

From Red Redemption to Oregon's Trails: The Western in Video Games

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Featuring internal and external strife, never ending expanses, vigilantism and crime, the western seems to be ripe for exploitation by video game companies. What better narrative or protagonist would a video game need than the traditional cowboy, riding into a disputed town to dispense a form of vigilante justice? If the west seems to be such a perfect venue to craft a video game's narrative, the question that should be posed is how has the west been represented? Out of the different genres of the Western do video games gravitate towards the revisionist genre, using new modern western history to weave their tales or a more traditional genre, letting the singing cowboys and righteous vigilantes win the day? In either case video games have not been seen in the same light as the other mediums donning the western facade, never ascending past the rung of a casual pastime. What this paper will illustrate, in a historiographical sense, is how video games have not only embraced the western myth by bringing the mythical west and frontier history to the homes of gamers. That video games are in the process of evolution from such romantic traditional tales to revisionist as other art forms have done before them such as literature, portraits and movies.

The evaluation of each game in this essay will be broken up into crucial parts. The first being the story focusing on the plot, what influences that plot draws on from not only western history but western myth and sub genre. The second will not only dissect the different characters that start in the games, but also evaluate the aesthetic values such as setting and historical validity towards the time period. The final category is one that is truly unique video games, the immersion that can be felt by gameplay; or how interconnected a player could actually feel while vicariously living through the protagonist.

Arcades, and the clunky Atari 2600 are the genesis of video games, as this is the case it would be the logical place to start this narrative. Thankfully, John Wills has already crafted an in depth analysis of Western Video Games in his essay "Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines: American West in Video Games". Even though Wills himself claims western video games, "Ranked in terms of total sales, the contribution of the arcade western of the video game market is marginal" there are still a few titles that embodied the western spirit in this infancy of video games.¹ Brevity will be the theme in this analysis because of the care and analysis Wills has given these games. Three of the games that Wills discusses are *Boot Hill* released by Midway in 1977, *Cheyenne* released by Exidy in 1984 and *Gun Fright* released by Ultimate in 1986. All three games embodied a simplistic version of the west, which allowed the player to don a six-shooter and dispense their own version of vigilante justice to the west, although this was always through a white protagonist. In *Cheyenne* the player was not just fighting against nameless bandits but against such Mexican banditos and "Apache Braves" which included Geronimo and Sitting Bull.²

Wells makes astute connections between Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West as he states, "Like Cody, Game designers recognized the global marketability of gunfighter glory, presenting the American west as an exciting an exotic mélange of six-shooters, wild horses, cowboys and Indians. Both entertainment genres offered viewers the opportunity to experience high noon shenanigans and to feel part of the west."³ This connection is not a large leap as Cody shows up as the protagonist in *Gun Fright* battling

the imaginary Sheriff Quickdraw over the fictional town of Black Rock. It did not matter that the entirety of the story was fictional. Cody as the protagonist, the avatar in which the player would recreate the west, helped legitimize the western tale as much as Cody's Drama of Civilization had done when he toured across the world with his Congress of Rough Riders.⁴

John Will's comprehensive essay has one omission that is crucial to younger generations. That game is *The Oregon Trail*, to which a mere mention of this game to an undergraduate American West class elicited a groan that can only be described as nostalgia. *The Oregon Trail* is western video game that was created for the Apple II by OMEC in 1974.⁵ Although representing different epic of the west, *The Oregon Trail* draws that important link to Buffalo Bill. OMEC strived to craft a historical experience for a young American by educating by using the Wild West.⁶ A game that was part of the education in numerous members of my generation, *The Oregon Trail* and its traditional representation of the west has had an integral impact on the way that my generation views western history.

Before the game play even commences, the player is brought to the games main menu. From the menu the player is prompted to choose to 1) Start the Adventure, 2) Learn About the Trail, 3) See the Oregon Top Ten, and 4) Turn sound off. When choosing the second option the player is led to screen that tells semi-historical tale of the Oregon Trail. Although this history contains numerous spelling and grammatical errors it does the job of setting the ambiance of the west, asking "will you slosh your oxen through mud and water-filled ruts or will you plod through dust six inches of deep?" and, "What about supplies? Well, if you're low on food you can hunt. You might get a buffalo...you might. And there are bear in the mountains."⁷ Including this choice, OMEC used the same tactic that Buffalo Bill used to promote his Wild West by targeting the entire family with an educational experience.⁸ *The Oregon Trail* uses education to sell the western myth to not only the administration so they will purchase the product, but also to the children who played the game.

After learning the "history" of the trail, pressing one brings the player to a picture of a family consisting of a father, a mother, and three children. The family is white and stands in front of a tradition wagon Conestoga wagon while the player is tasked to name the family. After naming your traveling party, you must choose one of three professions: A banker from Boston, a carpenter from Ohio, or a farmer from Illinois. These professions will affect the game in different ways; from how much money you will receive before setting off on the trail, to your value towards the town when you reach Oregon.

After choosing a profession the game shows the bustling town of Independence, Missouri in 1848 and you are prompted to decide which month to leave for the trail. The choices range from the months March to July. After choosing which month to leave the player will be prompted to purchase supplies before setting off. This is were choosing professions come into play, specifically how much money you have to purchase supplies between \$400 for ones who choose the farmer, and \$1200 for those who chose to be a banker.

Then after creating your own avatar, you set off from Independence the first song from the game starts to blare out an 8-bit version of “Yankee Doodle Dandee.” When traveling the trail the player has complete control over almost every aspect of the trip, from the pace your oxen will go on, looking at a map of the trail and your progress along it, hunt, checking supplies and changing the amount of rations your family will receive, and if you were in a town you could talk and trade with the locals. This is where *The Oregon Trail* makes an important step towards total immersion that other games would not only follow, but the arcades were not able to replicate. The trail is set up on a series of landmarks which can be anything from actual landmarks found on the Oregon Trail rivers that you can pay to be ferried across of try to ford, and forts.

Whenever the character reaches a landmark they are treated to a portrait in all of its 8-bit glory. These pictures are not just random selections as many pay homage to romantic painters of the west. When arriving at the landmark “Blue Mountains” a prompt asks if the player would like to look at their surroundings. If the player chooses yes they are treated to an illustration showing a large lake, with blue skies above a brilliant enveloping and huge mountain range in the background, while the different species of trees embrace the foreground. When observing the works of Albert Bierstadt such as *Sierra Nevada* a similar image is portrayed. The white clouds allowing for clear blue skies deliver sunlight upon the breathtaking mountain range, while an assortment of trees grace the bank of the river.⁹ The beauty of America is clear in his landscapes and *The Oregon Trail* tries to capitalize on this western art to reestablish the western beauty of the trail to a new generation. The creators of *The Oregon Trail* do not come close to the beauty of any of Bierstadt’s art, for the technological settings at the time allowed them very little room for artistic creativity. Even with the technological limitations the inspiration for the landmark “Blue Mountains” and many others can be linked to many of Bierstadt’s creations.

It is not only the natural features of the west that are represented in these pieces of “landmark art” in *The Oregon Trail*, for Indians also receive a similar, romantic treatment. When reaching the landmark “Fort Laramie” the image that appears a Native American on top of his horse while in the left side of the background there are multiple tipis. On the right side in the foreground there seems to be a traveler from the Oregon Trail, while on the background on the left side are their wagons. Dividing between the two individuals in is a horse, while the fort separates the tipis from the wagons. These parties are not fighting, but the Natives and the encroaching travelers are not able to meet. They are separated not only by the wilderness, represented by the animal separating the Native and the traveler, but also because of government interference, represented by the fort separating the wagons and tipi. *Fort Laramie* by Alfred Jacob Miller was most likely used as a reference to the “Fort Laramie” image in *The Oregon Trail*. *Fort Laramie* shows an entire tribe of Natives living outside of the fort, showing that they are trading and visiting the fort.¹⁰ If the player is successful in completing their trip through the Oregon Trail an image of The Willamette Valley from 1848 the image shows a large town in the background literally surrounded by majestic purple mountains, and wilderness. John Mix Stanley’s *Oregon City on the Willamette River* is a clear inspiration for this picture. Just as in *The Oregon Trail*, Stanley has a bustling and growing town in the background as wilderness, and some Indians surround them.¹¹

The Oregon Trail is an educational game that used the west to allow children to learn about responsibility while experiencing the west through a very traditional viewpoint. The west from the viewpoint of *The Oregon Trail* was a bountiful land of opportunity that anyone could approach and use to their own advantage, it did not matter what part of the country they were part of. There were harsh realities with this lesson that death, or robbers could attack your wagon at any point, taking a member of your precious family members or material goods. Whatever the consequences, or whatever the dangers the Oregon Trail were and still are enticing to the public as numerous websites offer the game for free, the iPhone offers the game as an application, and there is a new iteration of *The Oregon Trail* on Facebook. This is a traditional view of the west that not many are able to give up, but eager to resurrect.

As Wills states, “Despite the significance of the Western Shooter as a gaming genre...few arcade Westerns were produced over the period from 1975 to 1991. By the 1990s the notable absence of new commentary in the videogame Western...sealed its commercial demise.”¹² Much like the other mediums that have used the west to illustrate a story, the Western was thought to be dead.¹³ Video games in the nineties were still a burgeoning art form, only starting to have the technological power to convey stories past static screens and blocks of text at the end of the decade. By the turning of the new century new systems such as the Xbox, Playstation 2 and Gamecube brought upon the ability to convey complicated narratives with a detailed movie like scenes.

Red Dead Revolver, produced by Rockstar games released in 2004, is one of the first westerns to appear on these newer generations of game consoles. The story follows the bounty hunter Red Harlow who in the late 1880’s after completing a few small bounties embarks on a quest of revenge when he finds that the man who killed his father and mother, General Diego and Colonel Daren. Red’s parents are killed after Red’s father Nate Harlow had just found gold in the mountains near their homestead. After extracting revenge on his parents’ murderers Red enters the “Battle Royale” which is a glorified quick draw competition. Midway through the competition the Governor of New Mexico, Griff intervenes and tries to have Red killed. It is revealed that Griff was the man that sent Diego and Daren to kill Red’s family. Red then goes with an unlikely group of acquaintances that he has met on his journey to take down Governor Griff and the small squad of army soldiers to take his revenge. After taking down Griff, Red is offered the money from the previous bounties but declines, stating that it was, “Never about the money.”¹⁴

The narrative in *Red Dead Revolver* is a bit convoluted, but one that does portrays the western myth in a variety of ways, and is in essence a spaghetti western that an individual is able to play. If Rockstar was able to cast Clint Eastwood in the role of Red Harlow, they could have easily renamed the character Man with no Name, from *The Good The Bad and The Ugly*. This is not just based from aesthetic judgment which when compared to each other there is an stunning similarity, but also from their mannerisms as neither are heavy on the dialogue and let their actions speak rather than their words. Revenge is a heavy theme in most spaghetti westerns. The slaughter of Red’s family can be viewed as homage to the movie *Death Rides a Horse* where the Bill Mecetia witnesses the rape and murder of his family, only to grow up and take revenge.

An interesting aspect of Red's character is that he is the son of a white prospector, Nate Harlow and an Indian woman Falling Star. Because of his background Red has a cousin named Shadow Wolf an Indian who comes to his aid when Diego captures Red. Shadow Wolf's character is hardly developed past the savage yet noble Indian. When finding out of his cousins capture Shadow Wolf explains to his elders that his cousin has been capture they automatically send Shadow Wolf to rescue Red. Shadow Wolf is the only character in the five playable characters to not use a rifle or pistol, instead using a bow and arrow. Shadow Wolf is also the only character to die in the game, but does so to save Red while they are escaping. There is no room in the *Red Dead Revolver* world for Shadow Wolf. His death adds not only to his nobility but to his savagery.

Red and Shadow Fox are not the only playable characters in the game, as the player gets to don the personas of Jack Swift, and Annie Stoakes. Jack Swift can be seen as a nod to the movie *Tombstone* and its representation of the character "Doc Holiday". Jack Swift is a fast-talking, wise cracking bounty hunter who wields not only twin pistols but also a sharp wit coated in an English accent. Swift represents the old Victorian values that were being challenged in Reconstruction and Gilded Age America. Annie Stoakes is a clear reference to Annie "Little Sure Short" Oakley popularized from Buffalo Bill's Wild West. While other characters use handguns or bows, Annie dons her rifle to ward off the interlopers setting her farm ablaze. Annie's storyline and mission are used to represent the difficulties farmers had with corrupt government offices and could have been a reference to the Johnson County Wars.

Red Dead Revolver was a serious leap for the western genre in video games and introduced many standards that would be kept intact for many of the following games in this essay. The first is that *Red Dead Revolver* tries to craft an immense world with varying designs to show off the different and varied landscapes of the west. The first trailer released helps to illustrate this ambiance. Starting with a branding of the Rockstar logo onto wood the chilling guitar and whistles reminiscent of a spaghetti western welcome the viewer as the protagonist slowly walks across a barren desert, a wide pan over Annie Stoakes homestead burning, then the camera revolves around Red to show the wilderness around him. Then as the trumpet blares, Red walks into the town and starts to deal his own brand of justice.¹⁵ The shots of Red walking across the desert and Annie's homestead burning are quite reminiscent of the "long shot" found in westerns as early as John Ford's "Stagecoach."¹⁶

Cinematic presentation is not the only way in which *Red Dead Revolver* set standards for Western Video Games to strive for in the future. Marksmanship and virtuosity of the gun are calling cards for the Cowboy or Outlaw. *Red Dead Revolver* introduces one a system in the game called "dead eye". When activated, "dead eye" slows down time during a gunfight and allows the player to lock on to many different targets allowing them to execute outstanding feats of marksmanship. Dueling is another game mechanic that was melded into the game. As a duel starts the camera pans around the character and the aggressor, building tension as the viewpoints switch between the two until the last second when the player can draw the pistol and mark the points on the body they would like to shoot on the duelers body...all while being faster than the computer.

On November 2005 the Xbox 360 and on November 2006 the Playstation 3 consoles were released in America, and with them video games not gained new processing powers to present their games in stunning high definition, while increasing the space inside each disk to make games longer and more in depth. The latest videogame installment of the West is one of the few games to break out from the setting of Reconstruction and Gilded Age America, instead *Red Dead Redemption* produced by Rockstar and released on May 18th, 2010 is set in the American Southwest in 1911. *Red Dead Redemption* features John Marston who is on a mission from the government to find the last three members of the gang he used to “run” with, Bill Williamson, Javier Escuella and Dutch Van der Linde.

Through this adventure John Marston travels across three different lands that represent three different parts of western history. The old west is where John Marston hunts down Bill Williamson and is ironically set in the town of “New Austin”. In New Austin Marston encounters Bonnie MacFarlane the head of the MacFarlane Ranch that is suffering in this new industrial age, the tonic salesman Nigel West Dickens, grave robber Seth, and town drunk Irish. Williamson flees to Mexico and John walks into a revolution and encounters old folk hero Langdon Ricketts. He then goes to help the tyrant powers of Augustine Allende until he tries to have him killed, and then Marston joins the side of Abraham Reyes to overthrow the government and catch the two men he was looking for.

Finally catching Williamson and Escuella, John must now search for Dutch Van der Linde in West Elizabeth. At this point John is now working directly with the government agents that are holding his family and forcing this mission onto him, Edgar Ross and Archer Fordham. Van der Lin has created an army with young Native Americans to fight against the United States Army. After working with Nastas, the native agent, and Harold McDougal a scholar using heavy doses of cocaine and studying how to “civilize” natives, Marston joins a front with the Army to attack Dutch’s army. John confronts Dutch upon a mountaintop only to have him jump to his death. His debt fulfilled to the government John returns to his wife Abigail and his son Jack. After living his life on his homestead John realizes that the army is encroaching upon him. After trying to fight the army off, John sends Abigail and Jack to safety while he faces the army alone, only to be gunned down brutally by the men he just served and promised his freedom.¹⁷

John Marston is the personification of the western antihero. Richard A Maynard describes the cowboy as “Daring, noble, ethical, romantic...the conqueror of wilderness, savagery, and villainy”.¹⁸ Marston may qualify under some of those traits, but in his own words Marston describe his mission and personality as such: “I’m an uneducated killer sent here to do all I can do well, kill a man in cold blood so that another man may do his part to cut crime in an area, and a rich man can be elected governor on the back of these promises”. As Robert Athearn stated about the Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, “...the western hero could be the ideal spokesman for those who found much was going wrong in the modern world.”¹⁹ John Marston, even though he has fought against all odds, then tried to live a “straight” life is still killed in the end. In a situation where the American Dream of prosperity for the common man should have flourished it has withered and died. His government, the very government that promised this man his freedom, betrays

him. In *Red Dead Redemption* the death of John Marston could be seen as the signal of the death of the American Dream in contemporary society.

Bonnie MacFarlane is anything but the standard woman found in many romantic westerns, and even in some revisionist. As Anne Butler describes the role that women had in more traditional “popular” west, “In the American mind, these women, unquestioning of their husbands’ decisions, sustained families through any trauma of the pioneer west but contributed little of economic or political import.”²⁰ Bonnie MacFarlane as an unmarried head of the largest ranch in the world of *Red Dead Redemption* easily battles this common myth of domesticity. In the mission “Hanging Bonnie MacFarlane” when traveling New Austin Bonnie is kidnapped by a part of Williamson’s gang and John goes off with the town marshal to save her. When the group finds Bonnie she is obviously beaten and bruised and is almost hung until John shoots the rope and saves her. After John asks Bonnie if she was ok she merely coughs and states, “I’m fine now, Mr. Marston. Thank you. What the hell took you so long, you stupid man?”²¹ Bonnie MacFarlane is the strong independent woman whom fights against the norms of a traditional western and almost personifies a revisionist western.

Unlike the previous, romanticized version of Native Americans in the previous Video Games, *Red Dead Redemption* actually brings to light the strife of the native people. By the early 20th century the Peace Policy that had set up the reservation system and many of the younger generations of Natives had been forced east to schools. While in Elizabeth town Marston is involved with a Native American by the name of Nastas, and a narcotics filled scholar from the East, Harold. In the mission “At Home With Dutch” When Nastas first walks into Harold’s office, Harold enunciates the following lines to Nastas as if talking to a baby, “Would you like to take off your slippers? Or Skin a rabbit? I know we cannot see the stars, but still my heart is pure and we meet as equals.” Nastas simply responds in a slightly dismayed tone, “No, Sir. I grew up on a reservation and attended school in the east.”²² The juxtaposition between the two characters is important, Harold who should be the more civilized character is degrading and flawed character while Nastas is the true symbol of civilization in the west.

The mission “For Purely Scientific Purposes” further illuminates the internal strife that many natives were experiencing from the destruction of their way of life. Nastas sets up a meeting between Dutch’s men but it ends up becoming an ambush. The dialogue between Harold and the Indian leader illustrate this frustration:

Harold: Hello, Gentleman. We come in peace. Indian: Those words mean nothing coming from people like you. Look at what you have done to us, look at us! We live like animals, scrambling in the dirt! Harold: Well I...I...Violence isn’t the answer. Indian: Maybe you live in a different America than we. Harold: Men like Van der Linde, will lead you to disaster. Indian: We’ve already experienced disaster. The likes which you could only imagine!

It is clear the frustrations that the Natives have with this eastern scholar. Harold does not live in the same land or plane of existence as these men.

The change to a Progressive Era setting is a deciding factor in the atmosphere in *Red Dead Redemption*. While the previous games, from the arcades to other westerns embraced the setting of an open west, where an individual could still find a new life and

setting in the west, by the time that John Marston sets of in his adventure, the west is closing. This ideal is set with the first scene of the game. John Marston is set on a train and sits between two older women conversing about the state of the West. The first dialogue of the game starts as such:

Lady: "Well, I for one am grateful, Mrs. Bush, that they are finally bringing civilization to this savage land" Mrs. Bush: I could not agree with you more, my dear. My daddy settled this land and I know he'll be looking down on us, pleased at how we helped the natives.²³

The two women are the representation of eastern ideals coming over to the "civilize" the west. John Marston is no exception from this realism of the closing of the west.

The last scene of "And You Will Know the Truth" in which John corners Dutch in his encampment illustrates further illustrates the death of the frontier. After his army of natives had been killed, Dutch is cornered by John on a snow topped cliff they have one final discussion:

Dutch: We can't always fight nature, John. We can't fight change. We can't fight gravity. We can't fight nothing. My whole life, all I ever did was fight. Marston: Then give up, Dutch. Dutch: But I can't give up neither. I can't fight my own nature. That's the paradox, John. You See? Marston: Then I have to shoot you. Dutch: When I'm gone, they'll just find another monster. They have to, because they have to justify their wages. Marston: That's their business. Dutch: Our Time is passed, John.

At this point Dutch falls to his death or the death of the old west, and as he tells John, their time is over.

Another way that *Red Dead Redemption* signifying the revision of the western myth is through song. After Dutch's death John is informed that his family has been returned to his homestead in the Great Plains area in the game. Instead of the normal nature sounds and slight twang of a guitar that usually set the ambiance in the game, "Compass" by Jamie Lidell is played. As you gallop towards the family that the player and John Marston has spent about forty or more hours towards the haunting lyrics "And now I know, the only compass that I need, is the one that leads back to you. And the burning blisters on my feet will calm, So Hold me as I'm close to flaw. Away from the warmth of your arms I stay, off the radar and into harm's way."²⁴ When this song is compared to a song that encompasses the classic "popular" western ideals such as "Don't Fence Me In" the change in tone is obvious. While "Don't Fence Me In" lyrics embrace the open range, and solitude is all that a man or a cowboy needs, "Compass" disassociates the machismo and claims that a man who has traversed the entire west only wants to return to his home, to be fenced in.²⁵

The gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption* takes the core mechanics from *Red Dead Revolver* and exponentially improved them. The "Dead Eye" mechanic returns and allows the player to perform amazing feats of virtuosity. You can still have duels all across the three territories, and now can play dice and card games, and even see a silent cartoon. Where *Red Dead Revolver* was an almost strictly linear experience *Red Dead Redemption* grants an entire breathtakingly beautiful open world to ride, hunt, and explore. This is seen in the launch trailer for the game, where old western art influences can still be found.²⁶ In one of the first scenes of the trailer John Rides with other cowboys

and it is almost as if Frederick Remington's *A Dash For Timber* has come to life.²⁷ In the very next scene John slowly rides onto a scene that might be able to rival Bierstadt in its beauty. In almost all aspects *Red Dead Redemption* have been fine-tuned and create a completely immersive gameplay experience.

Rockstar's dedication to historical accuracy with *Red Dead Redemption* started before the game was even released. As part of their marketing strategy Rockstar started a segment on the 'Newswire' part of their site and started a six part series entitled "True West: The History that Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption." In this true west Rockstar featured the history of such individuals as Frank James, Tom Horn, and Pearl Hart, and revealing the history of the weapons, drink and drugs, and the tension of government rule in the west.²⁸ The parallels between Rockstar and the partnership between Nate Salisbury and Buffalo Bill using historical fact to legitimize their Western experience almost draw themselves.

If the western is one of America's grandest inventions as Jim Kitses claims, and if the west has been, in a constant cycle of death and resurrection, why cannot this new reinvention of the western be inside a cd-rom?²⁹ At a time of mass industrialization, individuals who lost their feelings of masculinity flocked to see Buffalo Bill and his Congress of Rough Riders, to Dude Ranches to experience the west in real life, to the movie theaters to view the latest version of western justice in a narrative form. This "Neurasthenia" as George Beard classified it in the early 20th century can still be felt today.³⁰ Unlike the early 20th century the 21st century has brought new technology has brought this western myth through the new medium that is video games. Although Rockstar is leading the charge in west in video games there are many more that have adopted the western myth. Other games are adopting their own narrative forms and creating new art from it not just the western video game, and as such video game history just like the art form itself is just beginning to take shape.

Notes

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