CULTURE

Playing the Hollywood Western on Repeat:
Cinematic Realism in *Mad Dog McCree*

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Abstract
This article explores video game adaptations of American popular history and culture by looking at the 1990 arcade title *Mad Dog McCree* produced by American Laser Games. Heavily inspired by the Hollywood Western (along with the broader mythology of the nineteenth-century American West) and using light guns and Full-Motion-Video (FMV) technology, the live action title offered players the chance to play an active role in a celluloid-based frontier story. Handling replica pistols, players watched a series of cinematic vignettes, before assuming their own role in the action, shooting their light guns at all manner of renegade gunslingers. Thanks to the FMV, the title recreated in tone and substance a traditional Hollywood Western, placing the player in the role of lead character and hero, and offering a unique 'film-game' experience and cinematic realism explored in this article. As well as functioning as a nostalgia piece for traditional cowboy movies, *Mad Dog McCree* also took the Western in new directions, emphasizing the frontier as, in essence, a landscape of play and play-acting, marked by simple pleasures and constant repetition.

Keywords: Arcade Western, Hollywood Western, American Laser Games, *Mad Dog McCree,* LaserDisc, frontier myth and storytelling, video game histories

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, video games emerged as a new popular entertainment media to compete with film, television and radio.[1] A

fledgling game industry faced the challenge of introducing computer and video games to people for the first time. Understanding a new medium of play required a cognitive jump, not just in terms of mastering joystick-based controls, but in terms of comprehending the purpose of pixels on screen, their symbolic as well as storytelling abilities. One technique used to popularize the new medium involved the adaptation of familiar myths and folk-stories to a digital domain. This process included translating one of the most popular genres, the Western, to the computer screen. Given its global recognition, in large part due to the success of Hollywood movies such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956), as well as later Italian Westerns such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), the Western served as one narrative option for companies at the time. Inspired by Japanese developer Taito's *Western Gun* (1974), Chicago-based amusements company Midway developed the arcade machines *Gunfight* (1975) and *Boot Hill* (1977) for the domestic recreational market. The cowboy-themed titles proved immensely popular in the arcade, with their gameplay copied on a range of titles for home consoles, including *Outlaw* (1978) for the Atari 2600. Midway's machines compressed the frontier narrative into a single action scene, one of two cowboys caught in a duel, with only the occasional sagebrush or passing wagon to separate them. Drawing on their knowledge of the Western genre, players knew instinctively how to act when playing Midway's new arcade titles. Players knew what to do, and how to win, without the need for textual instruction, and the frontier story and its tropes facilitated an easy, even seamless, play experience (Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 66-7). The arcade cabinets, sporting Western art as if straight out of a nineteenth-century saloon, as well as vintage-looking pistol handles for controls, helped further a sense of frontier atmosphere. However, while capturing the spirit of the frontier, games such as *Gun Fight* crucially lacked immersive realism. Monochrome pixel cacti and simple stick figures hardly mirrored the monumental landscapes of John Ford Westerns nor characters like Will Kane (Gary Cooper) in Stanley Kramer's *High Noon* (1952). The video game Western proved at best cartoonish and symbolic and lacked a filmic quality.

Toward the end of the 1980s, Albuquerque-based businessman Robert Grebe, having developed a firearms training simulator using LaserDiscs, light guns and Commodore Amiga computers, saw the potential for the format to be used for wider entertainment purposes. Having witnessed local sheriffs enjoying his firearms simulator, their huge smiles testament to the thrill of shooting actor-criminals with light guns, Grebe pivoted to develop an arcade game using live action recorded on LaserDiscs and themed around the Wild West. Establishing American Laser Games with programmer Pierre Maloka, Grebe explored the new media technology mostly as a business experiment. While titles such as Cinematronics' *Dragon's Lair* (1983) employed the LaserDisc to generate detailed cartoon animation on screen and deliver recorded speech, the use of live-action film in video games represented something new and promising. Grebe recognized an opportunity to push the boundaries of visual quality in gaming, designing arcade cabinets running LaserDiscs that showed actual film content and supported by new 50-inch Panasonic televisions, all designed to replicate a cinematic 'big screen' feel. In the fall of 1990, the company released the arcade title *Mad Dog McCree*. The first Full-Motion-Video live action video game, *Mad Dog* functioned as a relatively conventional gun-game (of a 'point and shoot' mentality), but with the key difference that the view screen functioned as a movie screen and featured pre-recorded footage of familiar frontier locales. Essentially, the title worked as an interactive movie reel, with the narrative direction of the movie dictated by the gamer's skills with a light gun, causing the LaserDisc to jump to appropriate scenes. For players, the game offered a novel play experience seeped in nostalgia for the Westerns of old. The title proved exceptionally popular in the U.S. market, before shipping globally courtesy of Atari. Grebe's team followed *Mad Dog* with nine more LaserDisc titles in the early 1990s, including *Mad Dog II: The Lost Gold* (1992). The company also licensed *Mad Dog* for a range of home consoles including the Panasonic 3DO and Philips 3Di, as well as IBM PC.

With its cinematic visuals, *Mad Dog McCree* helped shift the video game Western away from 2D side-scrolling graphics and cartoonish figures and towards more sophisticated aesthetics. Due primarily to its

LaserDisc format, *Mad Dog* represented a new and unique synthesis of film technology and video game technology, at a time when most gamers were accustomed to solely computer-generated sprites. The use of LaserDisc represented a novel technological path for gaming, ultimately one not taken by the wider industry, but remarkable for its filmic delivery and immersive potential.[2]

Game studies has mostly ignored the contribution of the LaserDisc to video game history and the dynamics of melding film design with game design in the early 1990s. While M. J. Clarke explores the popularity of *Dragon's Lair*, the contributions of live action film-game titles to the games industry, and specifically American Laser Games, have been sidelined. Equally, the role of the Western genre in gaming has garnered only marginal attention, with video game histories typically more expansive in tone (Kent, Donovan), with most discussion focused on key titles such as *Doom* or *Call of Duty* (Pinchbeck, Garretts), or cult horror series such as *Silent Hill* (Perron). In terms of the video game Western, scholarship focuses on early video game history (Wills, "Pixel Cowboys"), and more recently Rockstar's contributions, including the work of Tore Olsson on renegotiating history using a *Red Dead* lens, and John Wills' and Esther Wright's edited collection on *Red Dead Redemption*, exploring a range of critical perspectives on the game series. On *Mad Dog McCree*, scholarship primarily notes its novelty as an experience. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Janet Murray offers the title as an example of how games can provide unexpected revelatory experiences, in her case the "new kind of dramatic experience" offered by *Mad Dog* encouraging her towards casual acts of in-game frontier violence, in stark contrast to her "fervently pacifist" self (61). Zack Waggoner presents Murray's experience of *Mad Dog* as an example of older games offering "human meaning-making" despite the absence of avatars or complex characters (10). Finally, Bernard Perron et. al., in a piece on categorizing interactive movies, situate *Mad Dog* as an example of a "movie-game" based on "the gamer's sensori-motor skills" as opposed to more cognitive-based and strategic titles (233). *Mad Dog*'s Western lens and synthesis of film and game structures meanwhile remain unexplored.

Drawing on film history, cultural history and game studies, this article argues for the significance of *Mad Dog McCree* as a piece of interactive frontier storytelling and a dynamic example of two contrasting media coming together. By fusing classic Hollywood film and its conventions with video games and their conventions, American Laser Games produced a distinctive media property, what I call the Western film-game, held together by a layering of one format onto the other, and establishing a novel common ground between them.[3] Crucially, the game articulated a sense of 'watching' a cinematic story of the West unfold at the same time as 'playing' that story. Pivoting, often moment by moment, between static voyeur-ship and fast-paced interaction, gamers assumed both the role of traditional theater audience and the starring role in a Hollywood Western. At predetermined moments, often prompted by the advice of an Old Prospector, players moved from audience to participant, entering the game world as if walking onto a film set. Such a sense of cinematic realism – of being inside a Western – has proved difficult to replicate, even in later video games such as *Red Dead Redemption*.

With an interest in media-archaeology and game mechanics, I also explore some of the technological processes involved in turning film into gameplay, highlighting the significance of optical disc storage in melding game play with cinematic aesthetics in the 1990s. *Mad Dog* remains important for the degree with which technological determinism shaped the play experience – in particular the effect of LaserDiscs and FMV on determining the game's narrative and visual dynamics, bringing to life a classic American frontier story in segmented (even stunted) fashion, but one notable for its charm and theatrical feel. The movie-like elements of *Mad Dog* pay homage to classical Hollywood cinema and make the game feel both real and reel for the player, an important collusion and one that works particularly well with a storyline grounded in both frontier history and Hollywood storytelling.

Through this process, *Mad Dog* offered an old Hollywood Western in new technological garb, using the latest entertainment technology to return to a largely nostalgic version of both the West and the Western. The game offered a cinematic and immersive experience of the 'old West' that by the 1990s had been largely rejected by scholars

such as Richard White (*"It's Your Misfortune…"*) and Patricia Nelson Limerick, as well as filmmakers, including Kevin Costner and Clint Eastwood, with their films *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992) offering a fundamentally different slant on the frontier experience. While, as Michael Johnson notes, in recent years, a "re-imagining of the American West and the western through the framework of the speculative" (21) has proved most popular, especially hybrid fiction/media centered around time travel and new cartographies, *Mad Dog McCree* offered in the 1990s a singular and retrograde vision of the American West, arguably a step backwards in the cultural imaginary, but popular with an arcade audience (Grebe).

The Great Train Robbery Revisited

The story of the American frontier remains one of the most influential narratives of nation-building. In its simplest form, the story relates how pioneers on the East Coast of the United States travelled westwards in the 1800s, overcame the perils of the wilderness, fought back Native Americans, and emerged as worthy pioneers in fruitful lands like California, bringing civilization and progress to all. In such a narrative, the American West assumes primacy as the 'nation's story,' one legitimized by news writers of the time (most famously, columnist and editor John O'Sullivan declaring continental expansion America's 'manifest destiny'), frontier blazers and boosters such as William Frederick Cody, and period historians, most notably Frederick Jackson Turner (White, "Frederick Jackson Turner").

   The story of the frontier is also full of myth, exaggeration, and prejudice. A precursor of our modern receptivity to fake news, the myth of the frontier grew in currency in the 1840s thanks largely to expansionist and colonially framed mindsets, as well as spurious tales of riches and free land. The stories coincided and sometimes justified extreme acts of cultural genocide and environmental damage. As Limerick argued in the 1980s, such expansion left a widespread legacy of toxicity and conquest.

   In the twentieth century, Hollywood filmmakers explored the myth of the West through the new medium of film, in the process

perpetuating (as well as sometimes critiquing) America's fascination with the frontier (Rollins, McGee). As Andre Bazin wrote in the 1950s, with their common ground of "movement," the Western helped cement film as a dominant form of entertainment and became the "American film par excellence" (140-141). In 1903, Edwin S. Porter created one of the earliest Westerns, *The Great Train Robbery*, a 13 minute-long black and white movie for Edison Manufacturing Company. Shown at vaudeville houses and small theaters across the USA, audiences relished the explosive action playing out on screen. Despite the movie itself being filmed in parts of New York and New Jersey, Porter's production helped forge the conventions and aesthetic appeal of the Western genre.

Drawing on a variety of contemporary film and storytelling techniques, Porter's movie helped popularize the 'Western' as an immersive celluloid experience marked by action and justice. A series of spliced-together scenes relayed a short story of the frontier endeavor and its challenges, of passengers taking a railroad journey only to be hijacked by a gang of predatory bandits. Contemporary stories of the frontier in the guise of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, dime novels, cheap Western novellas, and other short films, had already quantified the American frontier as a landscape of action and movement, and where victory heralded often from violent confrontation. Hardly inhibited by its silent format, Porter's film brought this 'action West' successfully to theater audiences, helping to sell the frontier as a dynamic landscape, and even soliciting a degree of interactivity from patrons. Along with gasps at the railroad hijacking, theater attendees hid behind their seats when, in the final scene, the gang leader, played by Justus D. Barnes, pointed his gun at the screen and fired directly at the audience.[4] The scene proved an early example of breaking the fourth wall and underlined the Western as a story that might invite a level of participation from the audience; later amusement parks like Knott's Berry Farm in Orange County, California, equally framed the West as an interactive story for its guests. *The Great Train Robbery* also brought the frontier experience to the most civilized and technological of spaces, the bustling local theater, collapsing American geography and offering a temporary connection between the wild frontier and the city auditorium. The short movie introduced scenes

of the dusty wilderness to the dirty urban center. Porter's movie brought the great outdoors indoors, in a similar way to Western-themed video games playing in arcades and bedrooms a century later.

In the decades that followed, the Western became a staple of the Hollywood Studio system and helped establish conventional Hollywood narratives and film-making mechanisms (Schatz). The mythology of the frontier influenced ideas around storytelling and story structure, as well as concepts of masculinity, conflict, and heroism. Equally, Hollywood shaped modern ideas around the West. Film directors toyed playfully with the power of the frontier myth – as newspaper editor Maxwell Scott claimed in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend" (qtd. in Ingrassia 5). Directors such as John Ford and actors such as John Wayne located a national vision of the frontier as at the heart of modern American values. For the public, the West and the Western became virtually indistinguishable. A cinematic landscape of sagebrush blowing in the wind, dirt kicked up by metal-spurred cowboy boots, glass-smashing barroom brawls, and gunfighters shooting each other at downtown duels, shaped core senses of the frontier experience. A pantheon of Hollywood Westerns determined public understanding of history and place. A violent, physical and visceral sense of the West dominated. Such a formula was adopted by video games from the 1970s onwards.

In its cinematic design and storytelling mechanics, *Mad Dog McCree* drew on the conventions laid down by classic Hollywood film. Based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Grebe felt well-accustomed to a popular "fascination with the West" and the powerful hold of the Western genre over the American psyche (Grebe). Early storyboarding ideas for the title revolved around a movie-style player confronting a "bad guy" placed in a variety of frontier locales, with the aim to recreate a traditional 1950s Western but as a light gun game. Bringing together a team of mostly "non-gamers," American Laser Games used a scriptwriter to map a branching storyline, based around scene-by-scene progression, centered on a mysterious gun fighter (the player) working towards the rescue of a town mayor and his daughter from a reckless gang, led by Mad Dog McCree (Grebe). Local film maker Dave Roberts agreed to direct the

film-game segments, and the team met at the local movie set, Eaves Movie Ranch, south of Santa Fe, to record the content, employing a range of cheap actors, and with a budget of around $70,000.

The process of creating *Mad Dog* closely resembled production on a budget Western. Opened in 1969, Eaves Movie Ranch had served as the filming location for over 250 Western productions, including *The Cheyenne Social Club* (1970), *Silverado* (1985) and *Young Guns II* (1990). Creating content for the video game seemed little different from shooting many of the prior Westerns. The architecture of Eaves Ranch allowed the crew to film at a range of classic Western locales, including a corral, a saloon, a sheriff's office, a local bank, and a dusty downtown street. The crew moved from one set to the next, at each location filming branching variations on the same scene. Actors took on the role of familiar Western characters, including the Old Prospector, the friendly barman, the young and helpless damsel, and the deadly villain. Ben Zeller (*Wyatt Earp*) played the Old Prospector, while Russ Dillen (*Breaking Bad*) performed as Mad Dog. Actors delivered scripted banter, speaking to each other and directly to camera, often with a strong frontier drawl. Stuntmen in period costume leapt out of saloon doors and fell from rickety platforms, all for the camera to capture, simulating what would happen if the light gun targeted them in the game. The end footage rivaled a cheaply produced postwar Western but edited into a series of linked scenes designed for the LaserDisc format.

The filming of *Mad Dog* drew inspiration from classic Hollywood cinema, recreating the feel of a simple and largely upbeat performance. Roberts directed characters with alacrity, keeping the script punchy, but also playful and innocent. The motivations and backstory of lead characters in the film-game proved easy to understand, often by their directed speech to the camera (and thus to the player-protagonist), but equally by the color of their clothes and their personal demeanor. For example, one scene in the local saloon included a friendly bartender, leaning into the camera/player, warning of a group of villains playing cards, their faces moody and serious, while a corseted saloon 'gal' walked by, her joviality and mirth indicative of an innocent bystander. The classic settings and cliched lines captured the warmth and feel of older

Hollywood. Gender and racial roles remained untouched and outdated. *Mad Dog McCree*, like a 1950s Western, offered a world designed around simple morals and expectations, with a sense of good old-fashioned values dominant, and in stark contrast to contemporary Westerns such as *Dances with Wolves* with its subversion of genre tropes and attempt at a native perspective on the West. The *Mad Dog* West existed as a realm where the virtuous cowboy always won out, assuming the player could shoot a light gun with accuracy.

Game narrative and structure also replicated traditional Western cinematic techniques. Like Porter's Western, Grebe's *Mad Dog* projected the frontier story as a series of action set-pieces set up by conversational interludes. Director Roberts dissected the greater narrative into a chronological chain of events, all centering on cause and effect, usually determined by the player's actions and shooting skills, and leading to an end contest, in the form of a showdown with arch-villain McCree. Classic Hollywood filmmaking, based on linear storytelling and an inevitable climatic finale offering narrative resolution, as seen in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, matched well with the mechanics of video games built around successive game stages and player progression. As with classic Hollywood narrative, a final resolution, in the 1950s Western typically a downtown showdown, emerged in *Mad Dog* as a final game stage. The need in Westerns for an arch-villain, deadly with handguns, and embodying the final challenge faced by the movie lead, perfectly suited the concept of a video game end boss, a character glimpsed in earlier narrative sections, displaying their deadly ferocity, then offering a final challenge to the player. The showdown in *Mad Dog* bore all the hallmarks of a traditional Western climax with the villain facing off the player in a deadly downtown shootout to free the innocents.

The frontier narrative also revolved around the player in a similar way to how traditional Hollywood Westerns centered on their leading protagonist. With the Old Prospector referring to any approaching player as a "gunslinger" and offering the mayor's daughter as a potential 'reward' for killing Mad Dog, the LaserDisc title asked each person, whatever their background or gender, to assume a traditional leading man role and assert their dominance over the proceedings. Game narrative in

Mad Dog, as with classical Hollywood narrative, focused on the function and motivations of the lead star, with the friendly advice of the Prospector used to deliver in-game instruction but also stress moral purpose. Players welcomed the chance to assume the role of John Wayne or James Stewart in their own Hollywood Western and hold their own six-shooter. Game mechanics helped amplify the process. With light gun games reliant on a first-person on-the-rails perspective (with the idea of replicating a target range), *Mad Dog* provided an experience of the West mechanically built around the individual, with the view-screen acting as the player's eyes on the proceedings, as if looking through a film star's gaze. Despite inhibiting freedom of maneuver, such a structured gaze served to elevate the player as lead actor in all proceedings. Like classic Hollywood cowboys granted missions of saving stagecoaches or vanquishing degenerate outlaws, there seemed no question as to the player's central role in *Mad Dog McCree*.

Grebe's arcade game thus captured the essence of older Hollywood Westerns. The LaserDisc title borrowed heavily from an old and established film genre to furnish its game world. The narrative and aesthetic choices involved in making *Mad Dog McCree* marked a title consciously derivative in content and looking little different from hundreds of films made before it. *Mad Dog* existed as a playable everyman's Western: generic, accessible, and predictable in tone for the gamer to navigate. Notably, the title rejected the postmodern, ultra-violent, nihilistic turn of the Western in the late 1960s, led by Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), in preference for older and simpler stories, with Grebe preferring the simple binaries and old-fashioned values of classic Hollywood. *Mad Dog McCree* followed in the tracks laid down by classic Westerns, including *The Great Train Robbery*.

The Western Film-Game

Alongside its familiar narrative conventions, *Mad Dog* nonetheless offered something new by combining filmmaking with game-making. The process of making a movie into a game involved creating a structure of play that could overlay interactive sequences onto filmed sequences, with

a considerable challenge of balancing voyeurism with player input. Light guns, LaserDiscs and a new cinematic interactivity granted the Western film-game a distinctive kind of playability based around swapping between spectator and participant. As Grebe contends, the release of *Mad Dog* represented "the first time that a video game was done using live action video, as opposed to computer generated graphics," and something that "nobody had ever seen before" (Grebe).

Much like Midway's *Gunfight* before it, *Mad Dog* packaged a classic Wild West narrative into a novel play experience, transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar. The well-worn and traditional segued into new structures of digital entertainment. By superimposing a ludic structure onto film, *Mad Dog* resuscitated the classic Western, made it seem alive, at least for brief moments of play time inside the arcade. Traditional, even outdated, storytelling thus re-emerged thanks to the shift in media, updated and reformatted to a new video game brief built around player decision-making, first-person perspective, and digital interactivity. Thanks to the gamic repackaging, the West no longer seemed a dead mythology trapped inside old movies, but a dynamic world resurrected for a digital audience and responsive to player input. The game offered something new in its excavation of old frontier logic.

With its distinctive LaserDisc live-action format, *Mad Dog* functioned as a working hybrid of film and game, and a model of a new cinematic video game form. In promotional material, American Laser Games explained how "the player interacts with a true-to-life western movie; the first in the amusement game industry" ("*Mad Dog McCree*"). The different media fused together, video game superimposed on celluloid, to formulate the film-game experience. By combining LaserDisc, cinematic screen, arcade cabinet, and light guns shaped as replica frontier pistols, *Mad Dog* presented an amalgam of entertainment technologies gathered in one space. Such hybridity created an almost blurring effect when experienced directly by the player. The amalgam felt akin to watching a film and playing a game at the same time. Gamic mechanisms overlaid cinematic experience, most obviously when players fired at the screen, with bullet holes showing up as if superimposed on the cinematic reel, designed to look like they perforated the villain's clothing. The holes

seemed as though they pierced through a fourth wall, even the cinematic performance itself. This fusion and double layering resulted in an almost liminal space in the arcade, one existing between the real and the reel, and marked by dual elements. *Mad Dog* encouraged players to visualize themselves mixing with the cinematic characters onscreen, who all spoke directly to the player, as if on a live film set, yet the cinematic characters existed only as recordings, fixed, immutable and distant – a film-game illusion – and never truly responsive to player input. The gamic experience seemed pre-determined and revolving around pre-recorded scenes, but equally player-determined and marked by free-flowing action. Set in the nineteenth-century West, *Mad Dog* also seemed to operate by its own temporal duality. On one level, the player watched the past, on another level, they directly entered it. Gamers negotiated a fixed point in history, but the 'story' nonetheless unfolded as if in the present, as if happening for the first time, by being responsive to player choices and skillsets. Meanwhile, the gamers stood in a contemporary arcade space marked by a cacophony of digital beeps around them. The fixed nature of cinema and the fluid nature of gaming combined to provide an unusual form of cinematic immersion, strong on visual realism and filmic resemblance, but also affected by a degree of temporal and situational distortion. This liminality and blurring of cinema and game marked *Mad Dog* as a rare experience in 1990's arcades.

The melding of film and video game also produced a new variant of the Western video game. In stark contrast to graphics-based titles, with their pixels and programming obvious to the eye, in the case of *Mad Dog McCree*, ludic elements seemed almost hidden behind the cinematically real. The video game no longer seemed an obvious computer program or a series of binary numbers and operational codes. *Mad Dog*'s West seemed physical, spatial and more identifiable as celluloid than as digital simulation. Computer elements seemed hidden behind a frontier filmset. Compared to the two-dimensional scrolling stages of games like Konami's *Iron Horse* (1986), the West in *Mad Dog* appeared rooted in three-dimensional film, and fixed by a camera's sense of motion, perspective and depth perception. The title shifted ideas of a video game away from the animated, the technological, and the two-dimensional, and

toward filmic realism and live theater. *Mad Dog* thus delivered a visual depiction of the West marked by its cinematic contrast to other game titles.

This cinematic factor, when linked to replica guns and life-size screens, helped develop a sense of immersion in the imagined West, and a degree of physicality unusual to playing video games. Standing in the arcade, pulling a gun from the machine's holster and firing at cowboy actors, players traversed a gamic West not that far removed from live historical reenactments in Dodge City and other real-life tourist sites. This performative, physical space proved important and complemented the digital screen. The light guns, meanwhile, provided a necessary connective tool to the cinematic space, a crossover point in the liminal frontier imaginary. The guns shifted the experience from the classic voyeurism of film to the necessary interaction of video games. This made the West of *Mad Dog* a visceral experience, as well as one acutely dependent on its peripherals. As Grebe notes, without the arcade guns, the Western title proved a far less immersive experience, with players using their mice instead of guns on the IBM PC (Grebe). For the arcade audience, the first-person view of *Mad Dog*, coupled with its revolvers, presented a rare opportunity to directly engage with frontier storytelling. Almost a century on from Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, people now had the chance, for the first time, to see the villain about to fire at them, and crucially shoot back.

Gamers also felt as if they were in control, that they were starring in a classic Hollywood movie, and to some extent directing the action by their gun skills and scene choices. For Grebe, the title offered the player a welcome feeling of control with *Mad Dog* designed "so you'd be like you're at a movie and directing it" (Grebe). Players navigated the frontier experience by choosing locales to enter, using their gun not just to fire at targets but to click through stories and options. Drawing on Sören Schoppmeier's concept of a database Western, players chose (by pointing and firing) which stage of the West to enter and play (85). Meanwhile, actor-characters seemed consistently responsive to the player's endeavors, as if under their direction. The game thus granted the illusion of narrative control, even though the game mechanics, largely an on-the-rails structure, offered little practical agency.

Mad Dog consistently celebrated the player as hero in such a narrative. The game tapped the heroic identification endemic to much Western storytelling and emphasized a critical connection between entertainment consumer and frontier savior. Where readers of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) or Jack Shaefer's *Shane* (1946) had merely imagined themselves as frontier heroes, and cinema audiences identified with Gary Cooper's Will Kane taking on outlaw Frank Miller in *High Noon*, the American Laser Games title projected the role of frontier hero directly onto the player. Regardless of gender, race or sexuality, the arcade game gifted the heroic task to anyone who approached it in the arcade. Each paying customer assumed individual responsibility for seeing off the McCree gang and rescuing the town folk. The game impressed on each gamer the scale of the challenge, as well as the honor involved. First-person perspective, gameplay mechanisms focused on player response, and narrative detail built around a mystery gunfighter, all elevated the player's contribution. Shifting the camera angle from the typical two-dimensional gaze, where players looked down on a pixel character, to first-person perspective amplified a sense of personal responsibility. Like Clint Eastwood, the 'Man with no Name' in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), the player in *Mad Dog McCree* remained nameless and an everyman hero, critical in saving others' lives. *Mad Dog* also rewarded or punished the player based on their heroic performance. Using an early form of ludic morality system, *Mad Dog* rewarded the player shooting villains, but accidentally dispatching innocent bystanders led to the loss of player life/bullets. To progress, the arcade patron needed to consistently act like a hero. Such a play dynamic, based around moral recognition and an ideology of frontier justice, aped American Laser Games' earlier firearms training simulators whereby police took out actor-criminals with light guns.

The imagined sense of heroism always came back to one thing: the player's skill with a gun. For over a century, frontier mythology had situated weapons by Colt and Winchester as vital to the 'winning of the West' and those adept with such weaponry as the real heroes of frontier history (Slotkin). Hollywood continued the celebration, with movies such as Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950), starring James Stewart, even

relating its frontier story through the changing ownership of a trophy rifle. This sense of the gun as maker of the West continued with video games. Titles such as *Blood Bros.* (1990) portrayed the West as one elongated, even seamless, gunfight, with little break from shooting. Sega's *Bank Panic* (1984) placed the player in the role of a sheriff shooting robbers leaving a bank. Grebe's *Mad Dog* continued the celebration of the six-shooter, but with a new cinematic emphasis and a novel take on physicality. The light gun served as a critical story-making device in the entertainment West offered by American Laser Games. Navigation of the game world revolved around the gun, from selecting individual pathways through the storyline to maximizing points by skillful headshots. Each successive stage challenged the player's dexterity with a replica firearm, asking the player to shoot not just at villains, but at other targets, such as fuses to save the Prospector from a lethal dynamite explosion, at lanterns to enter a mine, and at cow skulls for point bonuses. A usually fixed camera angle, with villains appearing behind rocks or furniture, mimicked the traditional shooting gallery found at amusement parks. *Mad Dog* projected the gun as not just the winner of the West, but also as the only way to beat a video game, with consecutive kill-shots the only route toward victory and in-game progression. The gamic Western, at least in the guise of *Mad Dog McCree*, seemed unmistakably bullet ridden.

Taking the Western to New Places: Repetition and Simple Play

As well as amplifying genre tropes and drawing on the classic visual storytelling of the West, *Mad Dog McCree* also offered its creative divergencies. In repurposing the traditional frontier narrative for interactivity, the arcade title repositioned the frontier as a blend of cinematic visuals and digital play that resulted in subtle new meanings for the genre. *Mad Dog* made the cinematic 'gamic' by applying ludic mechanisms, especially repetition, stage progression, and simulation, to movie sequencing. Such mechanisms pushed the Western into fresh digital places.

One key change involved the use of repetition in the game, especially in terms of death. While death proved a familiar feature of Hollywood Westerns, for example in scenes of wagon trains being attacked by bandits or in saloon gunfights, heroes in Hollywood Westerns rarely died. Western characters played by the likes of John Wayne usually emerged victorious by the end of movies, keeping the national vision of the triumphant West intact; if the death of protagonists did occur, it usually did so with deeper meaning. Such a trope of Western film proved ill-matched to the typical video game experience, where gameplay mechanisms encouraged repetitive attempts at survival (especially in the arcade, where games needed to make money) and often resulted in a continual loss of 'life,' very much at odds with cinematic realism. In the case of *Mad Dog McCree*, the demise of the player happened with some rapidity, with the multiple 'lives' of the gamer-protagonist ending abruptly by McCree's trigger-happy gang. This form of Western, in contrast to Hollywood's older movies, mostly used death as an incentive to repeat the exercise, to play again. Digital death in the arcade encouraged the player to try another go at the Western video game, put more coinage into the machine, in the hope of seeing more content, or progressing towards the final duel. Rather than the death of a hero seeming to mark the end journey of a Western, the West of *Mad Dog McCree* also never seemed entirely over. In fact, the machine itself continued automatically even with no players present, keeping the Western alive and in perpetual motion. As the Old Prospector related, "I got a bad feeling, we're going to need you again, stranger," *Mad Dog McCree* invited players to come back again and repeat the same story.

Not just reserved to player death, the dynamic of ludic repetition in *Mad Dog* reworked the Western in other subtle ways. Computer games in the 1980s often functioned around the limits of memory, not just in technical terms and the restrictions of kilobyte storage translating into smaller game worlds and compromised graphics, but in terms of human memory, with players having to gather information about each game stage in order to progress, usually through repeated play. The conscious learning of game levels through repetitive exposure allowed players to gradually master key challenges. Memorizing where enemies or obstacles

appeared represented part of the skill of being a good player in 1980s video games such as *Pitfall!* (1982) or *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). With *Mad Dog McCree*, while one play through without a single error created a seamless narrative sequence, most gamers paid money to replay the game over and over, regularly dying while falling short of mastery and forced to repeat and memorize each sequence in order. Far from proving a negative experience, much of the joy of *Mad Dog McCree* came from repetitive engagement with each stage, getting to know the individual scenes closely, memorizing the scripts, as well as the on-screen positions of gunfighters. Such a process seemed much like taking the role of an actor in a new Western production and effectively immersed the player in the stagecraft of *Mad Dog*. This sense of intimately knowing the game world (aided by the fixed celluloid composition of *Mad Dog*) gifted the player a clearer path towards success. Such a formula presented the arcade Western as both an interactive format and a knowable routine and cast the frontier experience as more a performative process than a distinct time or place.

Compared to the typical Hollywood Western, *Mad Dog McCree* also provided an exaggerated sense of the American West as a landscape of play, pushing ideas of fun and frolics to the foreground, and, in the process, relegating more serious interpretations, as found in postmodern and revisionist Westerns of the 1970s and 1980s, to the background. Individual scenes in *Mad Dog* seemed almost laughable, full of wise-cracks and humor, with players joining the frontier theater not just by their own light-gun shooting, but by becoming part of a deliberately playful script and hammy dramatic performance. *Mad Dog* delivered an interactive version of Mel Brooks' comedy Western *Blazing Saddles* (1973), where gags and cliches reworked the conventional Western, with the Prospector character, in particular, servicing as comedic device, talking to his donkey and finding himself in the most precarious of situations, even tied to sticks of dynamite. On some levels, *Mad Dog*'s joviality showed its connections with past Wild West shows, designed like circuses to entertain, as well as early amusement parks exporting a Wild West of play, such as Knott's Berry Farm, with its cowboy street entertainers and lively recreation of gunfights. However, while Wild West shows and Knott's Berry always aimed to deliver some level of education

or historic authenticity, Grebe's video game worked under no such illusions, presenting the video game West as simply an entertainment experience. The Western, in the process, became something essentially about play, losing much of its hold on history or consequence.

The playfulness and theatre of *Mad Dog McCree* set aside any concerns over the title having a serious message or serious repercussions. The *Mad Dog* West offered a ludic performance of a Hollywood Western, with a frontier story acted out by film cast and individual player alike. It offered a reel Western more than a real West to enter. Nothing, including the violence, seemed of true consequence, despite the cinematic realism. As a gun-game, *Mad Dog* invited negative feedback for its promotion of onscreen violence, but the hammy acting and lack of bloodshed in *Mad Dog* made the game a far less disturbing experience than *Doom* (1993) or *Mortal Kombat* (1992). As Grebe calls it, the title was "pretty mundane by today's standards," more "Sunday afternoon at church" and "good clean fun."

The focus on play in *Mad Dog McCree* also included a degree of satire, parody and self-reflective gaze. While hardly on the scale of films like Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) and its subversive commentary on the horror genre (West), *Mad Dog* still played with the Western as a dramatic form, recoding its meanings and exaggerating its tropes. Part of this lay with the conscious dissection of 'frontier acts' for the player, the process of transforming film scenes into game stages, with all manner of choices and performances involved. A sense of gesturing to the Western formula, highlighting its systems and joking at its structure, granted Grebe's title a degree of satirical play. Film production and script amplified this reflexive element, with actors consciously hamming their performance and playing their roles to entertain the audience. Such a process disarmed the Western, rendering it more idle fun than message.

Finally, the gamic West of *Mad Dog* represented a challenge to the Western in terms of its creative freedoms. The coupling of cinematic presentation, LaserDisc technology, and gun-game produced a Western experience narrow in play dynamics, as well as in narrative content. Typical of games "designed around previously filmed sequences" and thus offering a "prescriptive frame of action" (Perron et. al. 247), *Mad*

Dog offered only a few set pathways toward story completion. The reliance on filmed scenes restricted the possibilities of player freedom. The simple mechanisms of an on-the-rails gun-game made sure that players followed a fixed view throughout the whole experience, looking, then pointing a gun, with little else to act on. *Mad Dog* mostly curtailed the traditional freedoms associated with video games, functioning more as a short playable cinematic narrative than a full-blown video game. More than that, *Mad Dog* at times curtailed its inspiration, the Hollywood Western. The title ultimately offered the West as a series of short movie scenes, marked by stereotypical places and characters, and compressed the Hollywood Western into its simplest form and essence. In essence, it made *The Great Train Robbery* playable.

Such ludic limits and narrative compression nonetheless rarely dissuaded people from approaching the live action Western in arcades in the 1990s. Instead, the quick doses of fun offered in the *Mad Dog* West proved largely what people wanted, both from an arcade title, and maybe from the West itself. *Mad Dog McCree* paid homage to the traditional West once offered in old Hollywood, a realm of simple binaries and gunslinging cowboys, brought back to life as a novel technological experience. It brought the silver screen and silver dollars back for one last play through.

Notes:

[1] On the history of early video games and arcade culture, see Newman, *Atari Age* (2017) and Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans* (2015).
[2] Despite an enduring fascination with visual realism in gaming, LaserDiscs and FMV were soon dropped by the industry. Meanwhile, the film-like nature of *Mad Dog* re-emerged in Western video game series such as Infogrames' *Desperados* (2001+), the player 'directing' a posse of outlaws as if in a Western film, as well as Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* (2004+) series, featuring an array of movie-inspired scenes.
[3] Perron et. al. (2008) use a similar term – the 'movie-game' – to describe *Mad Dog* amongst a wider range of games that all feature "live action sequences" (233); *Mad Dog* served as template for several other Western-themed American Laser titles, including *Mad Dog II: The Lost Gold* (1992), *The Last Bounty Hunter* (1994) and *Shootout at Old Tucson* (1994), that largely reworked the original title.

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[4] Theatres sometimes chose to show the Justus/shooting scene at the beginning of the movie.

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