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The Historical Environment as Aged Icon in the Gamed West

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ABSTRACT

As far back as Theodore Roosevelt or Owen Wister and his novel of western grit and masculinity, *The Virginian*, the American West has been charged with an evocative sense: as virtue, as place, as image.

In this paper, I argue that the image, as place and virtue, is exhibited in video games through a built environment that contains the ideas and meaning of the ‘Old West’ and the imagined past, in what I refer to as aged icons. The nostalgia of the American West has been built into the American psyche and is represented in film, T.V., novels, toys, amusement parks, and generalised game play. While digital games are a relative newcomer and their imagery is derivative, their immersive nature allows players the opportunity to explore and live within a world that revels in its own disintegration. The built environment and its contents in the digital play space are shown as having aged themselves – they are falling apart, dilapidated, or contain the death and destruction of a lost era. The aged icon references the buildings and objects within those structures as reinforcing and authenticating a distant and figural past that comports with a broader cultural memory of the ‘Old West.’

KEYWORDS

Video games; American West; representation; environment; aged icon; myth; distance; ‘old west’; decay

Introduction

The epic and mythic West has featured heavily in a variety of media since its invention in the 19th Century. Dime novels in the mid-19th century used Davy Crockett to encapsulate the rugged individual and the purported democratic freedom of the West; Buffalo Bill and his *Congress of Rough Riders of the World* brought the idea of Western settlement and war to large arenas in the East in the late 19th century; Films, beginning with *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, infused the tropes of violence and outlaws into a new medium. Over the course of the next 70 years films dominated the mythic representation of the ‘Old West’, and further enhanced the idea of a lawless West needing order. As video/arcade games rose in popularity in the 1970s, they too borrowed heavily from the well of established western myths, often resorting to the same tropes that appeared in novels, television, and film over the late 19th and 20th centuries (Wills 2019). *Oregon Trail* (MECC, 1978), created in 1971 and first adapted for the Apple in 1978, began to incorporate the tropes of the rugged and mythic West through the lens of an American pioneer. Throughout the 1970s arcade and console games such as *Gun Fight*, *Western Gun*, *Boot Hill*, *High Noon*, and *Sheriff* continued to paint the West as old, rugged, and

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violent. These games and later renditions published in the 1990s and through the 2000s included *Mad Dog McCree* (*American Laser Games*, 1990), *GUN* (*Neversoft*, 2005, *Call of Juarez* (CoJ) (Techland, 2006), and the *Red Dead* (RDR) (Rockstar Studios, 2010 & 2018) series have had a long lineage to pull from that created a fictionalised American West landscape based on an ideology of freedom, individualism, and masculinity situated in a frontier world. While their stories have become increasingly more complex and diverse, they are still merely a sum of ‘a copy of a copy of a fiction’ created over the prior 100 plus years (Maher 2016, 168).

The continual making and remaking of the mythic West in popular culture reinforces a nostalgic sense within gaming spaces that mirrors player expectation. As a result of the ubiquity of these images, players are familiar with the tropes of the western genre and willing participants in a game world that codes the American West as popularly known and understood. The mythic and idealised West grew ‘out of a groundswell of nationwide nostalgia’ (Murdoch 2001, 63) that had been engrained in play and role play since the early 20th century when children and teens were sent to ranch schools where they could re-enact ‘the experiences of pioneers’ (Bingham 2015, 107). In the mid-20th century ‘cowboys and Indians’ were a natural part of playground play and the development of Marx Toys’ ‘Best in the West’ action figures staged play as fun and violent. The video game world extended this play to late 20th and early 21st century audiences that were now able to immerse themselves in an American West that mirrored their understanding and expectations. Many players are aware of those connections, and they suggest that while they know the game is not history per se, they revel in the history of the ‘Old West’ that the games impart. The reflection and acceptance of these popular, heritage-based histories in the game worlds ‘reflect the complexity of contemporary cultural and social interface’ (De Groot 2009, 7). There is an excitement for a playground that players can inhabit that is both familiar and part of their childhood play habits. Websites and discussion forums make clear the explicit connections between these games and the cultural and play history they borrow from, such as ‘7 Things Red Dead Redemption 2 Borrowed from Classic Westerns’ (Atkinson 2021). Players’ references to film and the lost West are replete online – ‘This game actually feels like a movie,’ ‘YEEE!! old west again!!,’ and ‘Welcome back to the old West’ (Rockstar Studios 2018, Ubisoft 2012). And while the games explored in this article vary in their mechanics and platform, their use of imagery, setting, and naming conventions are clear nods to the nostalgia of the ‘Old West’ and an attempt to place the player into a familiar and satisfying setting.

Of specific focus in this paper is how the backdrop of that nostalgic West presumes cultural knowledge that even players unfamiliar with the history of the American West will be aware of. The built environment, the aged icon and its revelatory images showcase struggle and hardship through a depictive lens that is often secondary to the inherent violence in these games, but just as important in creating an immersive, distant, representational, and culturally familiar world. While this might not be unique to games set in the American West, I would argue that the spaces, and the built environment as an aged place, specifically situates the player in a nostalgic world that reinforces the western landscape as functionally derivative and the embodiment of America’s individual frontier myth. It is, specifically, the aged character of the built environment that roots the West as a rugged and ideological landscape. To see a clean and pure landscape, such as Maysville from the film *The Harder They Fall*, where the entire town is painted various shades of

white, intentionally demonstrates the historically rooted problem of the West being represented as a purely white space. Maysville is a town of clean, racialised newness, and makes the point by appearing so. Yet the built environment in American West video games represents a set of historical markers that make the West distant by ageing a variety of objects and structures in the game world that would have historically been new or recently built. Doing so marks the world as not only different and distant, but as exceptional (Jones & Wills 2009, 40).

The built environment formalises a nostalgic affinity with an aged West that is both ideological – the frontier as settler space –, and functional – situating the gunslinger within their presumed constructed environment that is understood by the player as appropriately western. In this way, the constructed game space is as much about what the landscape/environment does, as it is about ‘how it works as a cultural practice’ (Murray 2018, 144). The specific and curated western backdrop of the game essentialises the spaces through a ‘highly curated framing of the playable environment’ that makes ‘a set of claims about land, space and place’ (Murray 2018, 142, 146). The game environments are thus entangled with historical understanding and are directly connected to how players see and experience these historical spaces (Flores 2002, 18).

The paper threads together how the West has been imagined, represented, and entangled with nostalgic meaning in video games. The first section explores the creation of a physical and virtual *imagined West* that has painted the West as an ‘old West’ into popular memory. The second section follows with a definitional discussion of the *aged icon* and the way the built environment is used to tell an old story. A longer third section explores the unreality of the past in video games and its conflation with our own present and not the *present of the gameplay*. Historians are continually confronted with the problem of distancing ourselves from the past with the understanding that we approximate and mediate the past. Gameplay within these Western worlds, however, mixes these ideas and suggests an old world with the aged icon in place of newly constructed spaces. While the paper is peppered with game examples, in the fourth section, *The ‘Old West’ Exemplified*, I take a deep dive into the game spaces to show how the aged icon is reflected in three categories – decay, death/violence, and oddities. These categories are paired with the use of the aged icon to help create a distant present and curate a nostalgic sense of the western ideal in the game worlds. The paper finishes with a discussion that looks at the objects and spaces within western-themed video games as places of *re-enactment* and museum spaces that reinforce the idea of an aged past. Overall, the paper’s construction highlights the place and embodiment of the aged icon as a cultural relic that has been normalised and included in these Western game spaces in a structured and reductive way.

The Imagined West

The buildings in the gamic West are easily recognisable to players as they synchronise with how the American West has been imagined and they have the hallmarks of what might be called ‘Westernness’ (Clare 2021, 111). Like a Hollywood set, the towns are mere veneers with a built environment that has just enough depth to make it familiar. The towns are one, maybe two streets, there is a general store, saloon, brothel, a jail or sheriff’s office, possibly a bank, and a few other buildings that are nondescript or highlight some

of the other expected offerings in a small western town. These buildings offer a ‘certain *type* of historical representation within the game, one necessarily generated by the popular imagination rather than an attempted connection with “the” past’ (Clare 2021, 18–19). These games are in many ways not a history of the West, but westerns. As Pawel Kopinski, lead artist and co-developer of *CoJ* (2006, 2009, 2013), stated in an interview, ‘We wanted to capture the best of all the western movies we love . . . It’s a blend of the best elements’ (Goldstein 2009). Not only is the game telling or retelling a popular story, but the environment is structured and presented so it is understood as the American West as expected.

The expectation of what the ‘Old West’ looked like has been fortified through their representation as monuments that assume an ‘uncontested and unadulterated story’ (Barnes 2008, 83). There are numerous sites across the United States that play to the interest of seeing the ‘Old West’ ‘as it was’ but merely create and reinforce those references. There are towns – Deadwood, Placerville or Hangtown, Bisbee. There are forts – Fort Smith, Bent’s Fort, Fort Verde. There are theme parks – Disneyland’s Frontier Land, Knott’s Berry Farm, Wild West City. There are mines or ghost towns – Calico, Bannack State Park, Garnet. While these sites engage many elements of the myth of the ‘Old West’, they also play into the theme of a lost, decayed, and distant West. The aged icon, to coin a term, of video games, might in part, be said to be a derivative of these restored and recreated spaces that attempt to mimic the agedness of the American West. They are, in essence, a nostalgic attempt to recreate a distant past that aligns with an exceptionalist ideology.

Western tourist sites have helped to bend the fiction of what the ‘Old West’ looked like into an imagined reality. The ghost town of Bodie, California, exemplifies the preference to age the American West to align with and reify cultural expectations. When Bodie was abandoned in the early 20th century, the daily items of the inhabitants were mostly left behind in their homes, shops, and governmental buildings, giving a sense of ‘what it was like in that era.’ When the California Department of Parks and Recreation acquired Bodie in 1962 they decided to leave the buildings and objects exactly as they found them and only intervene when there is a structural issue with the buildings themselves. The Parks Department has kept the numerous buildings in a state of ‘arrested decay’ to give Bodie a sense of timelessness. But of course, the buildings are not in a state of arrested decay, but in a state of continual decay that presupposes this is what the new and burgeoning town might have looked like in 1880 at its height. In fact, when viewing an image of one of the structures from Bodie (see [Figure 1](#)), it looks like a virtual set piece for the display of the aged icon in western-themed video games. One could easily imagine the structures within Bodie, or other frontier tourist destinations, as set pieces for games situated in the American West. The buildings come in many forms, but the totality in their dilapidation confirms essential elements about the coding of these structures and the public’s desire to see the West as a place of ruin and decay. For one, when buildings are still occupied in the game world the subtle and not so subtle decay depicts a West in the death thralls of advancing American progress. Second, as some towns and communities were left to fall apart, the lack of occupants reinforces the abandonment of older projects to civilise the West. In part this is because, as Self (2007, 5) explains, ‘the western has been so involved in the discourse of national identity, its stories almost ritually engage a process of reimagining the



Figure 1. 'Arrested decay' in Bodie, California. Photograph by Ashlee Pisciotta.

frontier.' Within video games, players assent to the reimagining of the frontier and all its contents as old and faded, something out of reach. This fictive use of the past frames the historical icon to correspond with the imagination and popular memory of a distant West.

Examining photographic evidence of the deterioration of actual buildings reveals how nostalgia is entangled with how the past is presented. The images shown below are part of a collection originating near the turn of the 20th century in Elva, Winnipeg Canada. The images highlight newly built grain elevators, with the newest being built in 1904 and an older round elevator having been built in 1878. The photographs, while grainy, show well taken care of buildings that have not suffered the typical decay displayed in games, such as *RDR* or *CoJ*, even though they are between 35 and 6 years old. (see [Figure 2](#)) The weather in southern Manitoba is comparable to areas of the American plains, and the data from the general area of Manitoba shows weather extremes from -40°C in the winter to highs of 50°C (with humidex) in the summer ([Wikipedia 2022](#)). Images of the same structure from 2022 (see [Figure 3](#)) show what happened to the buildings once they were left alone and exposed to the elements. Only after 100 years do these buildings have the same visual cues that are presented in the gamified West, showing how texturing the West as old is mostly part of an imagination, an imagination that is linked more with nostalgia than reality. It is exactly why the newness of towns in *The Harder They Fall* resonates so strongly as they are unexpectedly not presented as old.



Figure 2. Elva grain elevator, 1910. Photograph courtesy Gordon Goldsborough of the Manitoba Historical Society. Winnipeg, MB, Canada.



Figure 3. Elva grain elevator prior to destruction in 2020. Photograph courtesy Gordon Goldsborough of the Manitoba Historical Society. Winnipeg, MB, Canada.

The Aged Icon

The aged icon is compilation of structures and objects within the built environment of modern, western-themed video games. The aged icon is at once the buildings themselves – consisting of structures within the small western towns, the individual homes and ranches strewn throughout the game worlds – and the associated objects near, in, or on those structures. These latter objects include exterior fences, farming tools, waggons,

paint, and interior objects such as tables, fireplaces, beds, and desks. The exterior and the interior of the aged icons work together to set the tone for the individual spaces and the larger game. The aged icon, as structure or building, is referential to other genre conventions of the West, but it connotes a particular vision of the West that rhymes with the violent game play. That is, the West in these games is enjoined with violence and the disappearance of the West as it was, or at least how it has been imagined. The aged icon is in continual decay; it is weathered and often unsalvageable, the wood or paint is faded or falling apart, windows are broken, and items within and near the house are unusable. When newer structures are encountered in these game worlds, they merely highlight the difference between the nostalgic, simpler, and forthright world of the 'Old West', and the newer or modern world, with its concomitant services, technology, and complexity.

The built environment within these games are reproductions of memory, a memory moulded together over time, and represented digitally as an American West signified through decay. Decay is rampant and experienced throughout the game worlds. These digital memory places can be equated with what Pierra Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* and they are representative of a specific imagination of the American West. They are spaces and places that denote the perceived rapid change in American society sourced from countless repetitions in other genre that built a memory of place, one that imagines the structures as not only symbolic but strictly representative of the hardship and loss associated with the American West in the late 19th century (Nora 1989; Murdoch 2001). From the moment these games begin, the aged icons are clearly displayed. The opening scenes in *RDR2* take place in Colter, an abandoned mountain town, and are a first point of contact for the decaying world. The structures are barely habitable, which the game highlights in its winter setting – there is nowhere to escape the freezing weather with the buildings providing only a slim and incomplete separation from the harsh reality outside (see Figure 4). Similarly, In *CoJ* (2006), Episode 1 – 'Once Upon a Time in Stinking Springs,' Silas enters a hideout that has clearly seen better days. The rotting wood and caved-in structures leave little to imagine about the age of the world.

The same is true for the built environment on the periphery of the game as it is near towns, such as Valentine, one of the first inhabited towns that Arthur can visit in *RDR2*. While the town itself is modelled on an idea of what westerns towns should look like, the structures immediately adjacent to the town, a church and small home on the northern edge show the typical weathering and agedness of buildings that will be encountered throughout the game world. As the game progresses, the player encounters more of the same – buildings, towns, and objects that are these memory places or 'spaces of memory' (de Simine and Silke 2013) – they are situated in a broader game world that reinforces the frontier as lost and abandoned yet rugged. The built environment and associated objects then 'become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage' within the game and for the player (Nora 1996, Preface).

While the *RDR* series is particularly replete with these images of the aged icon, *CoJ* and other games showcase similar aged and decayed qualities. The examples, as seen in Figures 5 and Figures 6 are common and force the player to associate these spaces with an aged or bygone era. They are, by design, made to look old – a distant and decaying West that no longer exists except in popular culture or physical tourist attractions (Maher 2016). Regardless of whether a player engages fully with the programmed



Figure 4. General decay in Colter in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games). Screenshot by Author.



Figure 5. House in Carmody Dell showing typical lived-in structure with weathering and unkempt surroundings in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games). Screenshot by Author.

narrative, or they disengage with the narrative at intervals to ride the borderlands and find new spaces or the limits of the game, the game world exposes them to the structured environment bounded by the erosion of life on the frontier. *RDR2* and similar games reveal how the aged veneer of the built environment and associated objects authenticates the centrality of the past as not just being ‘long ago,’ but as continuously old: they were never new because they were from long ago. The use of buildings in videogames conforms and confirms how many people locate and think of the past as an aged icon. New is



Figure 6. Abandoned town with broken homes in *CoJ: Gunslinger*. Screenshot by Author.

now; old was then (Lee 2005). The objects that appear old are construed as old. The use of an aged icon within the built environment locates the past as distant while authenticating it through association. As Sandweiss (2002, 326) states, images ‘evoke rather than tell, [they] suggest rather than explain’. The distance here then is to differentiate us from an older era; however, it also equates the past with age itself and a nostalgic sense. A marker not known to those who would have existed within that world as objects would present as new and not timelessly old. The agedness of the structures then serve to distance us from the historical while connecting us to the rugged individualistic ideology associated with the American West. To do otherwise would complicate the nostalgic enjoyment of the imagined West.

The Present as Distant

The present, or the moment in history being played, in the games is shown as a past place that focusses the players own presentness and separateness from ‘Old West’. The player is placed in the world of the ‘Old West’ but positioned to view it from a distance – nostalgically. Mixing historical and cultural memory is often essential to encourage gameplay, as the idea of the American West has been fully rooted into the American psyche (Murdoch). How the aged icons in *RDR2* and similar games essentialise that distance through a fictive lens is critical to game player engagement and immersion into the ‘Old West’. As Phillips (2013, 7) affirms, ‘What matters is to recognize that all historical representations mediate our engagement with the past, though their distance vary both in type and degree.’ The type and kind of concern here focuses on the ways that the built environment is aged, and how the past is approximated, or altered to tell the narrative (White 2005, 153, 1980, 10). The idea of a fictive truth, an element in between or containing truth and fiction, that appropriately connects a meaningful narrative of the past – a place in between what we know and want to convey, can be a valuable, though

misplaced tool when conveying historical ideas (Rosenstone 2017; Southgate 2013). The aged icon looks to create a distance from that world of the late 19th century American West to let us know that while we are taking part in the world, as Arthur or John or Cotton or Silas or Billy, we are separate from it as indicated by the passage of time portrayed through the aged icons.

Video games that reify the mythic west confront historical distance in a way that is unique to the genre, confirming the old rather than the new. Other forms of popular history take a different approach that is no less mythic. This contradiction is especially true at historical re-enactment and local and national heritage sites that have been purged of traits that might present any sense of decay or age. This is a restorative past, a past that unlike the environments in many American West games, presents a clean and hyper-realised world for the comfort of those in attendance. David Lowenthal describes such an effort in Victorian England where ‘restorers . . . scraped medieval churches and cathedrals clean of the debris of time and neglect, so as to perfect their divinity’ (Lowenthal 1998a, 6). This restorative past has combined with what might be called a comforting past, which can be highlighted in how many American farms that enslaved people have chosen to exhibit and explain slave quarters on their property. Recently, several of these sites, including Oak Alley Plantation in Louisiana, have included slave quarters as add-ons to their larger tours of the main house, but the structures of the slave quarters themselves are often refurbished, newly constructed, and perchance have windows; the dwellings for the enslaved contain little of the actual horror of slavery. The sanitising of these spaces is redolent of what Cornel West and Ijeoma Oluo have referred to as the Santi Claus-ification of historical figures, especially MLK Jr. However, instead of creating a softer image of a person, the structure’s interior and presentation is softened, again for the comfort of those wary of confronting a complex past. A purposeful act to cleanse the built environment of the past it had inherited.

These restorative myths have their place in Western genre video games where spaces and places of violence are denuded of the inherent inhumanity to erode or soften our relationship with them. In *CoJ: Bound in Blood* (Techland, 2009), a video game situated towards the latter stages of the Civil War in 1864, the McCall brothers enter a large farm owned by a man named Jackson who enslaved individuals. After rescuing Jackson, the McCall Brothers have a shoot-out with Union soldiers all the while running in and around the supposed slave quarters. These buildings are in reasonable condition, akin to the status of the main house, and have windows and general amenities that wash the site of the brutality of slavery, removing any reminders as to the humans who suffered. The restoration and comparative newness of these slave quarters reflects a dissonance that ultimately softens the impact of slavery within the game. The lack of any significant reference to slavery demonstrates the power of negation or absence in depictions of the American West and strengthens the power of what is included and signified. Braithwaite Manor is a good example of how *RDR2* avoids critical issues with the Civil War. The Manor situates the war in the distant past even if Civil War Veterans wander the countryside. The point here is to highlight how games and game developers are selective with the way they portray the West so as not to disrupt the popular imagination, and their use imagery to convey a variety of ideas about the American West to shape engagement and affirm what the player *knows* about the past.

The cleansing and reshaping of the built environment are ways to confront historical distance and confirm our premeditated relationship to the past. We hardly relate the past as it was, as if it was, and when writing narrative for video games historical distance must be shaped to capture the player in the moment. Yet, video games are not history exactly (Clare 2021). They are, in a sense, a variation on a theme and present a historical show rooted in historical markers. This is not to downplay or sideline-specific commentary on the importance or the impact that historical video games have on a larger audience. In fact, it is that impact that makes reading video games and their portrayal of history so relevant. The *CoJ* example above suggests a cleansing of the environment, but what we often see in games set in the American West is a built environment that is hardened to extol the passing of time within a presumed frontier world. As Lowenthal (1997, 35) 'Legends of origin and endurance . . . project the present back, the past forward, aligning us with forebears whose virtues we share but whose vices we shun.' Even in the game *Westerado: Double Barrelled* (Ostrich Banditos, 2015), a pixelated humorous open world top-down shooter that incorporates an inordinate amount of western film references, towns and the overall environment fit the narrative of the old and mythic West. The first shoot-out of many within the game occurs around a broken set of buildings, weeds, and is located next to a cemetery that exemplifies the loss and destruction of the 'Old West'. Games like *Westerado* are a historical retelling shaped by cultural memory and they form and reform a set of markers that reaffirm ideological memes about past lives and past environments. History is not at once factual or objective and much as a historical game 'it fulfils that function by itself proving to be a hybrid mixture of fact and fabulation' (Southgate 2009, 154). Or even more to the point, 'Fiction, fed by history, becomes material for historical reflection or else for fiction, and so on. This unpredictable intermingling can come together in a knot, or in a name' (Ginzburg 2012, 4). In this sense, video games are different in degree and not purely in kind (De Groot 2009, 6). How then do western-themed video games confront the complexity of the American West through its built environment?

The 'Old West' Exemplified

RDR2 even more than *RDR* and *CoJ* reaches further in its depictions of the built environment of the American West as a distinct and separate place. The built environment of *RDR2* conveys, to use a line from Nora (1996, 15) 'maximum possible meaning with the fewest possible signs.' Within modern video games, buildings are a derivative of old. Examples are strewn throughout the open world environment of *RDR2* and include three principal forms – decay, death/violence, and oddities. Decay references the specific ageing and weathering of the structures and their surrounding environs and objects and is quite normalised throughout the game worlds. Death and violence are commonly associated with these spaces and equate the American West as violent and rooted in a less civilised world. The final category, oddities, is a means to situate the game spaces as different and strange. While I have isolated specific examples for each category, they often work in combination thus enhancing the distance of the aged icon.

Nearly all the structures within *RDR2*, *CoJ*, and the other game worlds are in a state of some decay or disrepair. The decay scales from simple lack of attention to uninhabitable. Smaller forms of decay are noticeable in how fences and animal pens are broken on

numerous farms and can be found extensively throughout the *RDR2* worlds. Even on the working Guthrie Farm outside Emerald Ranch in *RDR2* the appearance of broken fences and pens along with random detritus relegates the farm to the past. Associated with many of the decayed structures, and randomly spaced throughout the large game world, are unusable waggon with broken wheels, missing boards, or rusted-out frames. These items are common signifiers of an 'Old West', and they make their appearance in *GUN*, *West of Loathing* (Assymetric, 2017), *Westerado*, *CoJ*, *Weird West* (WolfEye Studios 2022), and *RDR2*. Specifically, the waggons reference an older, less technologically adept world. They are also familiar items that pair with decorations used in some people's yards in the United States to evoke tradition, quaintness, and a lost era. On a larger level, the houses within *RDR2* are barely holding up or may have completely deteriorated, and you can find broken windows, missing wood planks, and peeling paint on homes that are still inhabited in the game world. This is as true for the several mining locations (Heartlands, Roanoke, Grizzlies) as it is for the variety of isolated houses and farms. For example, the mining facility in Ewing Basin is abandoned and every building is uninhabitable. It is also the location of the first gang on gang shoot out. There are at least three other mining installations that are completely broken and unused. One is an Oil Rig located in the Heartland where Arthur finds a lone miner who was killed by a falling shaft. The addition of abandoned and dilapidated mines is also found in *CoJ*, *GUN*, and even *Weird West*, a fantasy-based top-down shooter.

While towns, in general, tend to have less physical damage, this isn't always the case. Even in a town like Rhodes within *RDR2* players will find buildings such as the Doctor or Sherriff offices with broken planks and peeling paint. When looking at the riverside town Van Horn, the community is completely broken down. The small piers are falling into the water, boats are shattered, and the storefronts are pictured as old with loss of paint and structural integrity. One of the buildings that you can enter at the south end of town is inhabited by vagrants, stairways are broken, and the interior has been scraped of meaningful resources. This is similar to what can be found in *CoJ: Gunslinger* (Techland, 2013), Episode 2 'A Fistful of Hot Lead.' After escaping jail, Silas is greeted with the abject deterioration of the town of Lincoln. The town is a literal patchwork and includes the associated broken-down waggons and even dead trees to add to the effect of the aged icon. Examples are too rife to detail, but the prior examples speak to the way that the games convey a rigorous climate, a harsh landscape, and a difficult life that the game embodies through dilapidation. This broken and decayed West rhymes with the loss of the American West that is told within the game. Even *WoL*, the comic RPG Western that presents the world in black and white and the characters as merely stick figures, does its best to convey a world in disrepair. Within the opening scenes, where you find yourself at home, the interior of the house is shown to be weathered, and objects such as tables, chairs, and desks are given a 'wobbly' appearance to suggest age. The characterisation of the building's exterior and interior announce the ingratiating of the old as old, visually told. Additionally, these games use the past as a reference point to let us know that the world is not only old, but violent.

Many of the structures, especially on the periphery – or in the vernacular, the frontier – are filled with death and mayhem, suggestive of the reputed violence of the American West (Slotkin 1992). The structures that are part of the gamic 'frontier,' serve to exist as 'old' examples of the late 19th century and the concomitant struggle to survive. These

'frontier' spaces outside the settled areas are near enough for game travel but are situated metaphorically distant. The hardship they exhibit, on one hand, is exemplified with a character that needs to 'conquer' their environment or world through masculinised violence and the games often 're-create a unifying win for America and specifically for white Americans' (Maher, 3). This is just as true with a comic side-scrolling game like *WoL*, as it is with an open world epic like *RDR2*. While substantially different in substance and realism, each game's character's gunslinging skills are used to conquer a range of opponents. Other games such as *GUN* essentialise, as the name indicates, gunfights, which often take place in the Old Western towns set in 1880. On the other hand, violence is exhibited through natural causes that serve to link the harsh environment to the experience and rugged necessity of frontier settlement.

The expectation is of a West that is senseless in its brutality. Examples are rife throughout the game worlds, but a few select examples from *RDR2* will make the point. Before any meaningful play begins, Arthur, Dutch, and Micah dispatch a few unsavoury individuals who have invaded the marital home of Jake and Sadie Adler. Jake's body is found in a waggon as the outlaws are confronted. You can then enter the house after a brief shootout to find a scared and harassed Sadie who had been hiding in the cellar and at the end of her wits. The home is in bad shape, and Sadie is clearly suffering trauma, a dissociative break from domesticity to independence culturally read as madness. She's been stripped of the trappings of femininity and now occupies a space of criminality and debauchery. Later in the game, when you return to the house, you can scour the home that has been destroyed by a fire that began when you left the house after rescuing Sadie. Walking through the ruins finalises a loss, not just of the Adler family and home, but of the idea of the West and a way of life. To experience an empty space or to experience buildings on the periphery that are occupied by safe and non-violent homesteaders and small farmers would challenge player expectation and suggest a West that runs counter to the mythology. For example, near the Southfield Flats at the Robard Farm is the 'love triangle' house. Inside you find a gruesome scene with blood- and blood-spattered footprints throughout the cabin along with two murdered individuals inside. Outside, propped against an ageing waggon, is a woman's body with a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. Death within houses is a common encounter. You can find the body of an elderly woman inside a small home who either died of loneliness or killed herself. A love letter dated from the Civil War speaks to a lost love from 34 years prior. Graves are also a literal marker of death on the outskirts and can be found at intervals during game play. On the very edge of the game map, you can encounter the widow of Willard's Rest where she is found crying by the grave of her husband. You can find dug-up bodies in the hills of West Elizabeth, and outside a small cabin in Grizzlies West a grave has been robbed. In Emerald Ranch, there is a grave listing the death of Joshua Burgess whose headstone reads, 'Accidentally Shot, August 1898.' If you enter the nearby empty and now defunct saloon, you can find the bullet holes in the wall and the blood splattered floor where the shooting occurred. Not all violence in the game, however, is man made. Natural events create chaos and expose the violence of the American West in multiple forms.

Entire towns are found in ruin either through some natural event or simply the advance of civilisation. The small community of Pleasanton was besieged by a plague, with every headstone bearing the date of decease as 1883. While the loss is violent, it is

not specifically, the violence of the gun, but the savagery of the frontier that destroys community. The town now sits vacant with several of the buildings left without supporting walls or any substantial interior. Further exploration brings Arthur to the town of Limpany in the Heartlands region. The town has burned to the ground and each building is left exposed and vacant with no survivors. The only people in the town are the bodies of two prisoners abandoned in their cells left to die a miserable death. The edge towns reaffirm a narrative grounded in the difficulty of survival on the periphery. A house near the derelict and abandoned trading post in Roanoke Ridge has been destroyed by a meteor. Inside the 'Meteor house,' Arthur finds several bodies where the unfortunate were unlucky enough to be when the 'act of god' hit. Examples are too numerous to mention, and their ubiquity highlight how the American West is depicted as not only violent but at the end of its age. Death as myth and death as metaphor. The mayhem being insidiously located within an aged icon is there to verify the antiquity and separateness of a world that no longer exists and exists outside of our own world's conception of what might have been and what a proper civilised world looks like. The mayhem and death at the edges of these built environments lets us know that this was long ago just as the death within these aged and dilapidated structures further serve to approximate an era, yet merely distances one from any historical reality.

Amid all the decay and violence, the misfits and oddities appear. Their appearance is often, though not always, found on the edges of communities and further paints an American West that is removed from civilising influences. While one could see these encounters as fun and entertaining asides, placed along the aged icon, they further estrange the player. A possible early encounter with one oddity occurs at the Aberdeen Pig Farm with 'The Happy Family,' an unkempt house with detritus strewn throughout the yard. If you visit this house in the evening, you will encounter a large man sitting on the porch. He will invite you in for a meal with his becoming sister, who also comes onto the porch to entice you. If you go inside the house and commune with the pair, the game will dissolve, and you will find yourself outside in a mass grave where the pair have killed and buried others. This encounter demonstrates how the oddities are mixed with violence and often paired with the aged icon. In several locations, there are the loners who exhibit the characteristics of the outsider or hermit. There is the lone woman on the northeastern fringes of Big Valley and at the edge of the game map who will sic her dogs on you and shoot at you if you get too close to her hovel, again a dilapidated mess. There is the isolationist or hermit on the fringes of Annesburg in Manito Glade who shouts a variety of warnings and invitations for you to leave as you approach. Many of the taunts are in the vein of this particular chant from him, 'Didn't you understand me? I don't want visitors,' and exemplify the separation and preference to keep his 'Old West' away from encroaching influences. If you get too close, as is the case with many of the houses within the game, you will be warned, chased, and then shot at. This isn't just because you are an outlaw, as you are not specifically shot at in towns unless you are officially wanted by the law, but register that you are a stranger and the preferred form of greeting is shoot first, ask questions later. You can carefully explore the hermit's outside space, which consists of old fencing and a variety of run-down objects, thus again exemplifying the aged icon. There is even a house in the Heartlands known as Hani's Bethel where approximately a dozen individuals have committed ritual suicide and lie in state on beds with their shoes still on. Similarly, there is a house, or barely a house far off trail in Grizzlies East where

you can find a variety of ‘spiritual’ objects and a ‘witches’ cauldron.’ If you drink from the cauldron, the scene will dissolve, and you will wake up some distance from the witches’ brew. The oddity of the site and its dislocation from the game narrative serve other game references but also the decentring of the world. These are but a few of the examples of the misfits or oddities that Arthur can investigate. These instances and the structured space that they inhabit further distance the world from our own and suggest a world on the edge and in many ways, dying. Each example is further stretched by the decayed environment and the examples of death or violence that many contain or evoke.

Re-enacting History

The use of the aged icon and its pairing with violence and oddity particularises the past as something less or as a time when people and their surroundings were not just different, but uniquely pre-modern. As Phoebe Kropp demonstrated when discussing the invention of Olvera Street in Los Angeles, ‘historic built environments are most notable when they become stages for dramatizing the meanings of the past in the present’ (Kropp 2006, 13–14). While situationally different, the push at the turn of the 20th century in California to recreate El Camino Real, the Missions, and Olvera Street was meant to provide California with a past, and the only past that California was perceived to have, meaning the Native American experience was not considered a real or ‘civilized’ past, was the old Spanish past, which could then serve a new interest of authenticating a place presumed to lack history. Within the world of games set in the American West, a history located in the recent past could be approximated as distant through age and that age associated with authentic and nostalgic elements. The worlds are also representations that convey an ideology with a distant past that is in turn grounded in it having served the test of time and therefore rooted in an old tradition. Within the game worlds of *RDR2*, *CoJ* and the like, the buildings are often there to visually confirm what has already been applied to the narrative structure, further reinforcing the West as a separate era clearly distinguished from our own (Sandweiss 2002). ‘The power of these pictures,’ or in this case images, writes Raphael Samuel

is the reverse of what they seem. We may think we are going to them for knowledge about the past, but it is the knowledge we bring to them which makes them historically significant, transforming a more or less chance residue of the past into a precious icon. (Raphael 1994, 328)

The built environments within the games are powerful markers of an American West subsumed with a recognisable ‘residue.’ And while I have used *RDR2* as the primary example of these instances, many other western-themed games, including *CoJ*, *West of Loathing* (Asymmetric 2017), *Westerado*, and *GUN*, would serve just as well to substantiate the idea of the aged icon and its ability to immerse game players into the ‘known’ world of the American West.

Video games with their interactivity and immersive nature, function as a museum space, and the games mechanics and sweeping open world vistas encourage players to explore these spaces.

Robert T. Self’s (2007) assertion that ‘movies thinly veil their status as museums, but the western purports to take us to exhibits of an actual West’ applies just as well, if not

more so, to video games as an exploratory space (Self 2007, 16). The museum space is highly curated and may not function or be authored by an academic, but its representational form draws from popular memory and recreates an environment that is tangible and warrants its 'Westernness.' As players explore the aged icons and surrounding spaces, they encounter the structures and objects that authenticate the historical qualities of that space. For example, *RDR2* authenticates the game space and recreates a sense of museum when players collect cigarette cards, guns, and even letters that narrate stories of exploration and loss. The cigarette cards are both historical and highlight historical people, moments, or ideas that further authentic the space as historical (Salvati and Bullinger 2013). The same ideas can be seen in the opening of *CoJ: Gunslinger* when Silas begins recounting some of his many bounties. The scene incorporates the objects associated with a saloon, from the swinging entry doors, whisky bottles, poker cards, and an 'authentic' dime novel. In many ways, the 'objects [are] a means of entering into and living vicariously in a past time' and 'are triggers of chains of ideas and images that go far beyond their initial starting-point. Feelings about the antiquity, the authenticity, the beauty, the craftsmanship, the poignancy of objects are the stepping-stones towards fantasies, which can have aesthetic, historical, macabre or a thousand other attributes' (Jordanova 1989, 25, 23).

The overall environment and the ability to immerse a game player into the space and place within video games is essential to the gaming experience. The veneers, particularly through constructed objects, that are created to occupy that space within historically situated video games establish and re-enact historical moments that ultimately reinforce ideas about the past and entertain. As Daniel Maher states in his book *Mythic Frontiers*, the 'process of mixing contemporary imaginings of what the frontier was like with historical and material artifacts from a specific period ... create ostensibly authentic reproductions for tourists to consume.' (Maher 2016, 4). Any relation of the built environments to authenticity or to any order of simulacra matter less than what is meant through the embodiment of the re-enactment or in this case the representation of the built environment and associated objects of the 'Old West'. (Dow 2013, 227). It is these embodiments with a means to interpret the environment, but on the terms prescribed by the game itself, that give life and narrative focus to the many objects within the game.

Video games are not pure re-enactment, but they do present a world where the history is re-enacted and the objects that players engage with presume an authenticity. According to Iain McCalman and Paul A. Iain and Pickering (2010, 1) authenticity functions as a byword for re-enactors, 'a means to narrow the gap between past and present, as if counting the stitches on a tunic or soaking leather in urine is a way to experience what it felt like to live in the past.' The attempt to shrink the distance between the past and present is common in re-enactment communities; they engage in these displays for many reasons but also to 'keep history alive because they love the past or wish they could have lived back then' (Maher, 199). In the same way, there is a seduction to authenticity when re-enacting that 'is directly correlated to the more distant we become from the past' (McCalman & Pickering 2010, 60). In a similar fashion, historically situated video games, and possibly western-themed video games in particular, feel the pull and need to build a seemingly authentic world that can transport a player into a lived experience of

an era. The lived experience is enhanced by creating a world that pulls from a collective public memory and an authentication of artefacts that rhyme with the aged icon.

The gameplay, the game world, and the game structure reveal not only historical ideas and eras but demonstrate the game players role in confirming or conforming to a *prior* knowledge. Kapell's and Elliott (2013, 9–13) discussion about 'the problem of intention and agency' within video games grounds the complex relationship between the game and game player, and how historically situated games do history. In particular, the ability for a game player to fit into the mythic world is assisted by the presumed authentic material objects within the game (Jardanova 1989). Objects, neither physical nor virtual, alone cannot attune one to the lived experiences of those in the past, but they do create an immersive environment that suggests that the world as real, identifiable, and tangible. These objects reinforce the spaces within these games as historic or historical and validate the mythology behind the historical presentation. This is what Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger refer to as selective authenticity: 'how game designers draw upon a chain of signifiers assembled from historical texts, artifacts, and popular representations' to create a feel and look that presumes an accurate or real historical space (Salvati and Bullinger 2013, 154). In this sense, artefacts and other items are modelled on actual artefacts (e.g. guns, cigarette cards) to provide realism that further serves to immerse game players into their role and their connection to an authentic environment. This strong connection to the past is what reinforces the identity of the aged icon 'with an interactive experience of the past [that] blends historical representation with generic conventions and audience expectations' (Salvati & Bullinger 2013, 154).

Situating these authentic objects within or near the aged icon reinforces and authenticates the structural realism of the buildings that house those objects. So on one end, the built environment suggests a distance through the aged effect to coerce a differentness of the world, and on the other end the realistic objects provide substantiating 'evidence' for the realism of the aged icon. The built environments within these games claim a high degree of authenticity merely by their intoned specificity and detailed objects. This is seen in many aspects of games where authenticity is ascribed to objects merely because they did exist, and the games visual artists have taken the time to detail all aspects of said objects.

The player as visitor, investigator, and consumer of the objects is immersed in an artificial environment that represents an expected 'Westernness' that reaffirms the players own ideas about that American West while offering a venue to commune and play with the objects. The spaces and objects function as a curio cabinet of sorts in service of the narrative, disrupting the players ability to distinguish authenticity and reality or the historical and the fictive.

It's as if 'the simulation – the simulacrum – is more real than the thing itself' (McCaiman & Pickering 2010, 6). There is nothing real in this virtual space, the history, icons, people are all manufactured by the developer to evoke feelings and to suggest the historical and in doing so challenge the player to create meaning from their prior knowledge and experience with the western form. To be effective, the created objects must be closely tied to player expectations about the West, and as they explore the world and collect consumables associated with western tropes their world view and notions about the west are reinforced.

The exterior and interior spaces of the built environment within *RDR2* speak to not just the immersive effects of the visual portions of the game but the intentionality of drawing players beyond an experience of simulacra but to an environment that speaks to authenticity. Interestingly, the aged icon is mixed with the sublime of the natural surroundings – the picturesque mountains, valleys, streams, and skies – all of which further suggest a dialectic of civilisation and savagery. The amalgamation of a culturally familiar set of icons represents the West in a way that is suggestive of its decline and fits into the larger way that public memory has shaped the discourse and imagery of the American West. The outdoor environment of the game, which seems a virtual patchwork of plagiarised work from Albert Bierstadt, is part of the same engineered process of building an environment that appears, feels, and aligns with the imaginings of the old or idealised West (see Figure 7). Bierstadt's environments conveyed the exceptionalism of America and the American West specifically (Milner et al. 1994). Any number of Bierstadt's paintings, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863; *Sunset at Yosemite*, 1863; *Estes Park, CO*, 1867 could be used to demonstrate the larger than life and Edenesque quality he infused into the American West. Similarly, the immersive sense of the outdoors in *RDR2* displays an untouched world, something that Bierstadt himself wished to convey as oppositional to the ruins of Europe and paint a West or a past separate from industrial development. All of it being some part of memetic accuracy that blends fact and fiction. The fictive in this case lends itself to a use of the real with a blending of the imaginative – collapsing what is thought to be real and what is merely memory. (Southgate 2009). But more to the point, the dramatic use of imagery draws players into the game and 'calculates specific distances of time and space ... for particular aesthetic and political ends' (Thomas 2013, 160).

The framing of the American West is at once supposed to provide a link to an era of rugged self-determination and distance us from the more unsavoury portions of that world



Figure 7. Screenshot in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games) that reflects Albert Bierstadt's work. By Author.

(Maher 2016). Within these environments the era of the ‘Wild West’ is reflexively collapsed, allowing a complicated era of 40 odd years to remain static – that is until progress and civilisation arrive (Danbom 2014, 95–103). Yet progress is packaged in these games as impending and inevitable and separate from the changes in weather and settlement patterns. The vagaries of economic cycles, technological advances, and crop yields do not affect the perception and display of the American West in these games. The aged buildings beyond lines of significant settlement connote the hardship, struggle, and the presumed cultural hardiness of the ‘pioneer generation’; they authentic an era resounding with seasoned individuals. And yet, this belies, what David Wrobel (Wrobel 2002, 145) argues was a West promoted as already settled and tamed in the late 19th century.

Conclusion

When Daniel Maher interviewed performers at Fort Smith their responses resonated with the compulsion to both interact with the past and to play with the past: “‘You know, what we do isn’t *really* accurate’ and ‘We are here today to entertain you with the ‘Old West’,’ fictitious of course, but what the heck?”, suggesting that the shows were ‘simultaneously contrived and considered historically accurate’ (Maher 2016, 199). The sense of the space and place as both something real but proscriptively veneered to make it more entertaining is akin to the way that video games incorporate an imagined reality to draw players into the world. Expectations are enhanced, stories are embellished, violence is encapsulated, and the myth is perpetuated through visual and narrative elements. As Clare writes (2021, 18), ‘A vision of the past in video games is necessary for us to play, but that vision is wholly inadequate for understanding the past ‘as it was.’ Yet diverging from the myth would complicate player interactions with the game world as it would contradict their cultural understanding of the ‘Old West.’

The *RDR* series, *CoJ*, and other western-themed games directly confront and approximate the distance of the era unlike games from the late 20th century by visually ageing the environment to let us know that it was old. Modern video games, like their precursors from the 1970s–90s, rely on environmental tropes but have the advantage of software that can provide greater detail and realistic facsimiles with their improved graphics to display the aged icon in all its visual glory. As John Wills (Wills 2019, 81) writes, ‘Whereas early arcade machines sold uncomplicated cowboy chronicles ... by the 2010s, *Red Dead Redemption* offered a far more rich, filmic, and challenging West.’ Advances allowed games to provide more narratively rich and immersive experiences regardless of genre; however, in the case of games set in the American West, the visual backdrops of the untamed West mixed with the illusory sense of a lost era that contained the core of Americans presupposed individualism, queued a gamic West that more closely fit with expectations from film and tourist venues. Game play is from the perspective as if we lived in the era, and yet time has been stretched through a myriad of aesthetic choices that provide cultural cues to substantiate the American West as rugged, difficult, and associated with the exceptional Turnerian world.

Collapsing historical time allows for a broad mythologising of the era that connects to an ideological self-image of ‘self-reliant individualism.’ (Murdoch 2001, 16–21) According to an ‘*Old Timer’s Hand Book* for Butte, Montana ... the town’s pioneers were the most rugged and frontiersman-like of all pioneers, since they had overcome “a

rigorous climate, an unprolific houseless waste” (Wrobel 2002, 145). This is a fitting motif for how these western-themed games incorporate individualism and package it as lost, distant, and nostalgic. The problem with this is that, as Richard White (White 1993, 328) has written, ‘Myth takes a West of Indian hunting and violent strikes, of fence cutting and range wars, and translates it into a West of rugged and armed individualists’ where ‘mountain men, gunfighters, cowboys, Indian warriors, scouts, and prospectors – come onto the scene armed and dangerous.’ Video games take those armed figures, and nearly every house in the game world that is occupied has individuals who will threaten you, and places them in the rugged West that has itself lost its race against progress and change. The video game environment, particularly large open world games in the style of *Red Dead Redemption* or multi-hour games such as *Call of Juarez*, present a highly situated and regulated historical space (McCall 2020): the environment in general and the built environment in particular is imbued with an ambience and artistic intent that conveys specific and purposeful meaning about the game worlds relationship to the past, a meaning for what the past not only was, but what it means to us in the moment. Yet the ageing of the environment corresponds to a sense of authenticity with the understanding that the world is curated for a player’s immersion (Jordanova 1989, 23–25).

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Jeffrey Lawler is Co-Director of The Centre for the History of Video Games and Critical Play at California State University, Long Beach, where he is a full-time lecturer. The Centre is a playable archive that serves students and scholars as a place for research and connecting individuals from a variety of backgrounds and scholarly interests.

His most recent work published with Sean Smith includes, ‘Imagining the Other: Historical Possibilities and Teaching in Twine’ in *Entwine: A Critical and Creative Companion to Teaching with Twine*, forthcoming 2023, “Reprogramming the History of Video Game Studies: A Cultural History Approach to Videogames as Primary Sources. *International Public History*, fall 2021, and ‘Gaming the Past: Video Games and Historical Literacy in the College Classroom’ a chapter in *Return to the Interactive Past: The Interplay of Video Games and Histories* from Sidestone Press, 2021. His current work explores and maps the relationship between video game arcades as recreational spaces and segregated neighbourhoods in Los Angeles county during the 1970s and 1980s. The project maps the placement, access, and community discourse around video game arcades and smaller spaces such as liquor stores, restaurants, and recreational venues that also housed games to visualise economic and social stratification in leisure spaces.

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