**Mechanisms of Time in the Video Game Western from *Gun Fight* to *Red Dead Redemption 2***

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Abstract:

This article explores the video game Western and its relationship with ideas of temporality surrounding the American West. The fledgling video game industry first put ‘Cowboys and Indians’ on arcade screens in the 1970s, creating a playable digital West for gamers. Content and aesthetics proved decidedly simple, with game worlds reliant on prior filmic presentations. By the 2000s, thanks largely to technological advances, video game Westerns began to offer quantifiable depth and complexity, with Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead Redemption* series (2004-2018) a leading example. The video game Western represents the next technological as well as cultural representation of the ‘Wild West’ in all its complexities. In this article, I explore how both old and new video game Westerns have toyed with notions of ‘time’ and how we experience ‘the frontier’ a century on from the lived historic period. I argue that games not only invite players to (re)visit a distinctive ‘frontier time,’ but, by their coding and mechanics, actively encourage players to subvert the temporal flow of Western history onscreen, and even disrupt the West’s larger cultural meaning.

Keywords:

Western, Videogames, Temporality, *Red Dead Redemption*, Rockstar Games, Western history

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From dime novels and pulp fiction, through to stage shows and radio shows, and later cinema, consecutive entertainment media has manufactured a story of the West mythic in tone and violent in substance. The video game signifies the latest technology to package ‘the West’ into popular entertainment and secure its cultural survival. Often exploiting cinematic tropes, the video game Western in many ways pays homage to its media ancestors and preserves and extends the Western genre. With over 50 million copies sold of Rockstar’s *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), video games also introduce the old frontier to a new audience.

How far does the video game alter the Western paradigm? While past media platforms molded the West into a narrative for passive consumption - something watched, read, and listened to - the video game is by design an interactive format open to agency, input, and negotiation. Game mechanics transform the frontier into a digital playground whereby the audience becomes active participant. Games thus recode the West around player perspective, granting the frontier a new malleability and fluidity. With their focus on participation and ludic mechanics, video games have the potential to disrupt the Western genre as much as maintain it. Reminiscent of Americans heading westwards in the 1840s, players take control of the horse reins and the wagon trains in an unfolding frontier drama.

Scholarly work on understanding this digital West, of critiquing the video game Western, remains sparse, mostly framed around cataloguing titles, connecting the new media with cinema, and dissecting issues surrounding themes of realism, gender politics and authenticity in Rockstar’s *Red Dead Redemption* series (Buel 2013; Heikkinen & Reunanen 2015; Wills 2008; Wright 2021; Wills & Wright 2023). A range of concepts have yet to be fully dissected. This article explores the video game Western from a specific angle: the relationship of the digital West to the concept of time.

In a sense, the historic frontier is fundamentallyabout time as much as it is about movement. The nineteenth-century westerly experience is marked by (at least in the popular imagination) mineral rushes and cattle stampedes, boom towns and ghost towns, quick draw duels and the split-second roll of dice, and catastrophic, sudden losses of wildlife and people (see Aquila 1998; Johnson 1996). If a six-month journey across arduous terrain can be quantified a ‘race,’ then traversing the Oregon Trail in the 1840s signified one of epic proportions. As Dr Marcus Whitman, an emigrant on the trail, explained, “travel, *travel*, TRAVEL – nothing else will take you to the end of your journey; nothing is wise that does not help you along, nothing is good for you that causes a moment’s delay” (Applegate 1868: 132). Westward migration proved a temporal as much as a geographical event.

This sense of significance surrounding time re-emerges in the video game Western but translated through distinctive game mechanics such as ‘dead eye,’ slow-motion, countdown clocks, and timed stages (or what might collectively be called temporal mechanics). Compared to the West of dime novels, radio shows, and Hollywood movies, video games stress ‘time’ as something to keep track of *and* something that the audience (or player) directly engages with, whether being ‘up against the clock’ or working to extend play. The story of the West is no longer temporally fixed, but a narrative that the player can mold, influence, and revise in the present day. This article explores some of the notions and mechanisms of time in the digital West. It ultimately argues that the video game Western, while preserving the frontier West in collective memory, consistently reminds the player of its ephemeral nature, while game mechanics work to upend and disrupt traditional concepts of frontier time.

*Approaching Time in the Entertainment West*

Approaching ‘time’ in the video game Western reveals several complexities. The first is what we understand by the concept of time and how we relate to it. In her work on time in motion pictures, Helen Powell notes the difficulty of relying on the clock, a mechanical, rational, and consistent measurement device, for ‘our concept’ of time, when for most, time appears fluid and marked by personal experience. For Powell, the clock falls short as a perfect tool as it “does not represent or communicate its [time’s] experiential dimension” (2). Put simply, it marks time, but not its meaning. Powell reveals how with conventional film, talk of the concept of chronological time refers to a minimum of three distinct points linked with an individual movie: its time of production, the ‘time’ it is set in, as well as the time it is watched by an audience. These notions of chronology are important; they also sit alongside more technical elements regarding the cinematic experience, such as a movie’s running time, the pacing of individual scenes, and camera effects such as slow-motion.

In terms of video games, concepts of time borrow much from prior media. Like film, games have a time of production, often (but not always) a chronological time that they present (a ‘fictive time’), and a time given to audience engagement. Unlike movies, engagement takes the form of participation that can last just a few minutes (such as playing an arcade game), or can spread across weeks, even months (with games rarely conforming to a set length, as with a two-hour movie). As Jose Zagal and Michael Mateas point out, game-world time can diverge from real time, for example, by games having their own day-night cycle, or by their reliance on timed turns or events, much like a game of chess (Zagal and Mateas call this aspect “coordination time” (849-50)). Alongside their function as “a spatial medium” designed around player discovery, Alison Gazzard asserts that, “videogames are a time-based medium,” with many “game reward systems” time dependent. Time in video games further links with all kinds of game mechanics from ‘fast travel’ to ‘slow motion’ to the common aim to ‘beat the clock,’ highlighting the complex relationship between game play and temporal experience (see Juul 2004; Elverdam & Aarseth 2007; Tychsen & Hitchens 2009).

In terms of the West, the concept of ‘time’ exudes cultural significance (Nash 1980). While the American West is a recognizable geographical expanse in existence for millennia, its sense of identity in popular culture revolves around a specific timeframe, the mid- to late-nineteenth century. This chronological period - one marked by Euro-American westward expansion - boundaries the West, classically at one end with the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and Lewis and Clark Expedition (1803-6), and at the other, the 1890 Census and the official closure of ‘the frontier.’ The boundaries are arbitrary and make little sense for indigenous inhabitants or wildlife, but they do cement ‘the West’ as an almost temporal condition.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ideas about time also shaped direct experience of the nineteenth-century frontier. A sense of manufactured urgency propelled migrants westward during the pivotal decades. The language of mineral *rushes* in the West, and the promise of instant rewards, motivated Easterners to embark on new journeys. A sense of urgency drove homesteaders to competitively lay claim to ‘new’ lands courtesy of the Homestead Act (1862). Manifest Destiny extolled a sense of national mission, but one highly dependent on organized exploration and conquest, of stepping in time with Lady Liberty on her own journey west (as if acting out John Gast’s painting *American Progress* (1872)). From ‘boom and bust’ towns to accounts at Dodge City of shooting “a man for breakfast,” temporality marked myriad endeavors (Vestal 1972: 18). ‘Time’ also tested many travelers. The diaries of overland pioneers relate monotonous journeys - of time passing too slowly – on the wagon trail west, sometimes critically as weeks passed and supplies ran out (Schlissel 1982; Faragher 2001). Heading towards the close of the century, enthusiasm over the Western endeavor gave way to anxiety over diminishing resources, and time seemed to be running out for the frontier. The scale of change underlined the temporal condition. Bison, wolves, passenger pigeons all departed. Talk of the sudden loss of wilderness galvanized radical ideas of protection. Such a variety of Western sensations of time highlighted exactly the broader point Powell makes over time in film - that time is an experiential thing.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Entertainment culture about the West equally emphasizes a time factor. Much of the embryonic entertainment culture of the West that circulated in the nineteenth century defined the region as a space of ‘action’ marked by temporal urgency. Buffalo Bill Wild West shows, replete with galloping horses and rifle fire, provided breakneck storytelling of the West, and celebrated the momentum of conquering. Produced primarily for working class consumption, and written at speed, dime novels dropped character detail in preference for action, exaggerating the dramatic tempo of the West in stories such as Prentiss Ingraham’s *Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot, or Dagger Don’s Double* (1882) or Edward Wheeler’s *Deadwood Dick in Leadville* (1885). Both stage shows and dime novels related stories of the West marked by startling brevity, compressing history and folklore into easy reads and quickfire tales. They also constructed simple binaries of heroes and villains, with the heroes marked by their ability to dictate the tempo of events, and fire quicker than any enemy. At least in these examples, Western ‘time’ emerges as a series of action set-pieces, often cobbled together and lacking coherence.

The Hollywood Western continued this sense of time in the West as a series of compressed, episodic action sequences. Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) presented the West as fourteen distinct ‘scenes’ or ‘episodes’ spliced together to create a relatively cohesive story. The subject matter - a moving train being robbed - alongside images of horses and gunfire - foregrounded the ‘motion’ aspect in this early motion picture. Meanwhile, the absence of static scenes, dialogue, or pauses between set-pieces, underlined the speed of time in the West, with everything happening almost too quickly.

The pacing of *The Great Train Robbery* set the tone for a slew of Westerns that prioritized action, and in turn, developed a quantifiable sense of ‘Western time.’ Film directors focused on the motion of wagon trains, rail cars, and cattle drives. They created the pivotal final act of the Western as a downtown duel and encouraged audiences to fixate on the almost-mythic reaction times of celluloid gunfighters (see Simmon 2004; Bandy & Stoehr 2012; Slotkin 1992).

As film technology progressed, the opportunities to play with sensations of time and motion continued to increase. Longer running times afforded different pacing and scene setting, while the advent of sound and technicolor amplified immersion. Directed by Fred Zinnemann, *High Noon* (1952) consciously reminded the viewer of the significance of ‘time’ in the West by the movie playing (and being shot) in real time, clocks around the filmset saloon ticking down to an unavoidable duel between town marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) and outlaw Frank Miller (Ian McDonald). ‘Western time’ equally grew to encompass moments of expansiveness, with lingering camera shots of majestic landscapes such as Monument Valley common in John Ford’s Westerns. Directors experimented with slower, more meandering pacing. Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), with its leisurely camera work, created a sense of the frontier as a place where sometimes nothing happened, the imperceptible growth of the desert matched by an absence of human activity, with the film’s 166 minutes running time testing audience patience. Rather than working against compressed, quick-draw moments, such ‘slow time’ often worked to build tension and frame action-based finales. The significance of time in the West thus seemed very much connected to notions of impending conflict.

Rehashing prior entertainment media, film also seemed very much obsessed with the notion of the frontier ending. In George Steven’s *Shane* (1953), Alan Ladd’s gunfighter turned ranch-hand is a man trying to hide (and turn his back on) the past, with a sense of knowing that the gunfighter is doomed (McGee 2007). Like Frederick Jackson Turner’s lament for the closure of the frontier delivered to historians in 1893, Westerns of the mid-twentieth century romanticized the frontier by emphasizing its loss and fostering broader anxiety of ‘time running out’ (Turner 1962).

*The Quick Draw of the Arcade Western*

As the Hollywood Western faded in the 1970s, the video game Western emerged, arguably in its place. The video game Western initially replicated traditional narratives of the West, the new media largely regurgitating old frontier stories. Games nonetheless diverged from the classic experience of the West by their play mechanics, in the process disrupting traditional ways of engaging with the frontier myth. One of the first educational computer games, *The Oregon Trail* (1971), provided “a simulation model” of the frontier whereby players managed money, provisions, and wagon wheel repairs in a text-based adventure, with the six-month long journey compressed into around five minutes of play, or a dozen or so inputs (Rawitsch 2018). Across that (albeit small) timeframe, players assumed control of the action, making critical choices over resources that determined narrative outcome. The digital West in this way facilitated a new experience of genre.

This immersive aspect included a distinctive sense of time. Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga introduced the concept of the ‘magic circle’ in the 1930s to describe the world of play, a boundaried realm with its own rules and characteristics. Although Huizinga failed to make the connection, his concept of the ‘magic circle’ beautifully described kids playing cowboys and Indians in playgrounds, with the boundaried imaginary of the West itself a kind of ‘circle’ of mass belief extending beyond notions of play. For Huizinga, ‘magic circles’ featured a restrictive time dynamic. Servicing society’s “free time,” they existed only as a “temporary world,” and lacked permanence, but, in their favor, could still be revisited, in theory “repeated at any time” (Huizinga 1944 [1938]: 8, 11, 10). Applied to the digital era, Huizinga’s ideas seemed to capture the heightened immersion offered by video games.

Whereas previously ‘time’ in the entertainment West appeared limited to real-life performance schedules of Wild West shows, the running times of self-contained movies, or the time taken to read dime novel pages, video games presented the potential to experience ‘Western time’ on a more flexible and expansive level. The frontier narrative no longer seemed finite or a closed book, but open to renegotiation, especially by the player. Formerly demarcated boundaries of ‘frontier time’ re-emerged in video games as malleable and fluid, dependent not so much on directorial control, more on an individual’s desire for play. The ‘time’ of the West thus potentially had a new controller, one with the power to disrupt traditional notions of Western chronology.

Western time also seemed more alive and present. When depicted in literature and film, the historic West appeared naturally past tense, the audience ‘watching’ something that on many levels had already happened. With the video game Western, the historic frontier appeared alive, with its fate uncertain and open to (re)shaping by the player. This sense of being ‘alive’ in the West disrupted the core idea of the frontier as permanently closed and lost. Gazing across a digitally framed wilderness expanse, players reopened ‘the frontier’ as new intrepid explorers.

Aside from *The Oregon Trail*, most early video games focused on one specific temporal moment of the frontier. They homed in on the downtown duel. A matter of life and death, and the denouement of countless Hollywood Westerns, the duel served as the focal point of Western-themed arcade games. One of the first arcade machines to feature a microprocessor (an Intel 8080), Midway’s *Gun Fight* (1975) set the tone of this new digital West. An adapted version of the Japanese arcade machine *Western Gun*, Midway’s title introduced many Americans to video games. Conceptualizing the West as a simple act of two cowboys facing off and firing at each other*, Gun Fight* required no introduction nor back story. People approached the machine already knowing the story of the West, and thus, in turn, instinctively knew what to do in the game. The familiarity of the Western genre thus eased players into the unfamiliar realm of digital entertainment, and the first video games in turn perpetuated the myth of the frontier showdown (Wills 2019: 1-3).

*Gun Fight* nonetheless disrupted the traditional flow of events that traditionally led up to the downtown duel. Dime novels, radio shows, and Hollywood Westerns had collectively established ‘time’ in the West as a mixture of cowboy drawl and cattle drives, with escalating moments of tension and confrontation, often leading towards a violent end spectacle. *Gun Fight* recoded the West solely around the final moment, deleting all time before it. In the process, the West lost its longer narrative, its character development, and even any sense of anticipation, but kept its epic final few seconds. Games reduced the temporal diversity of the West and exaggerated and repeated just one moment in time.

Despite the wholesale deletion, players largely welcomed the temporal shift. The highly anticipated denouement of Hollywood Westerns - the downtown gunfight - could now be directly experienced by the player without any waiting. Drawing on established Western mythology, players likely imagined themselves as famous gunfighters including Billy the Kidd and the Man with No Name (Clint Eastwood), as they took control of their arcade cowboys. Where once vaudeville spectators watched powerlessly as the outlaw (Justus D. Barnes) in *The Great Train Robbery* faced them on screen and fired (some ducked behind chairs), now gamers had the chance to face the villain and shoot back.

The ‘quick draw’ moment of *Gun Fight* interfaced perfectly with early video game culture. Western mythos married with arcade ways. Accustomed to five-minute plays, fast reaction times, and high kill tallies, arcade players welcomed a simulation of the historic frontier focused on action and speed. They faced off dual foes of the deadly gunfighter and a ticking game clock, both threatening to end the game early. Similar to their defense of planet Earth from aliens in Taito’s *Space Invaders* (1978), gamers embraced a sense of ‘lasting as long as possible’ in defending frontier towns from villains. At home too, players fought off waves of incoming outlaws, as in Ocean Software’s *High Noon* (1984) for the Commodore 64 computer, an adaptation of the 1950’s movie (and featuring a digital rendition of David Dunn’s film soundtrack).

Games also played with the speed of the ‘quick draw’ motion itself. As artificial, programmed experiences, video game Westerns had the potential to defy laws of motion and concepts of time, with programmers finding in the latter a particularly useful game mechanic. Time could be consciously slowed down or sped up, although most arcade companies chose the latter. Foes, bullets, and tomahawks all moved quicker and quicker in arcade titles, especially the more the player progressed across levels. Nintendo’s *Sheriff* (1979), an overhead shooter, situated the player as heroic gunfighter Mr. Jack in the centre of a town with bandits approaching from all sides. Successive waves of outlaws moved quicker and quicker, forcing the player to respond with superior reaction times. Western time morphed into a ludic mechanism to test player skill and resolve, as well as a means by which to control and measure player progress. Game events often became more frenzied, overwhelming, and out of tempo with the real world. Body counts in arcade Westerns exceeded the annual tallies of homicides in the most violent of Western towns including Dodge City. With pixel bullets flying everywhere, some players struggled to gain any sense of control over the frontier, ending up victims to the speed of action.

Within early arcade games, time in the form of the quick draw also became something constantly repeated. Unlike a dime novel or Hollywood Western designed to be consumed at best a few times, video games functioned by a fundamentally different logic: that of repetitious play. In *Gun Fight* players revisited the same cycle of a downtown shootout hundreds of times. Aside from minor differences of positioning or who shot first, the ludic experience remained essentially the same. The face-off, and with it, the ‘Western moment’ returned again and again in a seemingly endless loop. That players embraced the repetition highlighted the ‘re-playability’ of the West - of a story, and a time, never truly over. This latter aspect granted the historic frontier a groundhog-day quality; of rather than being a finite period completed in 1890, the frontier appeared a ‘moment’ always available to repeat and revisit.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Early arcade games further played with the linearity of time by dividing ‘the West’ into bitesize chunks of history to choose from. Exidy’s *Cheyenne* (1984) presented the American frontier as a series of ‘hanging pictures’ to shoot at, that in turn revealed quintessentially Western moments to navigate, from defending a wagon train to fighting in a saloon. Each ludic stage typically lasted less than a minute to complete, or for the average player, facing an onslaught of bullets, likely only a few seconds before ludic death. *Cheyenne* packaged the West into a range of tightly orchestrated and timed excursions. The ability to ‘shoot’ different landscape paintings, and thus enter different ‘historic scenes,’ presented the region as a ‘choose your own adventure.’ Audiences to a degree created their ‘own West’ to play. Rather than a single timeline, the historic frontier emerged as a series of unconnected moments and vignettes. This non-linearity challenged assumptions of the West as a unified mission and a grand narrative, clashing with Hollywood Westerns that dramatized Manifest Destiny and heroic purpose. *Cheyenne* seemed altogether closer to a postmodern West marked by self-conscious imagery and deconstruction.

*Ticking Clocks and Time Running Out*

Along with fast draw moments of action, and mechanisms of acceleration and repetition, time also featured in the arcade Western in the traditional form of clocks. Arcade machines, focused on making profit from play, often featured digital clocks onscreen to impart ever-decreasing play time and to inform the player how many minutes remained (with additional time won by player success, or more often, additional coinage). Digital clocks charted narrative and ludic progress, with extra time a solid indicator of success. Displays of time thus played a central role in the arcade experience. The video game Western, as part of this culture, relied on the play clock, a visual and dynamic relator of ‘time past.’

The clock in arcade Westerns related time spent or left in the digital West and the temporal boundaries of the ‘magic circle.’ The presence of clocks granted Western games a sense of urgency, with a countdown to zero a register of the frontier’s end, and an inducement to panic. While far from the subjugated working classes laboring before the assembly line clock in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), gamers still had one eye on time clocks that dictated their freedom. Several Western-based titles, including Sega’s *Bank Panic* (1984) and Konami’s *Iron Horse* (1985), featured time bars that counted down game time, with *Bank Panic* additionally featuring a cuckoo clock that measured player response times to shooting villains. The implication of events happening in ‘real time,’ set against the clock, triggered adrenalin rushes and stress. The presence of in-game clocks also recalled time ticking down in Zinnemann’s *High Noon*. Like in the 1950’s movie, where clocks “create not only an inordinate sense of foreboding but also function as temporal indicators to the audience in terms of the unfolding of narrative progression,” arcade Westerns employed clocks to denote both pressure and progress combined (Powell 2012: 24).

The clocks counting down to zero imparted a bigger message regarding time in the West. As time decreased, so too did the frontier appear closer to its closure, with games again touching on one of the most powerful of frontier myths. In ludic terms, the sense of ‘time running out for the West’ often connected with the fate of the individual player’s character. Assuming control of a gun-toting cowboy in the scrolling action title *Gun.Smoke* (1985), survival for as long as possible proved the simple aim of the game. Using an overhead perspective, players navigated a series of Western locales, including a downtown, a railroad, a river crossing, and a desert, all infiltrated by foes. The difficulty of the game increased by the speed and spread of projectiles (from ninja stars to dynamite) that headed in the player’s direction, while the player in turn relied on fast reaction times and speedy movement (assisted by a ‘bonus’ horse). *Gun.Smoke*’s challenge came from the frenetic quality of play, with the Western adventure lasting only so long as the player’s ability to ward off enemies. In many games, the end of the West and the end of the hero tied together seamlessly, often with a Hollywood-inspired ‘THE END’ as the lingering visual message, highlighting the new media’s dependence on old and familiar imagery. The story of the historic West thus finished when the player (as hero) lost their life. Games conveyed a sense of Western history as personal and heroic, but also destined to end abruptly. Video games thus repeated familiar messages about the West as a place of sacrifice and endings, but now directly experienced through a player’s actions.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Different Wests, Different Times*

In the 1990s and 2000s, the game industry began to experiment more with the Western as a playable experience, in the process shifting senses of time, and often slowing time down. Largely sped up in arcade Westerns, the frontier became a more leisurely experience in domestic environments, where typical playtime measured in hours, not minutes. As the technical capabilities of home consoles increased, graphical realism became an aspiration, and interfaced with notions of temporal realism. The full motion video (FMV) title *Mad Dog McCree* (1990) by American Laser Games, released at the arcade and on the Philips CD-i, captured a more accurate sense of time courtesy of its production values. Filmed at Eaves Movie Ranch in New Mexico, the game functioned as an interactive movie. *Mad Dog* furnished a new sense of ludic realism, as events played out in real-time, actors looked the player in the eye, and fast draws resembled classic Hollywood action. The cinematic elements included on-cue acrobatic falls from galloping horses and filmset buildings. Player input revolved around simply pointing a light gun at the screen. Judged as a film, *Mad Dog McCree* played to cliche and convention, but as a game, the sheer novelty of ‘being’ in a Hollywood-style Western, seeing real actors and physical landscapes, made it quantifiably different. Film footage granted the title a far more natural sense of timing than that found in the pixelated West (Grebe 2021). Only the need to offer multiple routes (determined by the quality of the player’s shooting) interrupted the sense of seamless action. As Alfred Hitchcock strived for perfection in one long take in the thriller *Rope* (1948), the one flaw in *Mad Dog* proved filmic cohesion with its awkward splicing together of scenes. Nevertheless, Western game time no longer appeared an artificial computer-generated simulation, and *Mad Dog* showed the potential for putting more traditional forms of narrative and choreographed action on screen.

The Sierra adventure game *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist* (1993) for the PC also diverged from the typical pixel frontier. Programmers Al Lowe and Josh Mandel slowed the frontier down to suit the format of a point-and-click graphical adventure, a very different genre from the typical Western ‘shooter’. In a narrative-heavy, character-rich three-hour story, Sierra cast the player as an amiable and educated gentleman whose chief interests revolved around solving puzzles, creating potions, and romancing the locals in town. Compared to prior games set in the ‘Wild West,’ the title seemed slow and ponderous, and designed mostly around humor. *Computer Gaming World* magazine called it “the Blazing Saddles of computer games,” likely referring to the in-game challenge of collecting gas from flatulent horses and mimicking the 1974 comedy Western (Sierra 1993 box art). Focused more on conversation than action, the tempo of the game rarely shifted gear, with piano tunes arguably the fastest entertainment component. The slower pace of *Freddy Pharkas* facilitated a more critical, even postmodern, narrative of Western history, with common stereotypes parodied (for example, the local Native American saying ‘how’ solely for tourist effect). An accompanying game manual, *The Modern Day Book of Health and Hygiene*, caricatured period medical practice. *Freddy Pharkas* both played with and deconstructed Western genre tropes.

Spellbound’s tactics series *Desperados* (2001-20) equally played with genre expectations. Assuming control of John Cooper and his gang, the player moved characters across a detailed isometric landscape while overcoming strategic challenges. The title featured an option of suspending time while several enemies could be targeted in quick succession. This Quick Action mechanism granted the player greater control over the speed of events. Like *Freddy Pharkas*, *Desperados* facilitated a more detailed, complex, and satirical view of Western life. Cooper’s gang included a female gambler Kate O’Hara and a Chinese orphan Mia Yung. Developers experimented with Western characters and the flow of frontier time, technology servicing a more nuanced depiction of the trans-Mississippi. Meanwhile, Pawel Selinger’s *Call of Juarez* (2006) proved distinctive for its use of the frontier as a setting in a first-person shooter, a game genre traditionally marked by sci-fi, war and spy narratives. The Polish design team aimed for a “serious” Western marked by wild scenery, “strong characters,” and a realistic feel to frontier weaponry (IGN 2012). Similar to *Desperados*, *Juarez* included a temporal game mechanic for slowing down time, a ‘Concentration mode’ specifically designed for combat sequences and the targeting of multiple villains. The video game industry thus experimented with how best to interact with the Western genre, while at the same time maintaining an overall loyalty to period architecture, story, and frontier atmosphere.

*Mundane Time and Slow Spectacle in the Red Dead West*

In 2004, Rockstar Games released *Red Dead Revolver* for home consoles. A Western-themed action-adventure game, *Revolver* told the story of bounty hunter Red Harlow. The title featured multiple characters to control, active shooting elements, and the interactive town of Brimstone. In 2010, a successor title *Red Dead Redemption* *(RDR)* delivered a far more expansive play experience, marked by an open world to freely explore, and sold over 15 million copies. *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)*, released in 2018, took the franchise further in terms of narrative depth and graphical realism. In stark contrast to the two-dimensional landscapes and pixel cowboys of the 1970s, the *Red Dead* series forwarded a detailed three-dimensional Western landscape inhabited by complex characters and a multitude of gameplay options. Compared to the five-minute play times of arcade Westerns, *RDR* and *RDR2* required over 50 hours to complete, with the potential to explore for much longer.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As Esther Wright notes, Rockstar marketed its *Red Dead* games as linked with prior Western film, granting their titles a “cinematic authenticity” in the process (2017). For Wright, Rockstar recognized how “a text’s recognizable relationship to previous media(tions) arguably only increases its potential value as commodity,” with the Rockstar West promoted as land founded by the likes of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah. *Red Dead* certainly drew on classic genre tropes for inspiration. At the same time, *Red Dead Redemption* represented an indefatigably Rockstar product. The series depicted the West through a Rockstar lens of masculinity, violence and satire, the player assuming control of troubled gunfighters Arthur Morgan and John Marston and seeing the West through their gaze. The series offered a Rockstar approach to player agency and controls. Primarily enjoyed in the third person (*RDR2* later adding a first-person perspective), action sequences on the surface resembled the familiar template of shooting and violence found in *Grand Theft Auto*. The sense of *Red Dead* as a Rockstar product similarly stretched to presentations of time, with both *Redemption* titles marked by familiar slow-motion moments and cinematic cutscenes.

In terms of chronology, the *Red Dead* series concentrated on the 1890’s to 1900’s West.

It offered a storyline rich in characterization that weaved across locations and timeframes. It also produced a significantly slower experience of the digital West than any games before it. Especially in *RDR2*, time appeared deliberately slowed down, with the West largely presented as a realm of contemplation, mundane work, and idle wandering, perforated by quick draws and violent conflict.

Rockstar drew on established time mechanics to forge this slower ludic experience. Rather than solely borrowing a gunfighter duel from film, Rockstar transplanted the slower feel of classic Westerns, aping slow-talking Westerns with a range of non-playable characters (NPCs) who lingered, chewed gum, and bantered at length. Gradual sweeping camera work reminded of Leone and Peckinpah revisionist Westerns. Cameras in *Red Dead* appeared to hold the frame, focus in on the little details, placing the game as a potential companion to modern Westerns such as *Slow West* (2015), *The Revenant* (2015) and *Damsel* (2018). Reminiscent of film, Rockstar prepared the player for shifts in pace with musical beat changes and the shifting of onscreen colors.

Game mechanics similarly serviced a slower speed. On entering action set pieces, players slowed down time by employing Rockstar’s Dead Eye, a mechanic akin to an interactive slow-motion camera, to reduce the movements of nearby cowboys to a snail’s pace, allowing the player to target them with multiple shots. The developer built in a roster of menial daily tasks for the player to perform. In stark contrast to the epic action located in arcade Westerns, players ‘lived’ the Rockstar West at an altogether more leisurely pace by shaving, washing, feeding, and skinning animals. Rockstar created a world that revolved around mundane experience, with players expending considerable time on daily chores. Collectively, such tasks granted *Red Dead* a deliberate, almost grinding, tempo.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The slower ludic experience of time allied with a conscious attempt by Rockstar to depict the passing of days, weeks, and years in the West with heightened realism. Rockstar manipulated senses of time within the carefully scripted narrative and storyline. References to ‘time’ featured in NPC dialogue in *RDR2* to express disdain for a Westerner’s sedate life, often in past-tense reflection (‘waste of time’), to amplify the immediacy of the moment coupled with action sequences (‘just in time’), or to highlight what lay ahead, but with a firm sense of finality (‘borrowed time’ and ‘one last time’). The language of time thus looked forward and back, but with an overall tone of negativity.

While most play functioned in real time, Rockstar employed cut-scenes to explain situations, forward plots, and shift time forwards. Narrative cutscenes sometimes forwarded the game clock by just seconds or minutes, but at other points, whole years, even decades, passed, especially toward the story’s close and epilogue. Visual cues highlighted the longer time stretches, such as an increasingly weathered and aged main protagonist, with the advance of Arthur Morgan’s sickness from tuberculosis in *RDR2* another barometer of time passed. The cutscenes allowed Rockstar to tell a more expansive story of the West, as well as illicit the player’s emotional response.

Specific missions in *RDR2* used time in disruptive and creative ways. In ‘A Quiet Time’ mission, based around Morgan taking his friend Lenny, a young African American gunslinger, to town for a drink, a clever use of cutscenes allied to unresponsive game controls imitated a sense of increasing drunkenness and lack of temporal awareness for the player. As more alcohol is imbibed by Morgan, the player’s vision (the screen) becomes increasingly blurred, and the player has difficulty moving their character at any speed. Cutscenes jump in abruptly, interrupting play, and highlighting a hazy jigsaw puzzle of experiences (from outdoor brawls to random drunken conversations). The cutscenes collectively suggest a ‘loss’ of time due to alcohol’s effect, and ask the player to question what really happened. Morgan eventually wakes up on a hillside in the morning, unaware of how he got there. ‘A Quiet Time’ works by showing time as fluid, flexible and experiential, with individual events (and the management of chronological time) phasing in and out of the player’s control.

Old-fashioned timepieces also featured in *RDR2* storylines. In another mission involving Lenny, Morgan overhears at the campfire Lenny relating the story of his enslaved father. Lenny tells of his family’s experience of slavery, and the gift of a pocket watch to his departed father by a master reeling from guilt about the nightly beatings of slaves on the plantation. Morgan sets about finding the lost pocket watch. Located next to a typewriter in a small cabin in Vettor’s Echo, West Elizabeth, Morgan (controlled by the player) overcomes a grizzly to access the cabin and the timepiece, risking his own life for the family memento. Later in the game, a Reutlinger Swiss-made pocket watch is the object of a mission set in the industrialized town of Saint Denis. Morgan wins the coveted timepiece, a symbol of the upper classes, in a fixed game of cards, devised as part of an armed robbery on the Grand Korrigan riverboat. The mission serves as a ‘return’ to the “good old days” for the gang, although Morgan’s mumble “what could possibly go wrong” reminds that the good old days were in fact mostly bad. In both stories, ‘time’ is presented as a commodity owned by the rich and the successful, the shiny and valuable timepieces serving as symbols of the upper classes and their ruthless, mechanistic control over society. As oilman Desmond Blythe tells Morgan at the card table, referring to the Reutlinger, “It’s worth more than you.” By contrast, Morgan and his crew are shown to actively steal ‘time’ from those above them, akin to a trophy. If successful at Saint Denis, Morgan gains the ability to equip the Reutlinger, and look at its face to tell in-game time at any moment.

Elsewhere in *RDR2*, musical cutscenes highlighted the ‘passing’ of chronological time to mark narrative progression. The cutscene ‘Whatever the weather,’ featured in the game’s epilogue, depicts John Marston and his friends constructing by hand a frontier ‘happy home’ across several weeks, nailing and sawing wood during the day, reflecting and laughing by campfire at night, with music constantly playing in the background. The day and night cycle and work ‘whatever the weather’ highlighted both the scale of time expended on the task, and rallied comradery and achievement.

Collectively, game mechanics, missions, cutscenes, and dialogue in *RDR2* established a digital West marked by a more leisurely sense of time than in any prior video game Western. Rockstar’s use of environmental time further amplified the sensation. Striving to recreate nature’s cycles on screen, Rockstar pitched a world of gradual change, with plants growing, leaves blowing in the wind, and animals hunting and resting. Scott Hess defines the “postmodern pastoral” as a “mode of experience and fantasy” of wild nature, made possible by consumption, advertising, and leisure (2004: 71). In *RDR2*, players experienced the ‘fantasy’ of nature by watching from their armchairs as virtual seasons changed and digital wildlife migrated. Featuring its own ‘natural’ clock - 48 minutes of real-time equating to 24 hours passing in the game - *RDR2* imitated the arcadian rhythms of the frontier. The day/night effect facilitated systemic ‘resets’ of Arthur’s sleep pattern, game functions, as well as triggering time-dependent events. The day/night effect granted an ecological realism to the game title. Hollywood Westerns had, in the past, employed lighting effects such as storms and shadows to highlight danger and impending doom. In Stevens’ *Shane*, a spectacular storm caused farmyard animals to riot while the ‘good guys’ fought, while in *High Noon*, decreasing shadows indicated time running out, as well as intensifying a feeling of claustrophobia in the saloon. From grizzlies foraging in the springtime to spectacular thunderstorms soaking the player, nods to ecological realism added their own form of slow drama to *RDR2* (Blower 2023).

Players also actively contributed to the slower sense of time. The open world format of *Red Dead* encouraged players to explore the digital West at length. Gamers dipped into narrative when they wanted, but often simply explored the wild frontier. In this case, time seemed not so much determined by Rockstar as facilitated by the developer. The coupling of open space with open time created a distinct sense of freedom and liberation. Game design, especially controls and mechanisms, helped determine the slow speed of this exploration. While players dictated the individual speed of their characters by physically holding down thumb-pads for running, or riding a horse more briskly, the overall mechanic favored slow travel. Having to ride on horseback between destinations necessitated lengthy, monotonous rides across digital country, where other games typically allowed *Star Trek*-like teleporting. The emphasis on extended travel encouraged players to notice their surroundings and take in the atmosphere. Labelling *Red Dead* an “ambient action game,” Felix Zimmerman notes how “the unresponsive controls and the slowness of the protagonist’s movements inhibits the player agency in such a way that they become susceptible to perceiving the ambience acts of the game world” (2022: 53). Digital spaces that mimicked wilderness evoked contemplative acts, arguably repeating the real-life rewards of trekking Yosemite and looking down from El Capitan. For P. Saxton Brown, such forms of gameplay encourage a degree of pastoral reflection marked by the absence of goals, sometimes boredom, but with potential “value for an environmental consciousness” (2014: 400). Rather than focused on reaching the next level or vanquishing a deadly foe, *Red Dead* encouraged simply being in the digital moment. Such ‘moments’ collectively reinforced the temporal idea of the West as a place where ‘things naturally slow down,’ an oppositional landscape to the busyness and clock-watching of the industrial East. The ‘canvas’ of the Rockstar West seemed designed to be looked at, slowly gazed upon, much like an Albert Bierstadt painting. With artistic nods to the Hudson River School, Rockstar evoked a contemplative tapestry (Gies 2018).

The extent that *RDR2* focused on ‘slowing down’ the West won it plaudits and criticism alike. Journalists largely welcomed the distinctive pacing, linking the drawn-out gameplay to cinematic artistry, and deeming it a noble attempt to capture a more realistic West. As Heather Alexandra explains, *Red Dead* “is something you push against, something that you comb and scratch and brittly feel in your hands,” evoking an almost textural feel (2018). Nonetheless, for others, the time taken to ride horses to new locations, or acts of personal maintenance, grated. Critics associated the slower times with poor programming and the “clunky” controls generic to Rockstar games (Tassi 2018; Austin 2020). Transforming natural, instinctive acts such as combing hair into complex button combinations suggested ludic dissonance, not realism. Facing over 50 hours to finish the game’s main objectives or upwards of 150 hours to complete, *RDR2* entailed a level of time investment beyond casual players. Compared to the cinematic West, *Red Dead* seemed painfully long. For some, the slow time of *RDR2* even reminded them of why they disliked the Western in the first place.

Finally, like many Westerns, the slow time headed towards a final moment, the *Red Dead* series capturing a decisive temporal shift in the end of the frontier. The meta-narrative of the *Red Dead* series revolved around the frontier’s closure, the end of an age, and its meaning for Westerners, especially white male outlaws. Rockstar depicted this ‘ending’ in myriad ways, from environmental storytelling in the form of wildlife extinction and industrial encroachment, through to the personal sickness and ill-fate of lead characters. Familiar messages over the loss of personal freedom and the death of frontier community dominated. Especially in *RDR2*, melancholy surrounding the inevitable ending of the ‘Wild West,’ especially the demise of the noble gunfighter. The subject of countless celluloid Westerns, the gunfighter myth perforated the game series. Scripted moments of strangers approaching Arthur Morgan, asking “but you’ve fought duels?” and Morgan responding, “Once upon a time…I may have,” seemed poignantly familiar not just because of Morgan’s violent past, but as reminders of every gunfighter’s backstory in Hollywood film. Rockstar reminded its players that the fate of their cowboy protagonist also tied to the greater fate of the West, as Morgan related to fellow gang member Mary-Beth Gaskill: “Whole world’s changing…even I see that now. Our time… has pretty much passed. They don’t want folk like us no more…No more outlaws, no more killers.” Gang boss Dutch van der Linde similarly pondered, “For a long time, I truly believed a paradise lay somewhere in the West for us, but I just don’t know anymore.” In the case of Morgan, rather than a bullet to the heart, a disease - tuberculosis - gradually kills off the gunfighter, in tune with the closure of the West about him. All that the player can do is watch time running out for both Morgan and his West.

*Frontier Endings*

Since the 1970s, the video game industry has preserved the mythic West enshrined in prior entertainment media, largely telling the same old stories of cowboys and Indians to new generations, and in turn assuring the survival of the traditional Western genre. Working within set cultural imaginaries, game developers have replicated rather than revolutionized the frontier experience. They have maintained a white masculine perspective on the frontier and exalted the gunfighter myth. In terms of notions of Westerly time, the video game Western has borrowed heavily from its forebear the Hollywood Western, including its focus on the leisurely exploration of landscape, the fast draw duel, the gunfighter’s demise, and the unwelcome end of a frontier era.

However, the video game Western also functions as interactive media, shifting the West from a story to tell, to a story to play, and in the process, amounting to a subtly new experience of genre. Gameplay mechanics have led to the disruption of at least some of the older narratives and older ways of seeing the frontier, with the player positioned in the new role of active participant, capable of pausing and dictating events, repositioning characters, and subverting storylines. Time in the West is not something that audiences have traditionally had control over, but in the video game, the player assumes, in part, that responsibility. Rather than observe the frontier’s closure on film, gamers toy with the ebb and flow of frontier time, ‘slowing down’ the action with Dead Eye, or restarting levels and rebooting the story. Frontier time includes loops, repetition, and choices over which historic scene to enter. Sören Schoppmeier notes how in *RDR2*, the player, as Morgan, freely accesses a range of discrete stories of the West (akin to taking books off the shelf in a library, or accessing data files in a computer), and that such a mechanic disrupts the sense of the frontier as a linear, even comprehensible, story (2023: 35). This temporal disruption has a longer history in the video game Western, with 1980’s titles such as *Cheyenne* splicing the West into a set number of action scenes for the player to click on, with no clear chronology or cohesiveness. To a degree, video games through their own mechanics of interactivity, player agency, and multiple choices, have begun to disrupt the sense of the West as a single and consistent temporal narrative. In the process, the West threatens to be disassembled and destabilized, the region’s survival as a single time frame or chronology questioned. The frontier loses cohesion with more and more level restarts. Video game mechanics thus appear capable of orchestrating wider patterns of disruption, including challenging our mass understanding of the Western.

And yet, despite all the options and choices that gameplay provides, video game designers still largely cling to the singular frontier myth. The video game industry has yet to decisively recode the ‘frontier’ around more inclusive parameters, broaden its actors, or offer a more comprehensive understanding of time. Temporal disruption (at least in terms of frontier start and end dates), multiple views, and a new ethnic and gender diversity of stories, have for some time been much needed in seeing the real West, as New Western historians pointed out in the 1980s (Limerick 1987; White 1991). The sense of the historic West as one period, one goal, made by one group of white male gunfighters, still needs superseding. With their disruptive capabilities, video games hint at the promise of a decidedly new Western but have yet to deliver. The time to do this is now, not never.

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1. For example, Nash (1980) offers a classic historical view of frontier time. Looking beyond a Euro-American perspective, the temporal West might have a very different timeline. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Novelist William MacLeod Raine (1938) later claimed that the outlaw Billy Brooks “had a man for breakfast now and then and on one occasion four” in Dodge City in the 1870s. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Not just Western ‘shooter’ games used a repetitive cycle. *Claim Jumper* (Synapse, 1982) for the Atari 8-Bit computer pitted two cowboys in a race against each other to collect golden nuggets strewn across the landscape (or screen), the level restarting with each new mineral discovery. Programmer Gray Chang’s notebook for the game revealed his translation of the West into a series of looping codes, schematics, equations, and subroutines. Chang also spent considerable time designing the pixelated characters and scenery, from farmers picking corn to blowing tumbleweed (Chang 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In play mechanics, *Gun.Smoke* resembled Capcom’s World War II arcade game *1942* (1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Revolver had previous developmental history with Capcom, with strong action-focused elements. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Dead Eye mechanical effect resembles scenes from *The Matrix* (1999) whereby Neo slows down time to vanquish agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)