice, Indian removal in the 1830s found its place as one of the greater official acts of inhumanity and cruelty in American history."[94] Across the landscape of the American frontier, "Native Americans wished to preserve their cultural and political autonomy and to retain control of their ancestral lands, but this desire was incompatible with the Western settlers' notion of liberty as the right to expand across the continent and establish farms, ranches, and mines on land that Native Americans considered their own."[95] Preserving autonomy was a keen desire for Native Americans, as Bush and Bush argue, however, this was incompatible with the American Dreams of territorial expansion and liberty that settlers were trying to obtain. This difference in interests led to physical conflicts between the two groups. Rather than portraying the conflicts that take place as wholly one sided, a representation that has often used to characterise the relationship between Native Americans and white settlers, Rockstar has created an alternative digital landscape where violence becomes an act perpetrated by both parties. As Jim Cullen has argued, "One does not have to sentimentalise the Indians – who, in many cases, gave as good as they got – to nevertheless conclude that the lives of generations of Americans were only made possible by the slaughter of countless innocents."[96] The fact that Rockstar challenges the popular perception of one-sided conflicts is impressive and creates a more nuanced digital landscape for players. As Limerick contends, "On the contrary, the clashes and conflicts of Western history will always leave the serious individual emotionally and intellectually unsettled. In the nineteenth-century West, speaking out for the human dignity of all parties to the

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[94] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.191
[95] Bush and Bush, *Tensions in the American Dream*, p.17
[96] Cullen, *The American Dream*, p.13

conflicts took considerable nerve. It still does."[97] For the dreams of the settlers to be

realised, not only did the dreams of Native Americans have to die, they also had to literally

perish. In the digital landscape of *RDR2* Native Americans ambush groups of federal soldiers

and are just as frequently attacked in retaliatory fashion. The majority of the conflicts that

take place between Native Americans and whites, either settlers or soldiers, are motivated

by a desire for more territory, specifically, land that is tied to resources that can be used for

monetary gain in the nineteenth—century industrial world of expansion. Other

confrontations that happen are mostly motivated by a combination of ethnic and cultural

tensions.

Rockstar creates a digital landscape where the role of the natural world within the

American Dream is marginalised. Many popular videogames struggle to provide consistent

mechanics that recreate authentic interactions with nature, an issue that we will see in

Horizon: Zero Dawn, and this is no different in *RDR2*. Aside from providing players with

liberal amounts of resources for crafting items, such as arrows or healing salves, in a

ludological capacity, digital nature appears to have the most impact through its romantic

and aesthetic qualities. Interestingly the digital landscape that reflects the harsh reality that

many Native Americans faced, the Wapiti Reservation, has an overwhelmingly dilapidated

and neglected aesthetic feel to it that diminishes the grand and majestic natural landscapes

players experience throughout *RDR2*.[98] As an important area of player engagement during

the later stages of the narrative, the Native American reservation has been explicitly

designed to feel as authentic as possible for a digital environment based in the nineteenth—

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[97] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.221
[98] IGN, *Wapiti Indian Reservation*, In uk.ign.com [online]. Last Edited 21 December 2018, [cited 9 May 2019], Available from: <https://uk.ign.com/wikis/red-dead-redemption-2/Wapiti_Indian_Reservation> [See Appendix: Image 4]

century American West. This results in a virtual Native American encampment that feels impoverished and neglected, a landscape that bears the scars of the conflicts that have taken place between Native Americans and white settlers. This is a direct inversion to the other major locations that players can visit in the game which enjoy the technological advancements of nineteenth—century industrial progress. There is an enormous disparity between the quiet, sparsely populated encampment with hunched and coughing virtual Native Americans, and the bustling industrial cities filled, for the most part, with wealthy American settlers searching for their own versions of the American Dream.

When Rockstar created the digital landscape of the Wapiti Reservation, they were evidently influenced by the popular culture iconography of the American West more so than academic historiography. A point that Adam Chapman, author of *Digital Games as History*, clearly appreciates, "It is relatively uncontroversial to argue that for most of us imagery and understandings drawn from popular media probably construct the past as much, if not more, than the books of professional historians."[99] The camp is small and cramped, shabby tepees flanked by frail and windswept virtual trees. Wisps of smoke work their way up into the idyllic blue sky, small wooden crates are scattered haphazardly around the entire camp, while two ominous wooden cabins in the distance signal the foreboding presence of the federal government constantly monitoring the activity of the tribe. These aesthetic features conform to the cultural iconography of popular culture that depict Native Americans during the nineteenth century as a diminished and vanishing race, a troubling argument which has had serious ramifications for the continued survival of their culture and its traditions during the twentieth century.[100] As such, Rockstar promotes a comparable digital portrayal of the

[99] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p.12
[100] Miles, "To Hear an Old Voice", in, *Under an Open Sky*, p.69

late nineteenth century Native American way of life through the shabby and downtrodden aesthetic of its landscape. *RDR2* reinforces, arguably even encourages, this attitude promoted by popular culture that Native Americans are a doomed and vanishing race that cannot continue to exist in contemporary America as they are eventually forced away from their tribal lands by pressure from federal government forces. This can be further evidenced by the fact that during the epilogue chapter, after the main narrative has concluded, players can encounter the Native American Chief, Rains Fall, at a train station appearing to suffer from the early stages of dementia as he wanders around lost and confused in a world where he has become an anachronism. The downtrodden aesthetic of the natural world that is the home to the Wapiti Reservation speaks volumes about the role of nature within the American Dream as presented by Rockstar and how this has been influenced by popular culture depictions of Native Americans.

The continued presence of nature is a crucial aspect of the American Dream. Not only was the nature of the American West home to the multiple ethnicities who were instrumental to the early development of the nation, but it was also an important source of pride for those who felt overshadowed by the perceived cultural eminence of Europe.[101] Interestingly, comparisons can be made between the digital nature created by Rockstar and academic arguments made surrounding the irreparable consequences of conquest in the American West. As the New Western Historians have shown a proclivity for favouring the detrimental effects of conquest, it seems apt to follow their arguments here, however, we must instead focus primarily on the effect of conquest on the natural environment. As historian Susan Rhoades Neel has argued extensively, "In the western version of conquest,

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[101] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.67

the new regionalism posits, an Anglo-American culture driven by the imperatives of capitalism indulged in an orgy of subjugation and exploitation unlike that experienced anywhere else in America."[102] This sentiment can be directed at nature present in the digital American West created by Rockstar. Especially in the Native American reservation where nature appears as a subject of conquest, no longer wild and imposing, but dilapidated and cowering in the face of American expansionism and conquest. As Neel continues, "Western history with nature in it must consist of complex, finely textured stories set to the subtle, discordant harmonies, not to the strident, heroic cadences Turner chose."[103] Looking beyond the Wapiti Reservation, to the wider digital historical landscape created by Rockstar, we can see that nature at the end of the nineteenth century is represented as still managing to resist the encroachment of humanity. Nature is subtle and unassuming, despite the existence of grandiose vistas meant to enrapture with their aesthetic beauty, the everyday parts of nature, the creeks, the fields, the groves of fir trees, are all central to the American Dream of land ownership and consequently dominate much of the digital landscape traversed by players in *RDR2*. Nature is everywhere on Rockstar's captivating digital frontier. The few metropolitan areas players can visit are islands in a vast sea of green. Rockstar attempts to normalise the nature of the American West, although the frontier was once seen as a wild and dangerous place where the, "veneer civilization laid over the barbaric elements in man seemed much thinner," by the end of the nineteenth century this was no longer true.[104] By this time in American history the subjugation of nature by the pioneer seemed complete, hence the postulations made by Frederick Jackson Turner, and the

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[102] Susan Rhoades Neel, "A Place of Extremes: Nature, History, and the American West", cited in, *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. by Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p.117
[103] Neel, "A Place of Extremes", p.120
[104] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.30

prejudice against nature, especially the dwindling areas of wilderness, continued to influence American opinion.[105] As Neel has argued, "Western history should teach us about the centrality of nature to the human experience, indeed about how that experience is not apart from nature."[106] This is what Rockstar is attempting to capture in the digital landscapes of *RDR2*. The mundane and subtle portrayals of the natural world that players experience throughout the digital landscape indicate just how central everyday nature was to the American Dream and human experience in Western history.

Through the concept of digital land, Rockstar has created a vision of the American Dream that diminishes the role of Native Americans. This is particularly notable within the digital American West, where they are demoted to a peripheral role in the wider, and overwhelmingly white, historical narrative. This is particularly evident in the stereotypical portrayals of the three Native American characters players can interact with that are given prominent roles in the narrative of *RDR2*. Charles Smith who has an African American father and a Native American mother, Rains Fall an elderly Native American chief, and his passionate but reckless son, Eagle Flies. The enigmatic and resilient Charles is one of the most complex characters in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, showcasing an impressive amount of depth and emotion for a videogame character, who often tend to suffer from overly one-dimensional roles. Rockstar use Charles as a vehicle to explore the difficulty of navigating race relations between African Americans, Native Americans, and white settlers at the close of the nineteenth century. This complex racial and ethnic relationship is explored by Rockstar despite being completely ignored by studies of the frontier made by historians

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[105] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.43
[106] Neel, "A Place of Extremes", p.120

such as Turner.[107] Even though the issue of Charles' heritage is examined, it remains an extremely complicated question for a videogame to adequately deal with. However, Rockstar actively encourages players to engage with these complex aspects of history, as Chapman writes, "Games differ from many other historical forms because, alongside being capable of sustaining historical representations, they also invite the audience to actively take part in history and can therefore offer players access to particular kinds of historical practice (that is to say opportunities for doing history)."[108] The power of the medium of videogames comes through its encouragement of an active participation with history, not as a reader or a watcher, but someone who has the power to actively influence the historical process that they are experiencing. As Chapman continues, "This access to doing, this book argues, allows digital games to work not only as representations of the past but also as systems for historying, granting access to historical practices."[109]

Engagement with the struggles of the Native Americans, both in a digital and historical landscape, are underlined by the character of Charles. As a race, Native Americans, like many others, have often been treated as a peripheral part of the wider American Dream, a curiosity for many, but not an actual part of the shared dream that has supposedly managed to unite the various races that inhabit America. Despite being denied access to the white Euro-American Dream, Native Americans in the nineteenth century continued to barely survive within the constraints that were continuously placed upon them by the American Dream. This is certainly true for Charles, who is often show struggling to interact with others while surviving in a society that is designed to treat his race as inferior.

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[107] Lewis, "Still Native", p.213
[108] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p.22
[109] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p.49

When Charles is welcomed by the Native Americans living on the Wapiti Reservation,

Rockstar shows players that an entirely different cultural setting allows for the possibility of

normality and stability to be attained away from the corrupting influence of the American

Dream. The normality that Charles seeks is the chance to start a family away from a society

that is openly hostile and violent to his very existence. Due to his ancestral roots, both Rains

Fall and Eagle Flies treat Charles as an equal, an important detail that Rockstar stresses as

he is often confided in by both Native American protagonists. This is further emphasised in

the latter stages of the narrative, when Charles adopts the braided hair style and dress of a

Native American because he feels more comfortable being a part of their culture and

continues to distance himself from the suffocating constraints of the American Dream.

Players are shown that Native American culture can provide an alternative way of life for

ethnic minorities who have been cast out from the American Dream.

Complimenting the rich and complex character of Charles, Rockstar has two differing

portrayals of how Native Americans attempt to resist American expansion and cling on to

their own dreams. The first character who showcases the anachronisms of violent resistance

is the young and headstrong Eagle Flies. He spends much of his narrative arc attempting to

antagonise the federal government into a fight he knows he cannot win, ultimately, he gets

his wish and dies a glorious but sadly wasteful death. This portrayal is challenged by the

character of Rains Fall. The father of Eagle Flies who has spent decades resisting the

encroachment of white settlers. Rains Fall is portrayed as a stereotypically passive Native

American in the face of aggressive American expansion. However, he is also a

representation of the benefits of using a combination of peaceful and legal methods to

resist attempts made by settlers to seize land by force. As such, Rains Fall is an intriguing

character because his efforts are a reference toward the successes of Native American

resistance during the twentieth century. This would eventually become vital for Native

Americans looking to survive and prosper within the constraints of the American Dream

during the twentieth century. A point that can be emphasised by the arguments of David

Rich Lewis, "Pan-Indian organisations like the Tribal Chairmen's Association, the Native

American Rights Fund, the Council of Energy Resource Tribes, and the American Indian

Movement arose to shape Indian policy and political debate through collective action."[110]

This collective action of tribes, that lead to a wider a movement, is a major reason for the

success and economic growth of Native Americans during the twentieth century. Which

effectively answers another argument made by Lewis about the continued survival of the

Native American race, "That the people demonstrated a genius for enduring, for surviving

the descendants of Columbus is undeniable. Whether or not they continue to do so is up to

the next generation."[111] At first glance, it appears much of the gameplay and narrative

structure of *RDR2* portrays Native Americans as a race, subject to the aggressions of white

settlers desperately trying to obtain their vision of the American Dream in the nineteenth—

century American West, a world overpowered by contemporary industry and railroads.

However, when digging deeper into Rockstar's use of Native American characters within the

narrative there is a more nuanced representation which reveals their successes and failures

as they struggle to survive within the constraints of the American Dream.

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[110] Lewis, "Still Native", p.225
[111] Lewis, "Still Native", p.216

Degeneration through Violence: The Impact of Violence on the American Dream

Violence is a core theme within the American Dream, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This can be shown in the digital landscapes of both *Red Dead Redemption (RDR)* released in 2010 and *RDR2* where the impact of violence is explored extensively. Although *RDR* has not been included in previous sections, it is being included here while exploring the theme of violence because it has clear links with *RDR2* and also addresses the varying impacts that violence can have, both positive and negative. This final section will also be addressing the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, focusing on his academic writings on the violent and reinvigorating qualities of the American frontier. Alongside this will be incorporated some of the later twentieth century observations of historian Richard Slotkin, examining exactly how the ideas of these academics regarding violence can be linked to the American Dream within the digital landscapes of *RDR2* and *RDR*. Alongside academic scholarship, another important piece of evidence will be used to dissect the impact of violence as a generational disease is the song, "Deadman's Gun", which is used in the epilogue of *RDR* to convey the powerful impact that violence can have. As a ludic aspect of gaming, music can be extremely potent, invoking emotional responses from players and emphasising the influence that music and narrative-driven gameplay can have when paired together. Such is the case for *RDR* where this song is used to explicitly examine the detrimental effect of violence as it infects consecutive generations of a family, eventually tearing them apart and condemning them to a life of lawlessness. All of these arguments come with understanding that violence was not always the social norm in the nineteenth century American West, as a number of prominent academics have proven. As Jones and Wills have argued, "Envisioning the West as an eminently violent domain none

the less ignores a wide range of evidence that points to a more peaceful and complex

frontier experience."[112]

Ludically, violence is neither explicitly encouraged nor discouraged in the gameplay

of *RDR* or *RDR2*. However, the use of in-game mechanics, specifically the use of an honour

system that provides players with virtual rewards could be seen as a ludic attempt to

encourage violence. The implementation of this relatively simplistic "honour" system, where

resorting to a six-shooter decreases honour while resolving conflicts peacefully increases it,

creates a virtual landscape where morality is reduced to a mere attribute.[113] This creates a

world where the use of violence becomes a choice consciously made by players.[114] Through

the "honour" system, and the open-world sandbox gameplay employed in both *RDR* and

RDR2, players are given the agency to decide whether they wish to create a digital

landscape that is rife with violence and lawlessness, positing a digital recreation of the

mythical and popular culture depictions of the American West, or one that seeks to create a

more harmonious world promising a more enlightened future. This feature is present in

RDR, where players can decide whether John Marston stands by his new life as a law-

abiding, and morally rich, ranch hand hunting down former members of his gang, or returns

to the life of crime and villainy that he seems desperate to escape. This leads to the

construction of a digital landscape where seemingly the only two acceptable iterations of

the American Dream, at least in Rockstar's digital American West, are that of violence and

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[112] Jones and Wills, *The American West*, p.69
[113] Bogost, *Persuasive Games,* p.286
[114] This is a simplistic system because there is relatively little nuance to what constitutes something that is honourable or dishonourable. Violence is equated to dishonour even if it is defending yourself or others, while using money to settle disputes is seen as an honourable way to behave in the frontier West. In comparison to other games that use players decisions to impact gameplay and narrative there are countless examples that are significantly more complex than both *Red Dead Redemption* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*. For instance, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* has thousands of dialogue options that influence narrative progression and create a character that represents the dialogue choices made by players.

villainy or regeneration and the far-flung possibility of societal rehabilitation that it allegedly brings.

The players that choose to interact extensively with the honour system present in both titles of the *Red Dead Redemption* series actively play the past of America while simultaneously creating their own history within the constraints of the digital landscape.[115] As Esther Wright has argued, "While video games are not generally thought of as bastions of historical truth, they are one of the most hotly contested battlegrounds in the media today, in which people can choose to fight for their perspectives of the past."[116] The argument postulated by Wright is immediately evident in the wide-spread engagement and popularity of historical series such as *Red Dead Redemption*, the *Battlefield* series of games, and the expansive historical explorations of *Assassin's Creed* titles that have explored a plethora of different time periods. This can also be reinforced by the words of Ian Bogost who argues that, "part of the goal of such games is to challenge the notion that games cannot or do not take on a broader range of topics."[117] In *RDR* and *RDR2* players have the power to actively convey their own perspectives of the American Dream, painting a vivid, albeit virtual, picture of what they believed the concept looked like on the nineteenth-century frontier.

The perspectives offered by players can only be made within the permissible parameters placed upon them by developers while they are present within the game world. As the work of Bogost has also argued, "This is what we really do when we play videogames:

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[115] Players can choose to mostly ignore their honour level as it has no active bearing on the narrative progression of the game or its eventual outcome. However, Rockstar attempts to encourage players to interact with the system by providing benefits for either having the lowest or highest possible honour. These benefits range from impressive discounts in shops around the map, to being able to bribe lawmen to look the other way if they witness a crime being committed.
[116] Wright, '*Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Battlefield V*'
[117] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p.128

we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game's controls."[118] Exploring the possibility space of a videogame landscape comes with the realisation that these explorations are bound by constraints, not only in the rules of the digital world but also its controls. This often means that the perspectives offered by these players must fall into categories that are either explicitly or unconsciously encouraged by the inherent rules of the game. This is the case for both *RDR* and *RDR2* where violence and non-violence, two contrasting perspectives on how the American West functioned, are somewhat surprisingly rewarded in extremely similar ways. Rockstar creates an American West where violence and the death that it brings is a pursuit that comes hand-in-hand with increasingly large monetary rewards. The dollars earned from these disreputable actions can then be spent by players on more powerful and lethal weaponry as well as access to faster and more durable steeds. Interestingly, choosing to settle disputes peacefully also gives players discounts on these new weapons and more luxurious horses. This in essence amounts to the exact same rewards offered to those who employ violence. Ludically, both of these methods are simply ways to encourage players to browse the items within the game and continue to advance their character no matter what stance they have on the role that violence played within the development of the American West. Although players can consciously choose to avoid employing violence, they are still rewarded with the tools to be violent if they desire to do so. The rewards of nineteenth—century weapons include repeaters, rifles, and revolvers which encourage players to hunt and attack more powerful foes and animals, while more expensive steeds allow players to travel further and faster across the landscape. Despite this, the meaning transmitted by players onto the digital landscapes of the American West

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[118] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, p.43

manages to create a discourse between players and developers. This influences the overall

narrative of these specific games to create a shared authorship that involves the player and

the developer, "It was argued that historical gameplay involved both reading and doing and

that these dual activities mean that the historical narrative production in games always

involves shared authorship between developer-historian and player."[119] The relationship

between players and developers feels somewhat one-sided as Rockstar fully controls the

narrative progression of the game and also places restrictions on what players can

accomplish in their digital landscape. However, as Adam Chapman has argued in terms of

this relationship, "Thus, gameplay can be a dynamic historical feedback loop, an active

historical discourse between the player and developer-historian that emerges through

play."[120] The discourse between the so-called, "developer-historian", as Chapman likes to

term mainstream game developers, and the player leads to the creation of a digital

dreamscape where the history of the American Dream is constantly shaped and influenced

by the overwhelming presence of violence. Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew Elliot have explored

the access that videogames provide to historical narratives, "we see, for the first time

perhaps, that a narrative of the past – once the purview mainly of professional historians –

is now also available to everyone who wishes to play with it. Everyone."[121] Kapell and Elliot

underline the belief that popular videogames and their historical landscapes are making

history more accessible and engaging, to anyone and everyone. The narrative of the past is

becoming mainstream.

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[119] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p51
[120] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p.51
[121] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot, "Conclusion(s): Playing at True Myths, Engaging with Authentic Histories", cited in, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliot (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.367

Violence within the American Dream has at times been portrayed as a theme that has regenerative qualities. Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt dedicated much of their academic careers to discussing the concept of the frontier and through this work it is possible to explore the connections between violence and regeneration. Rejecting the notion that racial violence was a key component in the creation of the 'frontier' experience, Frederick Jackson Turner instead argued for the importance of farmers and the democratising powers of the natural wilderness. As Turner wrote of American democracy, "It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier. Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, made the democratic type of society in America while it occupied its empire."[122] Here, Turner does not acknowledge the role that violence played on the frontier or its capacity to be regenerative, not only through conflicts with Native Americans, but also the violence inflicted on nature itself through the hunting of animals and the destruction of wilderness. The free land Turner references was not an accurate observation either, "having passed into European hands only through the violent conquest of its earlier Indian owners."[123] For Turner, "The Frontier of the past appears as the place in which, once upon a time, the political and social life of a European people was transformed, morally regenerated, and given a distinctly democratic direction."[124] Turner dismisses the role of violence and does not accept that the American Dreams forged on the frontier of the American West had any significant connection with violence, instead arguing that agrarian

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[122] Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, p.143
[123] William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, "Becoming West: Toward a New Meaning for Western History", cited in, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992) p.4
[124] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp.34-35

pursuits and the democratising powers of the wilderness were more successful as regenerative themes.

The views of Turner are juxtaposed by those of Theodore Roosevelt, who viewed violence and its regenerative properties as a key determinant in the creation of a new and more progressive American civilisation. As an avid frontiersman and hunter, Roosevelt viewed violence as, "the basis of a renewal," whereby society was strengthened by a new breed of upper class Anglo-Saxon males who had been invigorated by a strenuous life of violence in the wilderness.[125] Although Turner devalued violence and the role it played in the Dreams of territorial expansion and land ownership on the frontier, Roosevelt believed that violence played a pivotal role in the development of the American West. Whereas Turner assigned the leading role in his story of the west to farmers, Roosevelt was interested in a vastly different form of frontier mythology where spiritual and secular regeneration were inextricably linked to the conquering of the "free" or "virgin land" of the wilderness and defeating the savage natives in a war of races.[126] The frontier mythology envisioned by Roosevelt resulted in an American Dream where violence between man, wilderness, and natives was glorified as a form of moral and spiritual regeneration. Although this can be seen as a way to create a new iteration of the American Dream where the role of violence is regenerative, it seems possible that Roosevelt's views were built on the premise of a racial superiority that could be, "invoked as needed to maintain divisions and enforce a social hierarchy."[127] Turner and Roosevelt saw the role of violence within the American Dream in contrasting ways. Turner sought for the role of violence to be diminished and

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[125] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p.37
[126] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p.33
[127] Bush and Bush, *Tensions in the American Dream*, p.21

replaced, while Roosevelt saw violence as a regenerative tool that on the way to establishing a social hierarchy dominated by skilled and strenuous Anglo-Saxon men.

The focused narrative-driven gameplay structure of *RDR* and *RDR2* allows Rockstar to investigate the role of violence and how it positively and negatively impacts the past, present, and future of the American Dream. It is also overwhelmingly apparent, in both *RDR* and *RDR2*, that Rockstar subscribes to the popularly held belief that the American West was, and remains, a region which was instrumental to the growth and development of the American Dream. Although the recent academic scholarship of the New Western Historians has challenged the power and influence of the American West, it is evident that the imagination of Rockstar is partially influenced by a nostalgic dream of the western past.[128] As Patricia Nelson Limerick states, "In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness."[129] In *RDR2* it is apparent that Rockstar deliberately choose to focus on the iconic dreams of westering settlers and their experiences with frontier violence. As a group, westering settlers were comprised of many races and classes of society, who decided to move across and settle in the frontier wildernesses of the American West. The concentration on this particular group by Rockstar may be because they are often considered one of the greatest examples of the American Dream, many who emigrated westward were motivated by a desire to build a better and more prosperous future for themselves and their children. In other words, they were pursuing the American Dream and

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[128] Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, Norton reprint edn (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006). See Also: *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992); Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973)
[129] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.19

were willing to give up everything they had for a chance to capture a taste of it. What is important to note here is that America was dedicated to helping people achieve their dreams. As Sarah Churchwell has recently argued when discussing America as a nation, "It was supposed to be exceptional in being a place dedicated to the proposition of helping those dreams to be realised – but the nation's dreams were meant to be exceptional, too."[130] This feeling that Churchwell synthesises in this quote can be extended to the concept of violence. In *RDR2* violence is often employed as a tool for realising dreams, a view which is definitely encouraged by Rockstar. However, at the same time an alternative argument is also presented. Violence is portrayed as a double-edged sword that is degenerative and corrupting, it may have the capacity to help realise dreams, but it is just as likely to end them. The deleterious impact of violence is shown to consequently impact the future of the American Dream, especially on the rapidly expanding outer edges of American civilisation where levels of violence are supposedly most prevalent. This is a theme that is explored throughout the entire narrative progression of *RDR2* as well as during the initial stages and epilogue of *RDR*.[131] Looking at a handful of specific scenes from missions and the use of dialogue within them, in both titles, it is possible to see how Rockstar explicitly emphasises the detrimental effects of violence. Not only in how it ultimately affects the lives of settlers and their actions, but how it becomes a disease that afflicts generations of a

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[130] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, pp.6-7

[131] Dreams and westward movement both play an instrumental part in the narrative progression of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. The game initially starts with the Van Der Linde gang moving west into the mountain wilderness to escape the clutches of pursuing government officials and potentially recapture their freedom of previous years. This dream is present continually through the entire narrative structure of the game, first through the eyes of Arthur Morgan and then John Marston who does manage to achieve the dream of freedom by purchasing and building his own ranch west of Blackwater. Ironically, the town of Blackwater that John Marston settles near is the catalyst the forces the gang to flee westward. After a failed bank robbery and ensuing shootout with local law enforcement which results in the death of a young woman and several members of the gang the unstoppable downward spiral of the Van Der Linde gang begins. Blackwater is therefore seen as a locus of federal control as well as a town slowly succumbing to the encroaching tendrils of capitalist society.

family and damages their visions of the American Dream, both in the present and the future.

The epilogue of *Red Dead Redemption 2* allows Rockstar to explore the positive and negative connotations of violence within the American Dream. After the main narrative of *RDR2* concludes, leaving the Van Der Linde gang scattered, divided, and leaderless, players are handed the reins to John Marston, the main protagonist of *RDR*. Taking control of the seasoned outlaw, players witness Marston's early attempts to overcome his outlaw past and build a better life for his wife Abigail and young son Jack. A particular mission within the epilogue, titled "Jim Milton Rides, Again?", explores the potential for violence within the American Dream to have positive and negative aspects. This mission sees players seek retribution against a neighbouring group of thugs, hired by a rich urban family looking to purchase land, who have spent much of the epilogue violently harassing Marston and his fellow ranch hands. These repeated acts of violence are later explained as attempts to force Marston's employer, the gentleman ranch owner David Geddes, to sell his establishment to a far wealthier and more influential landowner as the value of the land begins to increase and his fresh start turns rapidly stale.[132] The scenario created by Rockstar establishes a narrative where violence seemingly becomes the only viable solution. Although Marston has finally escaped the degenerative and poisonous violence of the Van Der Linde gang, it is evident that violence is still an acceptable way to solve problems between groups of settlers. However, the violence committed by Marston during this particular mission is not solely a destructive force. Rather, violence is portrayed as a behaviour that can be regenerative and protective as well as destructive. The mission initially portrays violence as

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[132] Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p.90

a positive force, as Marston is forced to defend his fellow ranch hands from being viciously

beaten by members of the aggressive Laramie gang. The theme of violence as a means of

protecting the weak is further emphasised when John gathers the remaining ranch hands,

collects his recently retired six-shooters, and heads to Hanging Dog ranch to put an end to

the Laramie gang once and for all. However, when John departs to deal with the remaining

members of the Laramie gang, the theme of violence is portrayed as overwhelmingly

destructive and negative.

Hanging Dog Ranch is a digital landscape where violence is portrayed as a destructive

force bringing death and desolation to the inhabitants of the American West. Violence

becomes personally poisonous and destructive for John Marston's American Dream, as his

decision to employ violence to dispose of the Laramie gang ultimately becomes the main

reason his wife Abigail decides to leave him. The structural design of the final part of this

mission forces players to ruthlessly dispatch every last member of the gang at Hanging Dog

ranch before the narrative is allowed to progress. The gameplay is tense and bloody, as

Marston shoots his way through the tightly packed gang hideout, butchering everyone he

encounters. This culminates in a hand-to-hand fight in a barn, where Marston confronts the

leader of the gang and mercilessly executes him. Players are given no choice during this

encounter and are forced to watch as violence wholly consumes Marston. The lack of choice

afforded during this scene emphasises the destructive and poisonous nature of violence, as

the only gameplay function players can take is to pull the trigger. As Adam Chapman has

argued, "All historical games create meaning about the past through their rules, pressures

and challenges and the values that the various historical elements are therefore

ascribed."[133] As a historical game, *RDR2* ascribes value to the theme of violence as it is such

a prevalent part of the narrative structure and the gameplay mechanics. At Hanging Dog

ranch, we see the negative aspects of violence and how they can affect the American

Dream. It ends lives, breaks families apart, and corrupts a character who is desperately

trying to break free from his previous life as an outlaw and pursue the American Dream of

land ownership by becoming a ranch owner. Violence is therefore portrayed as a destructive

and negative theme which works against the American Dream.

The degenerative influence of violence in the American Dream is portrayed by the

song used during the credits of *RDR* titled, 'Deadman's Gun'.[134] The use of music in

videogames, across both *Red Dead Redemption* titles, is to evoke emotion and force players

to think about the narrative arc of the game and the consequences of the actions taken by

the characters. Rockstar uses the song 'Deadman's Gun' to explore the consequences of

violence, which although initially written for the characters of *RDR* can also be applied to

those in *RDR2*. Looking first at *RDR*, 'Deadman's Gun' is used to explore the consequences of

violence on the Marston family. The final scene in the game sees Jack Marston hunt down

and kill the federal agent responsible for the death of his father, Edgar Ross, in a classic

western showdown. With the death of Ross, Jack avenges the death of his father but sets

himself on the path of the outlaw which John Marston repeatedly tried to escape. The lyrics

of the song describes the gunfight between Marston and Ross, "Your hand's upon a dead

man's gun, and you're / Lookin' down the sights," Contextualising these lyrics through *RDR*,

the 'dead man's gun' is John Marston's, and Jack is looking through the very same sights

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[133] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, p.72

[134] Genius, Ashtar Command – Deadman's Gun lyrics, In Genius.com [online]. 18 May 2010, [cited 28 August 20200], Available from: <https://genius.com/Ashtar-command-deadmans-gun-lyrics#about>

that his father did every time he had to take a life while riding with the Van Der Linde Gang. The unlawful violence committed by John which led to his untimely death at the hands of the federal government has corrupted Jack, who has consequently spent years seeking revenge rather than pursuing a more productive and peaceful life. Jack has no American Dream, consumed by bitterness and revenge, violence has not only destroyed his family and their American Dream, it has also irreparably damaged his future. An alternative view of 'Deadman's Gun' can be seen through the lens of *RDR2*. Using the same two lines, "Your hand's upon a dead man's gun, and you're / Lookin' down the sights," we can explore the relationship between Arthur Morgan, John Marston, and violence in *RDR2*. The 'dead man's gun' is Arthur's which is now wielded by John. Unlike his son Jack, John is not consumed by revenge, but haunted by the memories of what violence did to the Van Der Linde Gang. Once a family, a brotherhood of outlaws, they were torn apart by the violence they committed while pursuing their American Dream of land expansion. Violence is portrayed as a degenerative influence that corrupts familial bonds and every time John looks down the sights of Arthur's gun, he is reminded of this. Both *RDR* and *RDR2* use this song and their narrative arcs to indicates the destructive and degenerative influence of violence on the American Dream. Violence does not bring peace or regeneration, instead it spreads like fire, corrupting and destroying all that it touches.

Chapter 2 – *The Last of Us* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, utopia, apocalypses, nature, and the future of the American Dream

Moving on from *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the decline of the American Dream brings us to *The Last of Us* (TLOU), *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (*HZD*), and the future of the American Dream. This section will look at how *TLOU* and *HZD* view the concept of the American Dream, in both the present day of the twenty-first century, and the decades and centuries beyond where the landscape of modern America has changed in the games, almost beyond recognition. It should be made clear here that *TLOU* explores the American Dream halfway through the twenty-first century, so though it does discuss the future of the American Dream it still remains relevant to contemporary audiences. Conversely, *HZD* is set centuries in the future, so even though there are parallels and connections between *TLOU* and *HZD*, they both explore a futuristic vision of the American Dream. Despite the differences between these post-apocalyptic digital landscapes created by Naughty Dog and Guerilla Games, it is evident that some form of the American Dream is still present in the future they envision. A fluid and ever-changing concept that remains relevant in the post-apocalyptic digital landscapes of America. To provide some context on the videogames that will be discussed during this chapter a brief synopsis of both *TLOU* and *HZD* has been included following this introduction for those who are less familiar with these titles.

    TLOU is a narrative-driven title where players explore a post-apocalyptic America in the early twenty–first century, controlling Joel, a gruff middle-aged smuggler, who escorts Ellie, a teenage girl immune to the deadly cordyceps fungus, across America to find a cure and save the ailing remnants of humanity struggling to survive amidst the ruins of America. Considered by critics as one of the best games ever made, *TLOU* blends a compelling

narrative with two outstandingly written characters while also exploring the future of the

American Dream and its relationship with the natural world. *HZD* is a futuristic title set in a

post-post-apocalyptic American digital landscape where humanity has been destroyed by a

nuclear war with artificially intelligent robots initially designed to reverse the devastating

effects of environmental damage. Players control Aloy, the protagonist, through a narrative-

driven open-world adventure where they uncover the secret past of humanity and attempt

to prevent a new wave of aggressive, artificially intelligent, robots from causing another

catastrophic apocalypse. Set in an apocalyptic digital landscape, *HZD* explores the

ramifications of environmental destruction, fear of technological advancements, and the

potential problems of utopia and how these all impact a futuristic American Dream. These

two titles have been chosen specifically due to the quality of their narratological structures,

as well as how they both use the natural world within digital landscapes to comment on the

future of the American Dream and what this may look like.

Throughout American history there has been a deep fascination with destruction and

apocalypse embedded within contemporary society and popular culture. Ranging from the

prediction of a wide variety of apocalyptic events to Orson Welle's historic radio production

of *War of the Worlds* in 1938.[135] As Max Page has noted of this particular American interest,

"It has exhibited a strong apocalyptic strain that has not been hard to translate into popular

culture."[136] This interest in apocalyptic events by popular culture has been particularly

noticeable in recent years, for instance, the success of Cormac McCarthy's bleak post-

apocalyptic novel, *The Road* (2006), which received a film adaptation, as well as the long-

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[135] Max Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) p.82
[136] Page, *The City's End*, p.15

standing popularity of Robert Kirkman's apocalyptic zombie survival tale, *The Walking Dead*, both as a graphic novel and television series. This has also been the case for the medium of videogames which has seen a wide range of extremely popular post-apocalyptic titles. The most prominent example of this is the *Fallout* series which saw an initial release in 1997, and has continued to release titles regularly ever since, the most recent being *Fallout 76*, an exploration of a lush post-apocalyptic West Virginia, which debuted in late 2018. The aforementioned examples are indicative of the continued interest of American popular culture toward the theme of apocalypse. Throughout the rest of this section we will investigate how the post-apocalyptic digital landscapes of *TLOU* and *HZD* portray the future of the American Dream.

Unconquerable: Nature, humanity, and the future American Dream

Depictions of the future American Dream in post-apocalyptic digital landscapes are heavily influenced by the relationship between humanity and the natural world. *TLOU* and *HZD* investigate the future of the American Dream in digital landscapes that have been ravaged by apocalyptic events resulting in a seismic shift in how humanity and nature interact with one another. This creates digital landscapes where humanity becomes fearful of nature as urban landscapes are reclaimed and new challenges are posed that threaten the long-term survival of the human species. The relationship between humanity, the natural world, and wilderness, has been contentious ever since the Puritans landed on the shores of America. As Roderick Nash writes in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, "Prejudice against wilderness had the strength of centuries behind it and continued to influence American opinion long

after pioneering conditions disappeared."[137] Although prejudice against wilderness has

continued to endure, *TLOU* and *HZD* investigate futuristic concerns about the nature of a

post-apocalyptic wilderness that is dangerous, unknown, and unconquerable examining

how it may impact the existence of the American Dream in the future.

The portrayal of post-apocalyptic nature as unconquerable is apparent in *TLOU*

where humans are forced to re-evaluate their relationship with the natural world after the

outbreak of the cordyceps infection and the utter destruction of twenty—first century

society. The representation of nature as unconquerable and threatening creates a future

American Dream based around the theme of survivalism. Humanity is forced into tightly

protected and harshly ruled quarantine zones where the remnants of the American military

rule with unwavering authority. The infection is fungal in nature, and acts by gradually

taking over the human body, eventually controlling the host to create human-nature hybrids

which are referred to as 'infected'. As Amy Green writes, "The cordyceps fungus as it

manifests in *The Last of Us*, upends conceptions of nature as a benign entity in desperate

need of salvation."[138] Consequently, *TLOU* presents a digital landscape where the remnants

of humanity are constantly threatened by the creations of nature and are forced to pursue

an American Dream focused on survival. Players are continually reminded throughout the

narrative of the threat that nature poses, ranging from the rambling hordes of infected, to

the deadly poisonous spores that their corpses release as they decompose. This results in a

wild and unknown digital landscape that is comparable to the wilderness faced by the

Puritan pioneers, however, there is almost no possibility for wilderness and nature to be

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[137] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.43
[138] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.750

subjugated and become, "the chief source of pioneer pride."[139] Instead as Amy Green

argues, "More simply, in the conflict between human and natural worlds, the natural world

wins handily as it reclaims not only humanity but human society as well."[140] Players are

presented with a digital landscape where the natural world is unconquerable, the battle is

over before it has even begun, humanity has been brought to its knees by cordyceps and as

a result nature has thrived. Cities, a symbol of human control and domination over the

natural world, that once thrived with activity, are now overrun by plants and wildlife,

appearing, "eerily beautiful in their new, verdant form."[141] In *TLOU* wilderness and nature

exist in tandem as a constant source of danger. This is directly reinforced through gameplay,

where players travelling through the post-apocalyptic digital nature outside the relative

safety of the quarantine zones repeatedly encounter infected and are forced to fight them

off to survive. The overwhelming numbers of infected that roam the post-apocalyptic digital

landscape and the constant pressure applied to players through the threat of encounters

exacerbates the portrayal of nature as threatening and unconquerable. No matter how

many runners, clickers, and bloaters, players fight off as Joel and Ellie, there will always be

the looming threat of more.[142] Despite the representation of nature as vast and

unconquerable, *TLOU* manages to provide hope that the American Dream has a future, even

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[139] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.42

[140] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.750

[141] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.753

[142] The infected in *The Last of Us*, progress through three stages. In the first, referred to as runners, they are still recognisably human but clearly under the control of the fungus. Their basic instincts force them to hunt down and infect other hosts to help spread cordyceps as rapidly as possible. During the second stage, the "clickers" have undergone a complete physical transformation. While still partially human, their heads have been grotesquely malformed by the fungus, which has exploded beyond the initial infection point in the brain. As a result, clickers are blind and are restricted to the use of clicking sounds with their mouth as a type of sonar detection system. The final stage of this development is the "bloater", a hugely disfigured and distorted creature that sprouts fungal plates for protection all over its body.

in a desolate post-apocalyptic landscape swarming with virtual creatures intent upon taking

a bite out of anything within reach.

Although *TLOU* presents a landscape of severe dystopianism, potentially suggesting

that the American Dream is dead in contemporary America, the relationship between Joel

and Ellie and specific interactions with nature allude to the Dream having a future. *TLOU* is

introduced as a dark and dangerous digital landscape, overbearing government control in

quarantine zones, fears of establishing relationships due to the instability of life, and the

inability of America's emergency services, healthcare, and military combined to cope with

the cordyceps play on twenty-first century fears. This appears to indicate that the American

Dream is in a fragile state during the twenty-first century, and the smallest catastrophe

could send it over the edge. However, these fears are mostly present during the extremely

early stages of the narrative structure and while they are clearly threatening the future of

the Dream, the overwhelming prominence of the natural world and the constant threat of

infected humans relegates these fears to a subliminal level. The relationship that Joel and

Ellie develops amidst this chaotic landscape indicates that no matter how dire the situation,

humans will always be able to establish relationships with one another, even though Joel

and Ellie are from two completely different worlds, they manage to develop a common

language while travelling together. As Amy Green writes, "as Ellie and Joel navigate through

an area, their conversation focuses on their lives, their fears, and their thoughts about the

situation."[143] Contemporary fears give way to the pressure of the post-apocalyptic

landscape as players are assaulted time and again by zombified assailants, the greatest

threat to their Dream of survivalism is the natural world, and although players may dwell on

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[143] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.748

the parallels between *TLOU* and contemporary America, they are always drawn back into the moment and forced to focus on surviving.

The future American Dream of survival and the portrayal of the natural world as threatening are two themes also present within the digital landscape of *HZD*. In the post-apocalyptic world created by Guerilla Games, the threat of nature is constant. This is manifested during gameplay by the presence of aggressive and lethal, robotic-dinosaur, creatures that roam the lush post-apocalyptic environment of thirty-first century America. Although initially designed and built by humans, the robotic creations that players encounter while controlling Aloy, the pioneering female protagonist, have been manufactured to replace animals that were rendered extinct during an apocalyptic war between humans and artificially intelligent machines centuries before. Technological progress is complicit in creating a more dangerous natural world, an argument that has been supported by Ashton Nichols in *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism*, "Humans may eventually alter natural systems in ways that will have irrevocable and destructive effects on human life and other life on the planet."[144] *HZD* achieves this by fundamentally altering the meaning of the term 'natural' by portraying robotic creatures as animals who are an indispensable part of how the natural world of the future functions. *HZD* offers a digital landscape whereby the creations of humanity that have ultimately become infused into nature are now so threatening and out of control that one of the few Dreams they allow to be pursued in the future is that of survival.

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[144] Ashton Nichols, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbannatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p.66

The fear of the natural world that is inspired while in the presence of the robotic

creatures also links to fears surrounding technological advancement, a theme which is also

explored during the main narrative of *HZD*. Technology as a facilitator of the American

Dream can be traced back to World's Fairs held in the United States where the latest and

most exciting technological innovations were exhibited. For instance, at the 1964 New York

World's Fair, a striking documentary produced by designers Charles and Ray Eames,

"presented a world of perpetual motion powered by new technology."[145] Connections

between technology and dreams of the future could be seen across the rest of the World's

Fair that year, "New York looked to a horizon of technological mastery and prowess: a world

of space cars, automation, computers, and play."[146] The idea of technology as a facilitator

of the American Dream even extended to the sphere of politics. For instance, John

Fitzgerald Kennedy's vision of a new frontier was predicated on the ability of technology to

advance. As Wills writes, "Kennedy's frontier operated as a largely cohesive fantasy made

up of progressive white cities, space colonies, and patriotic endeavor [sic]."[147] *HZD* regards

technological progress as a part of the American Dream differently. Although technology

remains a facilitator of the Dream, unlike the hopeful visions of the World's Fair, *HZD*

instead challenges this perception, portraying technology as dangerous and unpredictable.

In the post-apocalyptic digital landscape, technology runs rampant, rather than sitting

neatly on an exhibition table in New York. The prominent fear of technology in the futuristic

world of *HZD* is rooted in contemporary worries, as Janine Tobeck and Donald Jellerson have

argued, "In our time (or on our screens), the past is very present, and this, along with rapid

technological development – particularly in the means of producing, distributing, and

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[145] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, p.21
[146] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, p.21
[147] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, p.22

tracking information – has altered our habitual vision of the future."[148] By creating a digital landscape where technology and the landscape are feared, *HZD* speaks to the past, present, and future of the American Dream. The nomadic, tribal existence of the remnants of humanity in *HZD* are representative of the past, present, and future American Dream a "simulacrum of a Native American culture," that been reimagined as shamanistic and decidedly matriarchal.[149] The four major tribes players encounter during the main narrative in *HZD*, the Nora, Oseram, Carja, and Banuk all exhibit fear of nature and technology, they are portrayed as a combination of the past, present, and future American Dream, afraid of the uncivilised wilderness, threatening robotic creatures, and the dangers of technological advancement.[150] Fear of nature and technology therefore become fundamental aspects of the future American Dream in the digital landscape created by Guerilla Games. Ultimately, *HZD* challenges conventional depictions of technology as a facilitator of the future of the American Dream. Instead, technology and nature are combined in the digital landscape of *HZD* and become aspects of the Dream to be feared, rather than ones that offer a promising vision of the future.

Discordant Harmonies: Peace within the wilderness and the future American Dream

The survival of the future American Dream is built upon establishing a harmonious relationship with the natural world. This portrayal is visible within the digital landscape of *TLOU* which emphasises the importance of establishing a peaceful relationship with nature. The visual aesthetic employed by Naughty Dog in *TLOU* underlines the importance of an

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[148] Tobeck and Jellerson, 'Caring about the Past', p.6
[149] Tobeck and Jellerson, 'Caring about the Past', p.6
[150] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.36

ecologically minded lifestyle in order to maintain a future for both humanity and the American Dream. The contrasting aesthetics are described in the following passage by Amy Green, "Everywhere that Joel and Ellie travel, a marked difference exists between the relative calm of the natural world, which has reclaimed both the vast cities and urban sprawl of human culture, and the creaking, unstable, and rusted remnants of all humanity's progress."[151] A screenshot taken from gameplay of *TLOU* highlights the contrast between the verdant, thriving nature and the rusting remains of humanity's creations.[152] In the screenshot Joel and Ellie stand atop the rusted remnants of a cluster of cars, looking at an abandoned quarantine checkpoint in the distance which was designed to help the military control the flow of refugees seeking shelter Pittsburgh. Contrasting the man-made ephemera of concrete checkpoints and rusted vehicles are overgrown vines and trees that have slowly reclaimed the roads of Pittsburgh. The overlapping presence of both humanity and nature in this screenshot is an indication of the constant battle between the two in the digital post-apocalyptic landscape of *TLOU*. In addition, it also shows that nature cannot be avoided in this new world, humanity and nature have become inseparable. Therefore, when humanity begins to rebuild and envision an American Dream of the future, nature will inevitably play a prominent role. Here the future of the American Dream is as simple as surviving, in the harsh digital landscape of *TLOU*, the dream has limited horizons. This is hinted at during the conclusion of the game when Joel and Ellie return to a small, ecologically friendly, settlement led by Tommy, Joel's brother, as they attempt to build some semblance of a "normal" life. Naughty Dog creates a world where a return to nature is the first step in establishing a positive relationship with the natural world, "as a potential

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[151] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.753
[152] IGN, *Story – The Last of Us Wiki Guide*, In ign.com [online]. Last Edited 1 July 2013, [cited 12 August 2020], Available from: <https://www.ign.com/wikis/the-last-of-us/Story> [See Appendix: Image 5]

solution to dystopia a return to nature and the utopian enclave of a life in balance with the latter."[153] The presence of a settlement ensconced within nature is not just a return to a balanced life, but a chance for the American Dream to survive, prosper, and grow. Cultivating a positive relationship with nature and learning to live in this new and dangerous world is portrayed as vital for the survival of humanity and therefore also the future of the American Dream. As Amy Green writes, "They symbolically and literally make use of their natural environment by trying to work with it, as when they restart a hydroelectric dam as a source of power. This burgeoning group of survivors, some "20 families strong" as described by Tommy, holds no illusions about reclaiming a lost world."[154] The character of Tommy is a symbol of a new and more progressive attitude towards nature which will allow the future American Dream of survival to endure. As Green argues, "Tommy reflects this attitude in his thoughts about the infection, which he says is "part of the world we live in." He and the members of his community avoid further antagonism with the natural environment and seek to construct a safe and decent community."[155] The focus on avoiding further antagonism and constructing a safe community really underlines the importance of how a positive relationship with the natural world will protect the future American Dream of survival. The future of the American Dream in *TLOU* revolves around cultivating a positive relationship with nature, no matter how wild or dangerous it may become, in order for humanity and the Dream to survive.

Establishing a harmonious relationship with nature to establish a long-term future American Dream that has the potential to flourish is a theme reflected throughout *HZD*.

[153] Gerald Farca and Charlotte Ladeveze, 'The Journey to Nature: *The Last of Us* as Critical Dystopia', *Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement if the Science of Digital Games*, Vol.13, (August 2016) p.2
[154] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.755
[155] Green, 'The Reconstruction of Morality', p.755

Whereas *TLOU* creates a digital landscape where a positive relationship with nature is being cultivated by the remnants of humanity, to protect the future American Dream of survival, *HZD* presents a more advanced version of this attitude that evidently has a future. A more idyllic, and only slightly less dystopian digital landscape than *TLOU*, Guerrilla Games' *HZD* provides a world for players where a positive relationship with nature is actively encouraged. As previously discussed, the narrative progression of *HZD* is anchored around the presence of four tribal groups that, despite their fear for the natural world and its robotic creations, still manage to live a peaceful and surprisingly environmentally conscious life within the digital world of the thirty-first century. The futuristic digital landscape designed by Guerilla Games transports players to a virtual world where appreciation of the aesthetic beauty and sublime qualities of nature, which flowered during the Romantic movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, no longer exists.[156] An appreciative attitude toward the natural world is instead established through a simple transactional relationship where players are encouraged to collect natural resources that allow them to upgrade their weapons and tools. This behaviour is also exhibited by the tribes scattered throughout the digital landscape, who use resources such as stone, wood, and animals sparingly to create settlements and structures for the purposes of protection and survival. In return, these tribes actively avoid using any form of technology from the "Old World" due to its close connection to the apocalypse, and the fear that it will corrupt and destroy their world. *HZD* is portrayed as a digital landscape where humanity survives by creating an environment that blends the natural world with an environmentally conscious civilisation in an effort to avoid an over-reliance on technology.[157] The future American

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[156] Nash, *Wilderness,* p.44
[157] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.81

Dream of survival portrayed in *HZD* is reliant on establishing a harmonious relationship with the natural world. Through direct gameplay and ludological practices, players are shown that a limited gathering of natural resources and the avoidance of aggressive robotic creatures is a vital practice to protect and maintain the future of the American Dream in the thirty-first century.

The future American Dream portrayed in *TLOU* and *HZD* is constrained by the limitations of the digital post-apocalyptic landscape. Both titles clearly indicate that the American Dream as a concept has a future, however, it is evident that the vision of this future depicted by Guerilla Games and Naughty Dog is focused on the notion that survival is the most accessible form of the dream available in the future of a post-apocalyptic world. In contrast to the digital landscape of *RDR2,* where many different forms of the American Dream are offered with varying accessibility, the post-apocalyptic landscapes of *TLOU* and *HZD* limit the possibilities available to the future American Dream. For instance, as previously examined, the pervasive presence of the natural world and the constant threat it represents creates a digital landscape where the pursuit of survival is imperative, ultimately becoming the only possible version of the future American Dream to be pursued. This is the case for *TLOU* and *HZD* where narrative structure and gameplay are predominantly dictated by violent encounters in a nature setting. This perpetuates imagery often associated with colonial America that captured, "man and wilderness locked in mortal combat."[158] Therefore, players are bombarded with images and gameplay decisions that make the American Dream of survival appear as the only legitimate option. A feeling which is further exacerbated due to the fact that the protagonist(s) of *TLOU*, Joel and Ellie, and *HZD*, Aloy,

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[158] Nash, *Wilderness*, p.27

spend the entire narrative arc constantly struggling to survive. The focus on survival in *HZD* has been noted by Janine Tobeck and Donald Jellerson who argue that, "Playing the game does not promise to reverse the apocalypse; rather, it demands and justifies a seeker who uncovers the past and finds a way to use that knowledge to survive and retain her humanity."[159] Tobeck and Jellerson admit the futility of trying to recover the pre-apocalypse landscape, the futuristic America of *HZD* is markedly changed and instead the focus of gameplay mechanics and narrative is employing knowledge to survive and retain humanity, two key aspects of the future American Dream. Although it could be argued that the idea of survival is not enough to be an American Dream, the harshness and limitations of post-apocalyptic landscapes paint it as the only rational pursuit in such a world. Survival is an imperative in allowing for dreams to even take place, therefore, it is more than enough to be considered an American Dream of the future. Even Though there is a clear future for the American Dream, it is evident that the post-apocalyptic digital landscapes of *TLOU* and *HZD* restrict the scope of the future American Dream to focus primarily on the survival of humanity.

Visions of the future: How *HZD* and *TLOU* critique utopia and the American Dream

TLOU and *HZD* create complicated and critical visions for the future of the American Dream. The digital landscapes of both titles provide commentary and criticism on the present and future of the American Dream. It should be noted here that for the purpose of this section, utopia is regarded as a realisation of the American Dream, therefore they should be regarded as similar concepts. The medium of videogames provides an accessible and

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[159] Tobeck and Jellerson, 'Caring about the Past', p.17

interactive platform to contemplate and critique visions of the past, present, and future

American Dream. Prior to the popularity and quality of modern videogames, there are two

academic works which must be mentioned when discussing criticisms of the American

Dream and utopia. The first is the ground-breaking work of Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*. One

of the most influential books of the twentieth century, Carson's *Silent Spring* detailed the

irreparable damage that humans were inflicting upon the natural environment through their

use of highly toxic chemical pesticides.[160] Carson discussed how the use of pesticides and

radioactive substances during the 1960s in pursuit of utopia in post-war America was

causing lasting damage to humanity and the natural world. As Carson argued, "Some would-

be architects of our future look toward a time when it will be possible to alter the human

germ plasm by design. But we may easily be doing so now by inadvertence, for many

chemicals, like radiation, bring about gene mutations."[161] Attempts to construct a utopian

society in America by revolutionising food production and pest control after the horrors of

the second World War was ultimately damaging to humanity and nature. Carson critiqued

attempts to swiftly modernise and improve upon tried and tested techniques, untested

technologies and practices were employed with a carefree attitude and the first chapter in

Silent Spring cautions against these methods, "A grim specter has crept upon us almost

unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall

know."[162] Another work during the twentieth century that explored contemporary anxieties

and issues with the American Dream and utopia was *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich

which detailed the devastating damage that overpopulation would have upon the planet.[163]

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[160] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 40th Anniversary edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002)
[161] Carson, *Silent Spring*, p.7
[162] Carson, *Silent Spring*, p.3
[163] Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971)

The future imagined by Ehrlich was not a utopia where the Dream was realised; rather, it was a dystopian nightmare where technological improvements designed by humanity would artificially prolong lifespans to the point that overpopulation and overcrowding would become uncontrollable.

The digital landscapes of *TLOU* and *HZD* critique misguided attempts to achieve a new society at the cost of utopia and the American Dream. During the main narrative of *TLOU* players infrequently clash with a faction known as the, "Fireflies". A militant group of post-apocalyptic survivors, the Fireflies intend to create a cure for the cordyceps virus and control the ensuing ruins of society. However, *TLOU* emphasises the various issues with this vision of the future and how it has negatively impacted the future American Dream. For example, the aggressively militant structure of the Fireflies removes any possibility for individual identity or freedom of choice. This is emphasised during one particular section during the final sequence of the game. Players control Joel as he fights his way through a Firefly controlled hospital in the midst of Salt Lake City searching for Ellie. While travelling through the confines of the building, the muted colour palette, and the repetitive dwellings of the Firefly 'soldiers' underline the facelessness of the majority of the Fireflies. Although the intentions of the Fireflies may have originally been good, early in the game they are posited as a foil to the despotic and violent military groups who control quarantine zones, it is evident that the digital post-apocalyptic landscape has affected them, to the point that they sacrifice everything, including key aspects of utopianism and the American Dream, such as freedom of choice, in order to further their own agenda. The criticism can also be extended to the moralistic decisions that the Fireflies make in pursuit of their vision for the future. This is evidenced in the Fireflies treatment of Ellie throughout the narrative. Whereas Joel, and therefore the player, are encouraged through a series of emotionally

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visceral moments to view Ellie as a daughter, a unique individual with dreams and aspirations who has developed an immunity to the cordyceps fungus, the Fireflies see Ellie as a means to an end. By linking curing the cordyceps to the attainment of utopia, the Fireflies portray Ellie as a fascinating specimen to be examined and dissected in order to learn as much about the virus as possible, consequently she is routinely and surgically dehumanised. Ellie's immunity to the cordyceps fungus makes her a representation of the future of the American Dream, she represents a new wave of humanity that will be able to live in the post-apocalyptic digital landscape. This is especially notable as it is revealed during the conclusion of the narrative that the Fireflies are unsure whether the genetic mutation present in Ellie will ultimately be successful in creating a vaccine. The Fireflies dehumanisation of Ellie in *TLOU* indicates that they are willing to sacrifice anyone and anything, including a representation of the future American Dream, in order to achieve their own goals. Although it can be argued that the leader of the Fireflies, Marlene, does show empathy for Ellie as she was close with her mother, the realisation that the virtual representation of the future American Dream must be sacrificed for a particular vision of the future is a damning criticism of how in the digital landscape of *TLOU* it is clearly detrimental to utopianism and the American Dream.

Criticisms of utopia and its influence upon the American Dream can be found in *HZD*. The narrative structure of the game revolves around players gradually discovering how the 'Old Ones', humanity that existed prior to the global apocalypse, brought about their own demise in search of the creation of a global utopia. As players are shown through a series of in-game artifacts, in the form of holographic recordings, the America envisioned by Guerilla Games in *HZD* has continued to struggle with the consequences of environmental degradation after the twenty-first century. In an effort to create a global utopia and repair

the rapidly degrading natural world, America designs artificially intelligent robots capable of this task. The American Dream portrayed here is a recognisable one; humanity attempts to repair the extensive damage they have caused to nature to prolong their own dream of survival. However, the pursuit of this American Dream is overtaken by another, one that prioritises economic gain, a future Rachel Carson cautioned against, "An era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged."[164] The artificially intelligent robots initially designed to repair nature are harnessed for economic gain, ultimately becoming an American tool of war, one that decides humanity is the greatest threat to the planet and must be exterminated. As players uncover this story during the game, it is made implicitly clear that although the desire for a global utopia, free from the threat of natural disasters, was not the direct cause of the apocalypse, it indirectly created the technology responsible. This therefore creates a connection between the criticism of utopia and fear of technological progress, as when paired together they have almost entirely decimated the future of the American Dream in the digital landscape of *HZD*. This furthers an assumption that William Katerberg has argued for, that in the future humanity's destiny, "is not to redeem its sins or transcend its flaws. History only leads to destruction."[165] This is certainly the case for *HZD* as the unearthing of history leads to the destruction of the landscape of the future. Misguided utopian visions are portrayed as destructive and dangerous, not only for humanity, but also for the future of the American Dream. The digital landscape of *HZD* paints the efforts to strive for utopia as a contributing factor as to why the 'Old Ones' no longer exist. *HZD* represents a digital landscape whereby

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[164] Carson, *Silent Spring*, p.13
[165] Katerberg, *Future West*, p.158

reaching for the perfection of utopia in the past compromised the future of the American

Dream.

HZD and TLOU boast digital landscapes full of complexity, however, they both

portray the future of the American Dream as an uncertain one. Fear of technological

progress, nuanced relationships with the natural world, and criticisms of utopianism lead to

a digital landscape where the future American Dream is simplified and constrained. Reliance

on the American Dream of survival is evident as both TLOU and HZD lean heavily on the

notion that any post-apocalyptic future will revolve around the human desire to survive,

rather than own land or move westward to start a new life. The apocalyptic worlds of TLOU

and HZD leave no room for the dreams to exist.

Conclusion – 'More ghosts than people', the decline of the American Dream

The power and influence of the American Dream has declined, and its future remains unclear. *RDR2* and Rockstar created a sublime re-imagining of the American West, packed with nuance, complexity, and an American Dream initially full of possibility and hope. Players experience a world where choices at first seem abundant and the digital American landscape at the end of the nineteenth-century is presented as one where many can succeed and build a life for themselves. Of course, this is not the same world experienced by those who are not white, or male, that world is harsher, less forgiving, and the American Dream feels more like a mythological construction designed to keep hope from being extinguished. As Arthur Morgan, the protagonist of *RDR2*, says when speaking of the future of the outlaw, "we're more ghosts then people," and so it seems is the American Dream to some, a ghostly set of ideals that can never truly be obtained.[166] Rockstar's portrayal of the historic American Dream within the digital landscape of *RDR* and *RDR2* also touches on the role of violence and how its degenerative influence is conveyed to players through a variety of ludic methods. *RDR2* is a masterpiece of a videogame, complicated and nuanced, players can experience the virtual Wild West and play their own version of history. Rockstar should be commended for how they have challenged the historically ethnocentric views of the American West, providing a canvas where Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexicans all play a part in the pursuit of the American Dream. Ultimately, *RDR2* is a game that highlights a turning point for the American Dream, a decline that seems almost inevitable. Characters yearn for simpler times and players watch as the apparent freedom of

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[166] Rockstar Games Production, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018

the American West is suffocated. The Dream is past its heyday, and Rockstar created a digital landscape that reflects this. While there are still sparks of hope, such as John Marston purchasing and building his own idyllic homestead, this is juxtaposed by the plight of Native Americans and the suffering they endure at the hands of those pursuing the American Dream. *RDR2* is a raw and powerful examination of the failures of the American Dream, the violence and exclusion that it promoted, and ultimately the corruption that it engendered in the humans who chased after it, "The facts are vastly less heroic than the myths America tells itself, and the world."[167]

Turning to *TLOU* and *HZD* we have two fantastic games that explore the future of the American Dream and critique and challenge the future of the concept. Both titles extensively explore the role that nature and technology play in the future of the Dream, arguing that although it has declined since the nineteenth century, it still has a part to play in the centuries to come. The natural world is a defining feature in both games, providing players with a virtual landscape where nature and violence restrict access to the American Dream and promote a theme of survivalism. Even though the Dream is present in the digital landscapes of the future, it is constrained and constricted, a concept brought to its knees by the passing of time and its anachronistic origins. The Dream in *TLOU* and *HZD* is driven by the theme of survival, the post-apocalyptic landscapes envisioned by Naughty Dog and Guerilla Games leaves no room for an expansive future for the American Dream. Instead, the concept has declined even more since the days of the Wild West and the outlaw. Players witness landscapes overrun with violent creatures and a crippling fear of technological progress. The virtual landscapes of the future offer no respite for the Dream, but it still

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[167] Churchwell, *Behold, America*, p.305

exists. Clinging to the shreds of humanity, *TLOU* and *HZD* offer a bleak look at the future of the American Dream.

How does 'play' change the criticism of the American Dream in the digital landscapes of videogames? An apt question considering that these games are played by a diverse range of people of various genders and ages across the entire world. For one, players will all interact with *RDR2*, *TLOU*, and *HZD* in extremely different ways, taking meaning from the narratives and the main themes based on their own experiences as a gamer. What this thesis has confirmed is that the depth and quality of modern videogames is at a level that has never been seen before, the graphical fidelity and the quality of writing have allowed modern developers to reach new heights that must be applauded. Going forward, games must begin to encourage their players to reflect on their experiences and fully immerse themselves in the digital landscapes to understand and appreciate the nuanced stories that are being told. Even so, videogames set themselves apart from their filmic counterparts by allowing their audiences to actively engage with their narratives, rather than passively watching events unfold. As gamers must learn to critically appraise and engage with the complex topics addressed by games, academics must also be willing to move in this direction. Historic films are criticised and appraised for their various merits, games such as *RDR2* should be afforded this level of scrutiny and it is heartening to see in recent years that this attitude is starting to be adopted. Recent books, such as *Gamer Nation* (2019) by John Wills understands and appreciates the long-term influence that games and 'play' have had on American culture, underlining how essential and embedded gaming as a habit is. Games are a vital part of modern society, they represent a level of engagement, immersion, and interaction that cannot be equalled.

The American Dream is more ghost than person, more passing thought than cultural mainstay. Videogames such as *RDR2* encourage and allow exploration of the historical past of the Dream, critiquing its shortcomings while allowing celebration of its successes. The Dream today is a concept that will undoubtedly continue to endure, and the digital landscapes of *TLOU* and *HZD* are an intriguing glance at the future of the Dream. Do they think it will survive? Yes, but in an even more ghostly form than the one that exists now, constrained and bound beyond recognition. Whether videogames have managed to accurately depict the gradual decline of the American Dream in the future, only time will tell.

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Appendix

Image 1:

Image 2:

Image 3:

Image 4:

Image 5: