


ESSAY

“You Are a True Progressive”: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and Reception of Progressive Era Politics

Hilary Jane Locke*  and Thomas Ashley Mackay**

*Corresponding author. Macquarie University. E-mail: hilary.locke@hdr.mq.edu.au

**Corresponding author. University of Adelaide. E-mail: thomas.mackay@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

Since its release in October 2018, *Red Dead Redemption 2* has generated considerable controversy. *Redemption 2*, Rockstar Games' highly popular video game set in a sprawling open world that resembles America's southern and western states at the turn of the twentieth century, has attracted criticism from players who have disliked the perceived political messages the game presents. With numerous interactions with people of color, Native Americans, and feminist (suffragette) characters, the game prompts players to engage with the ongoing effects of colonialism, sexism, and racism, as well as the rising problems of an industrial and financial capitalist society. As such, the game's depiction of Gilded Age and Progressive Era politics has resulted in a large amount of online criticism from a group of traditionally white, male, right-wing players. This article argues that *Redemption 2* utilizes the Progressive Era as a vehicle to capture and speak to the current political climate, and that it is the game's dual relationship with the past and the present that has aroused animosity from part of the game's audience. Ultimately, it demonstrates how contemporary mainstream progressive politics can be interpreted within and projected upon the politics of the Progressive Era.

Keywords: American history; Progressive Era; video games; Red Dead Redemption; Rockstar Games; historical fiction; reception; westerns; popular culture; capitalism studies

Shortly after the release of the hugely anticipated open-world video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* in October 2018, controversy ensued after players uploaded footage of themselves using the game's main character to assault and murder female suffragettes and other women characters.¹ In one such video, the player punches a suffragette in the face, sending her to the ground. This act of violence came after the game prompted the player to interact with the suffragette as she publicly advocates for women's rights in Saint Denis, a fictional city in the game. The *Guardian* reported on the now infamous YouTube video, which is titled “Red Dead Redemption 2—Beating Up Annoying Feminist,” observing that many of the comments were supportive of the behavior and that the video had been

viewed 1.5 million times.² As of June 2019, the number had grown to over 2 million views and had been liked 76,000 times (it was disliked 15,000 times).³ A sizable number of people thus enjoyed watching a *feminist*, not just a suffragette, be viciously attacked for bothering players with her advocacy of women's rights. They were thus equating contemporary feminist activism with suffragism, seeing both as part of an amorphous and unchanging whole rather than as historically specific movements.⁴

This incident points to a sharp contrast between the game's portrayal of Progressive Era politics, especially the plight and activism of marginalized peoples, and how some players have responded to its depictions thereof. Set in 1899, the game follows the story of Arthur Morgan and the van der Linde gang as they attempt to survive in the Southwest following the "closure" of the frontier and during the industrial modernization of the United States. The gang of outlaws are led by the utopian dreamer Dutch van der Linde. They are forced to evade authorities after a botched bank robbery and are pursued across a vast territory that features regions that resemble everything from the Deep South to the Far West. As they flee, van der Linde promises the gang that he has a "plan" to escape to a faraway location, variously including Australia and Tahiti, yet the gang gradually become disillusioned as their situation becomes increasingly dire.⁵ In the process of telling this story, *Redemption 2* places a considerable emphasis upon issues pertaining to women, African Americans, and Native Americans, and righting small injustices. This commitment to social justice is especially evident when compared to its predecessor, *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), and the game's extension *Undead Nightmare*; this game was set in the early twentieth century and features protagonist John Marston hunting down those characters that feature in van der Linde's gang in *Redemption 2*.⁶ The two *Red Dead* games also feature themes of political corruption and, to a lesser extent, economic injustice. Clearly, then, the game attempts to be much more than a video game version of a romanticized, Hollywood-esque tale about western bandits: it is an immersive game that *attempts* to get its setting and its politics right, historically and morally.

It is here that we can begin to see that *Redemption 2* is committed to historical "realism" and to progressive politics. Indeed, the game can be considered as a twenty-first-century progressive interpretation of the Progressive Era (roughly 1890 to 1920). One of the game's creators made it clear that this was a conscious decision, stating in an interview with *Vulture* that contemporary politics would be evoked "elliptically but not literally." He went on to say that "we don't have this person meant to be like Donald Trump and this person like Barack Obama," but it was "more this sensation that we found interesting in the 19th century that spoke to us, and I hope it speaks to people about today's problems."⁷ Thus, by looking at the game we can observe how a major cultural artifact of the late 2010s has attempted to connect contemporary progressive politics to those of the Progressive Era.

As such, this article argues that *Redemption 2* offers a fascinating insight into current American politics and how they can be simultaneously interpreted within and projected upon the Progressive Era. Significantly, the article reveals that the game places identity politics in the foreground and political economy in the background, which in turn reflects the contemporary centrality of the former and the gradual yet clumsy reintegration of the latter.⁸ In this way, *Redemption 2* demonstrates a "dialogue between the present and the past," one conducted not by an academic historian but by a hugely popular video game producer.⁹ Moreover, it further argues that it is this dual relationship to the present and the past that has elicited reactions like the one detailed above. Thus, players that sit elsewhere on the political spectrum contest and even reject the game's contemporary progressive politics. They are reacting to the present as much as they are to the game's depiction of the past.

Ironically, the game's format, which offers considerable player freedom, provides them with a way to do so in the game itself. *Redemption 2* has become, then, a virtual battleground for contemporary politics, one set during a politically turbulent moment in American history.

This article also aims to contribute to the dialogue about representations of history in popular culture, as well as the increasing number of scholars who are assessing video games as a practical medium for teaching, viewing, and engaging in historical content.¹⁰ Rockstar Game's *Red Dead Redemption* sits alongside other games that have recently been released that either directly adapt or hybridize historical settings: *The Witcher* franchise, *Wolfenstein II*, the *Assassins Creed* franchise, and *A Plague's Tale: Innocence* being some examples of note. And from the outset, *Redemption 2*, with its sepia tones and historically derived handwritten chapter titles are designed to evoke a not-too-distant past that was grappling with issues not unfamiliar to contemporary gaming audiences. As Dawn Spring states, video games "use history to immerse players in historical arts, cultures, landscapes, music, and the art of historical thinking."¹¹ This article focuses upon how *Redemption 2* uses history in this manner, but it also hopes to highlight how educators can use popular games like this one to engage and relate with their students.

The *Red Dead Redemption* franchise is of particular interest to us as it has been negatively received by some players since its release, largely due to their rejection of its portrayal of the era's politics. These players often express views that are characteristic of the contemporary far-right.¹² We are not alone in addressing the links between the contemporary political climate and the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise. It is crucial to mention Sara Humphreys's article that delves into the landscape of digital frontiers and the early 2010s political climate, where she highlights the relationship between cowboy romanticism and the rise of conservative groups such as the Tea Party in pre-Trump America.¹³ However, our article will focus specifically on the responses to *Redemption 2*, particularly with the rise of the alt-right in the United States and the misogynist and racist opinions that the game sparked in internet commentaries. Moreover, it is important to mention Esther Wright, whose research explores Rockstar Games and their attempts to portray American History in the *Red Dead* franchise, *Battlefield* franchise, and 1940s detective story *L.A. Noire*. While her research focuses more so on the way in which games can be used as an evocation of the past through sights, sounds, and aesthetics, as well as the representation of historical women in games, Wright has also written about the way in which *Redemption 2* depicts politics.¹⁴ As Wright states in *HistoryExtra*, in *Redemption 2* "there's comparatively little about the real lives of families, women and children—not to mention Native Americans and other people of colour—to be found in the franchise."¹⁵ We contest Wright's statement about *Redemption 2*'s lack of inclusion of minority groups outside of the gun slinging, white cowboy figure. Moreover, we are also suggesting that the politics entwined in *Redemption 2*'s plots, missions, and character interactions are very complex. As such, we argue that while the first *Red Dead* game arguably downplayed the politics of the Progressive Era, *Redemption 2* has attempted to engage them.

The Progressive Era was, in many ways, a political and societal response to the period that preceded it, popularly known as the Gilded Age, and historians typically pair the two periods. The Gilded Age is commonly recognized as a period of rapid industrialization and technological development but also as one marked by inequality, greed, and corruption. It also saw vicious labor disputes, the rise of corporations and monopolies, agrarian unrest, the continued dispossession of Native Americans, the mass incarceration and segregation of African Americans, and the denial of female suffrage. Furthermore, settlers still fueled by the idea of Manifest Destiny, the nineteenth-century ideology that white Americans had a duty to expand and settle across the continent, also participated in the

further dispossession and exploitation of minority groups within America.¹⁶ The Progressive Era, by contrast, observed the rise of a broad and disjointed political movement that sought to redress these problems. Many of these problems persisted, and even got worse, such as the reification of the “color line” (segregation and racial discrimination generally). But the overarching concern of activists was reforming American society so that it accorded with the interests of “the people,” whomever they may have been. Typically, reformers thought that this was to be achieved through state intervention and popular activism.¹⁷

As noted above, *Redemption 2* is set in 1899, which is when progressive agitation was gaining momentum. The game does not, however, attempt to restrict itself to just this year. It takes many liberties with its historical setting and shifts frequently between depictions of America that could fall before or after 1899. In short, the depiction of this year obviously is not intended to be literal. Instead, the game attempts to capture a “moment” in American history. As such, though it is set during what can safely be called the Progressive Era, it also makes considerable references to the Gilded Age. It does, after all, include an episode (or “mission”) titled the “Gilded Cage,” which involves members of the van der Linde gang covertly intermingling with extravagantly wealthy social elites.¹⁸ Given that there is no fixed end date for the Gilded Age and a start date for the Progressive Era, 1899, is, then, symbolic: it represents America on the cusp of transition, not just from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, but from “traditional” America to “modern America.”¹⁹ Together, the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era mark this moment, one that, according to historian Jackson Lears, saw the “rebirth of a nation.”²⁰ The game does include issues and movements that proliferated and took shape during the Progressive Era. It is for *this* reason that this article approaches *Redemption 2* through such a lens. The game is set during the Gilded Age as well as the Progressive Era, but we are interested in how it depicts the latter.

The era and its key figures, especially Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, loom large in the American political imagination, and the era’s meaning has been long debated by historians. Much of the debate has fixated upon just how progressive its reform agenda was and whether this was a key moment in the advent of American liberalism. Critics have highlighted progressive failures on matters including race, immigration, foreign policy, and Indigenous rights.²¹ Richard Hofstadter famously went so far as to write off agrarian reformers as deluded and urban reformers as disgruntled, while Robert Wiebe conveyed the reform agenda as a middle-class “search for order” that failed due to an “illusion of progressive fulfillment.”²² Those more sympathetic to the Progressive Era stress its democratic achievements, ranging from female enfranchisement, the enactment of commercial and industrial regulations, the rise of the labor movement, and efforts to curb political corruption. The debate has continued into the twenty-first century, but various historians over the past two decades have stressed the period’s democratic impulses. Historian Robert Johnston has observed that much of this literature has shown that progressivism was “not a singular political persuasion, but rather a truly plural set of progressivisms.” He adds that “workers, African Americans, women, [...] Native Americans” and a “diverse and contentious set of middling folk” borrowed from and contributed to the “languages and ideas” of the progressive movement, itself once conveyed by historians largely as a “white, male, and middle-class” crusade.²³ Instead, this “movement” was an aggregation of progressively minded activists that all in their own way sought to further “democratize” America and to make it more amenable to “the people,” broadly conceived.²⁴ During the “Second Gilded Age,” a label that suggests that contemporary inequality, corporate dominance, and political corruption resemble the conditions of the Progressive Era’s antecedent period, it appears that many Americans outside the

academy are also looking to the Progressive Era to see how their ancestors sought to end a period of gross injustice and inequality.²⁵

Consequently, *Redemption 2* brings to the forefront those political machinations of the Progressive Era to contemporary American audiences, who are grappling with similar issues of racial inequality, immigration, poverty, and various democratic challenges. Importantly, the setting of the game, the American West and the Frontier, is situated alongside the growing reassessment of how the “West” is used in popular culture, particularly the separation from the once romanticized, western of Hollywood’s golden age.²⁶ Indeed, *Redemption 2* compares nicely to contemporary examples from popular culture that once idealized the freedom associated with the American frontier and now interrogate contemporary political issues and confronting aspects of America’s colonial past.²⁷ Over the last decade, several Hollywood films and television shows have sought to add complexity to the traditional conservative notion of a glorious frontier and the opportunities it once held. Quentin Tarantino’s recent films, such as his 2012 film *Django Unchained* and 2015 film *The Hateful Eight*, although highly stylized, present the harsh realism of racial politics, the environment, and the violence pertaining to life in the West. Similar meanings can be said of *The Revenant* (2015), which utilizes the hero narrative, but has an opening sequence depicting a conflict between a white hunting party who slaughters a Native American group, which is filmed in a continual shot that spares little detail. The remake of *True Grit* (2010) by the Coen Brothers features a revenge narrative similar to that in *The Revenant*, but it uses the West to frame life as gritty, the reality of which was one of survival and bloodshed. The Coen Brothers’ Netflix movie *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), while more humorous than the previous examples, also partly dismantles the idea of the American West hero narrative by showing a string of tales featuring characters that are surviving, struggling, failing, and falling prey to misadventure. Furthermore, HBO’s *Westworld* brings the “Wild West” alive through human-like robots for visitors to indulge the fantasy of playing at a cowboy and does not shy away from showing how damaging this fantasy truly is to players, as well as the bloody and sexual violence it inspires.

More pressingly, *Redemption 2* grapples with part of its player audience that is far more conservative than the settings or issues in the game itself.²⁸ Several heated debates from recent years have highlighted that particular sections of the gaming community are quick to dismiss and attack representations of women and race, both in games and within the game development world. As stated in the introduction of *Gaming Representation* by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, “the social, political, and cultural context of the #Gamergate era, the #Blacklivesmatter movement, and fan-created campaigns like #INeedDiverseGames make this a unique and urgent time for game studies to develop better critical proficiencies for representational and identity based analyses.”²⁹ The “Gamergate” controversy, which occurred in 2014 and highlighted the endemic sexism within gamer culture, resulted in the orchestrated online harassment of female industry critics by mostly white men on the internet. Indeed, as Matt Lees has argued in the *Guardian* in 2016, there is a correlation between the Gamergate incident and the ways in which the right-wing male community expresses itself in online spaces:

Many [men] embraced Gamergate because they felt it wholly matched their ideals, and yet – quite consistently – no one in the movement was willing to be associated with the abuse being carried out in its name. Prominent supporters on Twitter, in subreddits and on forums like 8Chan, developed a range of pernicious rhetorical devices and defences to distance themselves from threats to women and minorities

in the industry: the targets were lying or exaggerating, they were too precious; a language of dismissal and belittlement was formed against them. Safe spaces, snowflakes, unicorns, cry bullies. [...] These techniques, forged in Gamergate, have become the standard toolset of far-right voices online.³⁰

Games such as *Redemption 2* and its counterparts, a list too long to mention in this article, tend to attract predominantly white-male, conservative audiences that “imagines a world of good and evil, of domination and annihilation, where whiteness and American manhood characterize protectors and heroes.”³¹ As Kishonna L. Grey and David J. Leonard argue in their introduction to *Woke Gaming*, “games provide a training ground for the consumption of narratives and stereotypes as well as opportunities to become instruments of hegemony; they offer spaces of white male play and pleasures, and create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalize the Other.”³²

However, aspects of the *Red Dead Redemption* series before *Redemption 2* can be seen to respond to such criticism seeking for an evaluation of representation within highly popular games. In her analysis of the original game and its downloadable extension *Undead Nightmare*, which features characters facing a zombie apocalypse, Melissa Elston argues that *Nightmare* intended to push confrontational messages upon the player, more so than the first game: “where *Red Dead Redemption* fails to engage or confront twenty-first-century continuations of colonialism and its attendant legacies of racial hierarchy and oppression, *Undead Nightmare* pushes a bit harder, revealing the illogical and moral ambiguities of nationalistic modern-day political stances, emanating from the nineteenth-century notions of Manifest Destiny.”³³ In doing so, the extension reveals to players a reality that “functions simultaneously as an interactive space for colonial/decolonial reimagination as an allegory confrontation of the American frontier histories of displacement, conflict, and genocide.”³⁴ Moreover, “[John Marston’s] perspective invites further and deeper reflection of players’ complicity in perpetuation neo-colonial systems that simultaneously justify and reproduce historical patterns of inequality, abuse, [and] dispossession.”³⁵ This, as we will explore, is something that *Redemption 2* attempts to build on through its engagement with identity politics and the role of the gamer participating and enacting through Arthur Morgan.

Redemption 2 addresses male hegemony and right-wing politics within gaming culture. As the incident mentioned in the introduction shows, *Redemption 2* has not been without its moments of conflict with how Rockstar has included historical plots that highlight racism, sexism, or colonialism. Particular instances that stirred responses include dialogue from Arthur regarding Native Americans wanting land, a side mission that involves helping the suffragettes, a mission where you can murder the Ku Klux Klan, and a side mission where Arthur encounters an African American doctor whom speaks overtly about racial discrimination and inequality in the 1890s. When it comes to the issue of racial inequalities and the racist ideologies that have and continue to sustain them, *Redemption 2* does not hold back. One way the game shows this is with the aforementioned KKK interaction. Players will come across the Klan at varying points in the game, despite the fact it had dissipated well before 1899 and would not reappear until the mid-1910s. Nonetheless, the player, as Arthur, will usually find them initiating a new member, which comically ends with the leader accidentally setting himself on fire, rather than the cross. Following this, Arthur is prompted to shoot and kill the remaining members, which involves hunting down those whom attempt to flee. Doing so positively influences the game’s honor system that determines whether Arthur is a good or bad man

by the end of the game. Another encounter has three Klan members erecting a large cross for a ceremony to be held later that day. Two Klan members are crushed, as they are unable to bear its weight. The Klan leader sulks before violently chastising Arthur for observing and not helping and starts chasing him with a knife. In self-defense Arthur kills the leader and gets on with his other mission. These two incidents with the Klan demonstrate how foolish they are in the eyes of the game and are not to be taken seriously.

Moreover, the van der Linde gang is a fundamental part of the game's depiction of identity politics, particularly with people of color. As such, one member of the gang we are introduced to during the initial missions is Charles Smith, who has a Black father and a Native American mother. Lenny, a Black man who lives in the camp, describes the "last six generations" of his family as having been "born in chains." Furthermore, you can overhear Lenny talking at the camp's fire "about the scars on his father's back and the rape of enslaved women by white slaveholders."³⁶ In another cut-scene, Arthur is called to interact with a street speaker in Saint Denis who is handing out pamphlets. The man preaches anti-mixed race "breeding" and the presence of purity in nature. As the conversation evolves, it turns out the man is speaking of the supremacy of the white race. He makes reference to the "real science" that white people are people but, "people aren't the same sir, white people are the same, all the others are trying to kill us [...]." After pausing in confusion, Arthur stands back and states: "I've got friends who's [*sic*] Mexican, friends who's Indian, known blacks, Irish, Italian. Good and bad in all. Good white people, bad white people. And above all, dumb white people."³⁷ This response sparks outrage from the gentlemen selling pamphlets, but the game's message is clear: white supremacy is unacceptable to the ethos of *Redemption 2*'s main character, as it should be for contemporary players.

Predictably, such interactions have aroused the attention of far-right, white conservative players, who have interpreted the game as left-wing, with its overt identity politics and depictions of diversity. One such Reddit poster, "Algotuck," on the "Debate the Alt-Right" sub-reddit, one that has been "quarantined" due to its offensive alt-right content, complained that the game's rules regarding player interaction with anyone was off limits to Native Americans: "the game will let you meet and antagonize anyone you want ... except for Indians."³⁸ "Algotuck" continued to say that Rockstar's decision to shy away from some of the hard-hitting racial politics of the 1890s West were also a cause for concern, stating, "the Black characters constantly talk about 'lynching' and racism, but the game is too cowardly to show it." The poster goes on to say there are no violent actions that come directly from the people of color in the game, despite there being historical evidence for such violence, pointing out that there are "no hostile indians [*sic*] or organized black gangs." The underlying criticism here comes from the poster's political rejection of how *Redemption 2* depicts its historical setting. To highlight the game's lack of certain types of violence speaks to the indulgent ways in which such games *can* depict the harsh realities of such a setting in the past; that the poster's sense they were missed, however, speaks more to their political leanings and their wish to see such realities for their enjoyment. That Rockstar steered away from such harsh historical depictions to veer toward a reflection of the types of political problems that affect contemporary gamers, such as toxic masculinity and whiteness, is why right-wing gamers have been so outraged. The poster expressed further annoyance at the way in which the game depicts whiteness, particularly when showing Appalachian folk as "Deliverance-style incest-murder hillbillies, except they also eat people." Ignoring the obvious ode to the hillbilly trope within popular culture, "Algotuck" seems particularly irked that Rockstar deliberately used white characters within the game to show the less-than-desirable sides to society,

including the potential effects of isolation, and that perhaps the problems of whiteness, in the form of colonial aggression and racism, is one of the main issues Rockstar attempted to portray in *Redemption 2*.

Indeed, one side mission engages heavily in the anti-racism themes, as well as confronting gamers with the ongoing issues of the postbellum South and the legacy of plantation slavery. Entitled “The Iniquities of History,” Arthur meets a homeless old man that talks of losing what was his due to “them” taking it away.³⁹ The Old Man, Jeremiah Compson, asks if some of the items from his decrepit house could be returned to him, as he is unable to legally return. As Arthur obliges, the player is exposed to the true story of Jeremiah. Initially, artifacts of the man’s life are designed to elicit sympathy, with drawings from a child for Jeremiah and a family portrait shown, and through letters found by Arthur, we follow Jeremiah’s downward spiral from the owner of this house, which he tells us his grandfather built, to unemployed outcast. However, it soon becomes obvious that Jeremiah was involved with “Ascension Plantation,” a slave plantation. The player then learns that he lost his job and livelihood as a result of the North’s victory. The Ledger, one of the items requested by Jeremiah, shows a list of “Negros Recovered” with names and prices of said slaves. Arthur, in disgust, rides out from the house to challenge Jeremiah and finds him camping rough. After some more ranting about how his life was ruined by “them,” Jeremiah states that he had a decent job, worked hard, and his legacy has now been “pissed on.” And with that, Arthur throws the items, including the Ledger, on the fire much to the old man’s dismay. Arthur emphatically, almost sympathetically, states: “Old Man, some jobs aren’t for saving ... and some legacies are for pissing on.” This mission pulls together the political stance, and meditation upon the ramifications of white supremacy, that Rockstar is adopting with *Redemption 2*, as while we are invited to feel sympathy for Jeremiah, gamers are brought into a reality where slave owners were unwilling or unable to adapt in the new political environment by holding on to their racist views. The player is then placed in a position to judge Jeremiah for being unable to adapt to his world progressing and for clinging to idealized memories of his former life that relied on a slave-based economy. In this way, *Redemption 2* connects contemporary and historical sentiments toward Black people. Given that a sizable portion of gamers possess far-right beliefs, it very much appears that Rockstar avoided adopting a “neutral” stance that would make them appear sympathetic to the sensitivities of white nationalists. As Jonathon S. Jonas states in *Slate*, “historical video games like *Red Dead Redemption 2* don’t have the luxury of being strictly entertainment [and] Rockstar seems to have realized that sympathy for white nationalism has been trending up among young white men, a key demographic for the gaming industry.”⁴⁰

This narrative is also a strength when it comes to portraying identity politics, which have also been criticized by right-wing players as pandering to leftist audiences. *Redemption 2* pauses to show that people of color were (and are) much more than mere symbols of historical violence. Rather than showing gratuitous incidences of violence, such as the lynching that the Redditor desired, *Redemption 2* has shifted to show the audience that there are more to these stories than simply bloodshed and violence. For instance, when the game depicts Native American conflicts with white society, particularly when it comes to land rights, as will be explored later, an alliance is formed between Dutch van der Linde’s gang and the Native Americans seeking to rectify yet another broken treaty that gave them land to settle on permanently; van der Linde is also using this conflict to gain access to documents that will ensure his freedom. In a conversation between Arthur and two Native Americans, Chief Rains Fall and his son Eagle Flies, Arthur seeks to show he is on their side: “the government doesn’t like me anymore than it likes you. Like you, I’ve been

running for as long as I can remember. And like you, my time is nigh on done.” As an outlaw and a criminal, Arthur has been outcast from mainstream society to find a life of his own, constantly on the move and dislocated from stability. Drawing on that background, Arthur comes to have an agreement with the Native Americans to help them settle, unlike himself. As Youtuber Skill Up rightfully states, “For Arthur, helping the Native Americans has just as much meaning [...] and that aiding the Native Americans in their struggle to have some sort of life represents a chance to do something good with the time [Arthur has] left,” as Arthur is dying of tuberculosis at this point of the game.⁴¹

Further reflecting this, before his son rides careless into a battle that he cannot win against the oil tycoons taking the land, Chief Rains Fall gives a monologue:

I’ve killed. The men I knew were slain. My first born, your brother had his head smashed by a drunken sailor. My wife had her throat slit. We made peace. I knew not to trust, yet I had no choice. [...] Do not die for pride my son. We have suffered too much in this trick. The earth, the water, they have no pride. They endure, and we must endure.⁴²

Delivered by a veteran of the Indian Wars (1622–1924) of the American frontier, gamers are told, rather than shown, the historical violence and its personal, generational impacts. When compared with other instances that the game shows audiences, like that with Lenny representing Black and slavery history through his camp-side tales of violence and rape, Rains Fall concession to the reality of death, slaughter, and personal history shows contemporary audiences a reality they cannot brush over. Importantly, rather than showing audiences a full-scale conflict, or the devastating effects of frontier violence between white men and the Native American peoples, gamers are shown the mostly white men of van der Linde’s group supporting a Native American conflict, and are drawn to participate through Arthur’s character. In this way, the game tries to show its progressiveness by not only highlighting the injustices Native Americans faced, but also by attempting to atone for their dispossession through the use of violence against the perpetrators. This, of course, falls far short of capturing the ongoing issues Native Americans faced in the wake of the Frontier Wars and may even inadvertently tap into the “myth of the vanishing Indian” by showing their “disappearance” as a tragic, yet inevitable consequence of white settler colonialism.⁴³ Nonetheless, *Redemption 2* still sides with the Native American struggle and conveys the use of violence against imperial expansion as a just cause.

This scaled-back approach to the game’s depiction of certain types of violence is perhaps why mostly white, male players in particular have been so vocal about the game’s attempts to explore identity politics. Moreover, the game forces players to participate in missions and interact with characters that challenge their views of historical circumstances or contemporary ideologies. The inclusions of outspoken suffragettes provoked criticism of the inclusion of so-called Social Justice Warrior issues, particularly because the gaming community is a notoriously sexist, anti-women environment, as we have highlighted with the Gamergate incident. For example, Reddit user BecktheHeck posted in one gaming sub-reddit screenshots from other right-wing gamers expressing distaste for the inclusion of women, such as Sadie Adler, a vocal female character in van der Linde’s gang, plus the suffragettes in the game, under the sarcastic heading “Red Dead Redemption Are SJW Garbage ‘Cus Women.”⁴⁴ In another instance, a comment on a YouTube video discussing such elements of the game said, “If a SJW tells you not to buy a game, you know it’s a worthy purchase.”⁴⁵ Moreover, others have criticized the inclusion of the

strong female character of Sadie Adler, who was included in the marketing material for the game, as well as on the physical disk itself. As Larry420 from a *Red Dead* Fan forum points out in his post “Game Too Politically Correct?,” he feels there was an unfair “worshipping of Sadie Adler because she’s a woman.”⁴⁶

No other issue has provoked such a strong reaction than the side-missions that involve the suffragette characters. The main mission itself involves Arthur transporting, and protecting, a group of suffragettes to a speaking event, which also attracts criticism from male passersby, including statements like “this is unnatural” or “Founding Fathers not Founding Mothers you silly old goat,” as one passerby says directly to the suffragette speaking from the steps of the hall.⁴⁷ However, the game does not place too much weight on the counterarguments that arose in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to women getting the vote. It is also worth noting that the game accurately depicts the suffragettes as middle-class white women, but it also avoids directly commenting on this fact. This may well be because the game is attempting to stress women’s rights generally rather than to critique the suffrage movement’s lack of intersectionality and diversity. Doing the latter would have detracted from the game’s obvious attempt to create a parallel between historic and contemporary feminisms.

As the gamer is placed in Arthur’s shoes, they are forced to interact with these characters and are thus alerted to the struggles that women have faced in securing their rights in a patriarchal society. When Arthur comes across another suffragette in Saint Denis, she proclaims that he is a “true progressive” when he does not dismiss the idea of women getting the vote; this particular suffragette was the one who received internet fame by being beaten, hogtied, fed to an alligator, killed and fed to pigs, thrown down a mine shaft, and left on the tracks in front of an oncoming train by Youtuber Shirrako.⁴⁸ Considerable portions of the online community, primarily white-male gamers, have stated that Rockstar’s gameplay was designed to be able to inflict violence on any character the gamer sees fit, and *Redemption 2* is tamer when compared to its earlier games from Rockstar, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise and the previous *Redemption* game. One Youtuber, Matt Christiansen, responded to an article by Emanuel Maiberg for *Vice*, which condemned both Shirrako’s videos and the misogynist comments left below it, states, “people [are] free to enjoy videos as they please and people who enjoy video game content are free to comment as they please.”⁴⁹ The game does allow for Arthur to be violent to whomever he wants; however he is punished by negatively affecting the game’s honor system and simultaneously gets a bounty on his head. However, this Youtuber’s commentary avoids the concern of such culturally ingrained issues of violence against women overall, which is why this video caused such outrage in the first place. As Maiberg’s article aimed to point out, video games “are a part of our cultural infrastructure that allows someone to roleplay [*sic*] as an anti-feminist murderer [...] and allow others to use that video as a jumping off point to discuss how much they hate women in the real world.”⁵⁰

Furthermore, one video essay by Youtuber American Krogan sums up the right-wing criticisms of *Redemption 2*. After praising how the game was a successful cinematic experience, he states that *Redemption 2* feels more like “an indictment rather than a homage” to the American West, which the creators of the game said was their aim.⁵¹ He further suggests that the game presents the argument that “America was built on the foundations of moral hypocrisy and corruption.”⁵² He also criticizes how the game portrays its female characters, using the example of Arthur’s interactions with the character Sadie Adler. In her cut scenes Sadie complains about cooking in the outlaw’s camp, which she considers a step down from her previous duties at a farm that she shared

equally with her husband. This video prompted responses from commenters, and that they shared the political stance of the video. One such stated:

Morgan consistently fights for 21st century social justice values as in the side mission where he burns the old slaver's items. It's also annoying how women and black people are 99% perfect in everything they do and the 1% missing is because of white men holding them back and those white men are displayed as cowardly, stupid, lazy, mean and generally useless. It's beyond subtle and glaringly obvious that an agenda is being promoted that has to do with making white men feel guilty. Morgan is essentially the poster boy of what progressives want a white man to be: an 'ally' to minorities and women, self-deprecating [*sic*], and aware of the demise of his kind.⁵³

Another user also stated, "Red Dead Redemption 2: White Hate Edition! I am not going to reward communists with my evil white man money. I guess this capitalist will have to take my ill gotten [*sic*] white privilege gains somewhere else."⁵⁴ This user's reliance upon the word 'communists' is a reference to 'Cultural Marxism,' which right-wing conspiracy theorists assert is a monolithic left-wing cabal attempting to level society through political correctness and identity politics. In referring to the way the game depicts Arthur's ongoing violence to white people in the game, and the typically nonviolent missions involving Black characters, another commented sarcastically that "Arthur Morgan might be a mass murdering maniac, but at least he isn't a racist," which was liked by the video creator.⁵⁵ *Redemption 2* has clearly struck a nerve within the far-right gaming community.

Evidently, *Redemption 2* taps into identity politics by reflecting contemporary and historic issues concerning the social, political, and material discrepancies between hegemonic and nonhegemonic identities. It directs players to the mistreatment of minorities and marginalized peoples within a white patriarchal society, particularly problems owing to racism, sexism, and imperialism. It places an immediacy on these issues, which thus reflects the prevalence of identity politics within the current political environment. Simply, issues associated with identity politics are conspicuously presented and easily are comprehended by players. It is for this reason that the game's depictions have stirred such visceral reactions from players, whether positive or negative.

Redemption 2's politics, however, extend beyond identity politics, evidenced by its attempt to integrate issues pertaining to political economy. Indeed, the game's overarching narrative presents an implicit critique of historic and contemporary American capitalism. Much like how *Redemption 2* improves upon its handling of identity issues over its predecessor, it also improves upon the representation of economic issues. As Humphreys has argued, the 2010 game "naturalized" and "depoliticized" the 2008 financial crisis by depicting "suffering, loss, and technological change" as "simply part of life." It was, she asserts, a defense of capitalism.⁵⁶ We argue that the 2018 game, by contrast, does the opposite.

We can begin to observe this through one of the game's primary antagonists, Leviticus Cornwall. Cornwall is a financier and business tycoon with interests that span far and wide throughout the game's world. Morgan and the gang find themselves on the wrong side of Cornwall following their robbery of one of his secure rail cars. Cornwall subsequently hires the Pinkerton Detective Agency—a real company then and now—to pursue the gang, resulting in their constant struggle to evade capture. In fleeing the private detectives, known as "Pinkertons," the gang find themselves pushed into new scenarios, many of which are already under the shadow of Cornwall. In one scenario, members of

the gang find themselves stranded and imprisoned on a fictional Caribbean island called Guarma, located near Cuba. The island is ruled by a ruthless dictator, Colonel Fussar, who subjects its inhabitants to brutal and exploitative treatment, forcing them to work on the island's sugar plantations. What follows is an insurrection, in which Morgan and the others find themselves enmeshed. Cornwall happens to be financially connected to these plantations and is a supporter of Fussar.⁵⁷ Further, the territorial conflict between the Wapiti Indians and the U.S. Army stems from an arrangement made between Cornwall and the State Government to "modernize" the reservation land, a plan motivated by suspicions that it is rich in oil.⁵⁸ It is clear, then, that Cornwall is not a villain merely because he is pursuing the story's anti-heroes, but because he is a progenitor of mass destruction and widespread suffering.

In this way, Cornwall is a metaphor for American capitalism, particularly its financial and industrial variants, and the havoc it can and has caused in America and abroad. His character resembles the age's key "Robber Barons," especially financial magnate John Pierpont Morgan and oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller.⁵⁹ He is both a leading banker and an industrialist, figures that were reviled as expropriators and exploiters by considerable portions of the population during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Showing attention to detail, the game's producers have made him the owner of a *national* bank, an especially disliked institution in the South and the West.⁶⁰ He uses his access to capital to eliminate competitors and to corner markets, thus also making him a monopolist, another hated figure at the time owing to the wave of consolidations that occurred at the turn of the century and the wholesale transition from the owner-manager model to the corporate model that split owners and managers.⁶¹ Overall, he is corrupt and amoral and will stop at nothing to maximize his gains. Before Cornwall is killed toward the end of the game's story, van der Linde, his assassin, remarks, "You kill. I kill. You rob. I rob. Only difference I can see is that I choose whom I kill and rob, and you destroy everything in your path."⁶² Here the game is drawing a distinction between the morality of the gang that kills and steals from the rich and powerful and the amorality of elites like Cornwall who loot and plunder society at large. The game asserts that the gang's crimes pale in comparison to the expropriations committed by those situated at the top of the social and economic hierarchy. The latter are the *real* villains.

Van der Linde's use of the word "destroy" is revealing. It hints at the "producer ethic" of the nineteenth century, which posited that wealth was the product of labor, a view advanced during the period by agrarian inflationist advocates like the Greenbackers and Populists.⁶³ Financiers, speculators, and monopolists were thus "parasites" that expropriated wealth from those that produced it. Resultantly, these figures were accused of undermining the Jeffersonian and republican ideal of the independent, self-made, and propertied individual; one created, the other destroyed.⁶⁴ It also alludes to Turner's "Frontier Thesis." Turner argued that westwards expansion and the "opening" of the frontier reinvigorated key American values, like independence, mobility, liberty, and democracy. The quest to conquer and settle harsh terrain and conditions, according to Turner, opened many challenges and opportunities, which necessitated rugged individualism and inspired anti-authoritarian sentiment. Once developed and connected to "civilization," however, these values were weakened. With the "closure" of the frontier, Turner warned that they were at risk of being totally corrupted or pacified. While Turner's thesis has been rightly criticized by scholars for being highly romantic and for ignoring the Federal Government's massive role in westwards expansion, it has nonetheless been influential and is ingrained as a part of American lore, typified by the "Frontier Myth" and the "Wild West."⁶⁵ *Redemption 2* does not adhere perfectly to the Frontier Thesis.

Significantly, Dutch van der Linde's utopic vision for his gang is collectivist rather than individualistic. This aside, it does still convey the damaging influences of "civilization" upon the West and the freedom of the people in it.

Importantly, the game conveys financial and industrial capitalism as civilization's most destructive force. Unlike Joseph Schumpeter's notion of "creative destruction," which argues that capitalism is propelled forward by innovations that disrupt the status quo, *Redemption 2* rejects the consolatory promises of creativity and progress; it does not indulge the idea that progress demands sacrifice.⁶⁶ Instead, it emphasizes what has been lost over what has been gained. The game suggests that in addition to undermining western ideals, capitalists were also responsible for destroying a way of life for Native Americans; for destroying democracy in Latin America (likely alluding to the reaffirmation of the "Monroe Doctrine" that gave the United States a "right" to intervene in Latin American affairs, particularly when U.S. political and commercial interests were at risk); and for destroying the natural environment, conveyed by juxtaposing a visually stunning wilderness with the dreariness and filthiness of the industrial city, represented by Saint Denis.⁶⁷ Ultimately, the game stresses that America has lost a great deal in the process of capitalist transformation and "modernization." This story is one about suffering and survival amid an incredibly destructive force.

It may well be true that the game is not necessarily critiquing all forms of capitalism. It is possible that the game is sympathetic to small-scale capitalism, particularly its individualistic and familial forms. Undoubtedly, the game does exhibit reverence toward homesteading and thus some forms of private property, production, and profit. In its two-part "Epilogue," for instance, John Marston, whom the player takes control of once Arthur is killed in *Redemption 2*'s story, takes out a mortgage-backed loan from a local bank to establish his own farm and settle with his family, which he does so successfully, in effect achieving the "American Dream."⁶⁸ Although this dream is short-lived, as shown in the original game, he at least momentarily becomes a Jeffersonian hero. Whether this counts as capitalism or not is beside the point.⁶⁹ It remains that the game is critiquing what American capitalism came to be, especially during this period. *Redemption 2* conveys "big" capitalism to be a "curse," much like progressive Louis Brandeis did in 1914.⁷⁰

Oddly, though, *Redemption 2* pays minimal attention to some of the other major issues associated with the ascent of financial and industrial capitalism at the turn of the century. The struggle for workers' rights, for instance, is largely absent, and the massive economic inequality characteristic of the period is underexplored, despite both being major progressive concerns. While the game does occasionally refer to labor disputes and strikes, they are not featured in the game itself.⁷¹ The labor movement itself is underrepresented, which is strange given that the period saw incredibly violent disputes between workers on the one hand and owners and armed forces on the other (often involving Pinkertons). Absent is anything resembling the Great Railway Strike, the Haymarket Affair, the Homestead Strike, or the Ludlow Massacre.⁷² Additionally, this is also the moment that organized labor developed, seen through the emergence of the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Socialist Party of America. None are featured or even mentioned. And while inequality is clearly observable through the inclusion of homeless characters and communities living in slums, shantytowns, and the woods, it is not obvious that their plight is connected to larger economic developments and the absence of a welfare state. They are part of the *mise en scène* and offer a glimpse of "how the other half lives," especially when contrasted to the game's Gilded Age elites, but they are peripheral and are not well explained—they are just

poor.⁷³ It is worth noting that the game does address the deleterious effects of financial debt upon desperate people, as observed through the “Money Lending and Other Sins” missions. In them, Morgan is tasked with pursuing debtors whose repayments are due to the gang’s loan shark, Leopold Strauss. Morgan acquires those repayments through force and violence, though he becomes increasingly disgusted with his role as he realizes that Strauss has been loaning to vulnerable people and has ruined their lives. He eventually becomes sympathetic to the debtors and finally evicts Strauss from the gang.⁷⁴ There is, therefore, a clear critique of predatory loaning and debt more generally, which is especially poignant now given the enormous levels of household and individual debt in America.⁷⁵ However, the reason why these characters pursued the loans in the first place is left unexplained, and the cyclical, reinforcing relationship between poverty and debt is not thoroughly articulated. Overall, it remains that economic inequality is left mostly unexplored in *Redemption 2*, even though it was a progressive cause célèbre.⁷⁶

Thus, while it is true that the narrative itself presents a critique of American capitalism, it does so in a way that lacks immediacy and avoids approaching its critique primarily through the lenses of class and economic inequality, once dominant concerns of progressives and the left. This approach stands in stark contrast to the way the game has integrated identity politics, which is conspicuous and unavoidable. Both forms of politics are there, but they are conveyed differently—one is explicit, the other implicit. It is likely for this reason that *Redemption 2*’s critique of capitalism has received little attention from video game critics and has not provoked similar reactions from conservative players.⁷⁷

Despite this lack of attention to labor issues within the game, the production of the game itself aroused a minor controversy over the treatment of workers in the video game industry. Following an investigation into the company’s working conditions by *Kotaku*, an online gaming publication, several commentators accused Rockstar of forcing its staff to work excessively long hours in the lead-up to the game’s release date, a practice known in the industry as “crunch.” Much of the controversy centered upon the company’s reliance upon contract laborers, whom, it was alleged, accepted overtime work out of fear of losing their jobs. Rockstar denied the allegations, though later admitted that it could understand how some workers came to think this way. It further claimed to have revised its practices, including how it communicated to staff and contractors.⁷⁸ Whatever the case, the controversy shows that labor concerns were not at the forefront of Rockstar’s politics. It further highlights that labor issues persist into the twenty-first century, even if workers’ rights are no longer dominant within progressive discourse.

Perhaps more significantly, the controversy further points us to the fact that Rockstar is a business that employs workers and is very much a part of a capitalist system. *Redemption 2*, after all, is a commodity that as of June 2019 has produced more than 24 million sales, making it one of the highest grossing video games of all time.⁷⁹ The game’s critique of capitalism is therefore ironic. This irony, though, is not unique to Rockstar and is now entrenched as part of the broader ideological landscape of the late-capitalist world. Political theorist Mark Fisher has argued that anti-capitalist sentiment within mainstream cultural mediums serves as a kind of catharsis that reifies what he calls “capitalist realism,” by which he means the mass cultural perception that there is no alternative to capitalism and that it is just how things are. Such mediums provide an outlet for consumers to indulge and placate their dissension. As the idea of a genuine alternative has been made so “unrealistic” it is safe to do so.⁸⁰ The only alternative offered by *Redemption 2*, for example, is van der Linde’s vague and delusional utopia. Missing is the Progressive Era’s drive to democratize the economy through state intervention and hence so too is any optimistic suggestion that “the people” can make a meaningful difference. It

is muckraking minus the underlying motivation to bring about significant change. For this reason, *Redemption 2* can be both openly anti-capitalist (or at least anti-big capitalist) and a commodity at the same time. And it is undeniably beneficial to be both. Owing to the likes of the Global Financial Crisis, climate change, soaring inequality, unaffordable health care, crippling student loans, the casualization of the workforce, and static wages, it can tap into and potentially capitalize upon an emerging dissatisfaction with capitalism. At the same time, however, given that one must *look* for this message and be attuned to it, the game can remain broadly appealing: it provides the disaffected a cathartic outlet and provides everyone else a melodrama that can be taken at face value.

Altogether, *Red Dead Redemption 2* is an excellent representation of the dominant strands of contemporary progressive thinking. It identifies some of the historic struggles of the Progressive Era and uses them to address current issues in American politics. In doing so, we can thus see how the dominant political concerns of the present have been interpreted in and projected upon the past. Issues pertaining to minorities and marginalized people are at the forefront, whereas political economy, though still present, is relatively opaque. This is despite the latter being a central concern of the Progressive Era. *Redemption 2* thus finds itself firmly within the “culture wars” of the past thirty years by elevating identity politics to the foreground. Resultantly, it has had to contend with those on the other side of this war. Nevertheless, it does attempt to address political economy and even presents a critique of American capitalism. However, as we have shown it does so in a much subtler manner, and it does not meaningfully articulate historic or contemporary problems like inequality and the exploitation of labor. Most significantly, it does not bother to present or even hint at a better alternative. It is “progressive” without a sense of progress. This lack of optimism and strive for change is the game’s sharpest break from the Progressive Era. Still, that it has attempted to at least address political economy reflects its reentry into mainstream progressivism, even if clumsily and insufficiently. If the two kinds of politics are further synthesized in popular progressive politics, perhaps the next *Redemption* game will follow suit.

Notes

1 The authors would like to thank the anonymous readers for their useful suggestions and the editors for their work. Thanks also go to Stephanie Russo, Marina Gerzic, Mark Neuendorf, Steven Anderson, Elijah Winters, and Connor Douglas for reading and providing valuable feedback on early drafts of this article; and to Logan Niblock and Yvette Wijnandts for their support and assistance.

2 Kate Lyons, “Red Dead Redemption 2: Game Criticised Over Killing of Suffragette,” *Guardian*, Nov. 7 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/nov/07/red-dead-redemption-2-game-criticised-over-killing-of-suffragette>

3 Shirrako, “Red Dead Redemption 2: Beating Up Annoying Feminist,” *YouTube*, Oct. 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPYAM9AfRH0>

4 “Feminist” was a niche term in the United States until the 1960s. While the term has been used to describe advocates of women’s rights since at least the 1880s, American activists at the turn of the twentieth century primarily saw themselves as suffragettes. The term became widespread upon the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. See Nancy Cott, “What’s in a Name?: The Limits of ‘Social Feminism’; Or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 76:3 (1989): 809–29; and Claire Goldberg Moses, “‘What’s in a Name?: On Writing the History of Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 38:3 (2012): 757–79, esp. 760–63.

5 Rockstar Games Inc., *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

6 It is worth noting that both games are “spiritual successors” to *Red Dead Revolver*, a 2004 game set in the 1880s. The game was far less successful in terms of sales and popularity compared to *Redemption* and *Redemption 2* and it is rarely considered alongside the two latter games. Tom Nicholson has stated that the game is “nearly forgotten now.” This article thus will not refer to the game any further. See Tom Nicholson,

“Remembering the Red Dead Redemption Prequel You Probably Never Played,” *Esquire*, Oct. 14, 2018, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/latest-news/a23590641/remembering-the-red-dead-redemption-2-prequel-you-probably-never-played/>

7 Dan Houser quoted in Harold Goldberg, “How the West Was Digitized: The Making of Rockstar Games’ Red Dead Redemption 2,” *Vulture*, Oct. 14, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/10/the-making-of-rockstar-games-red-dead-redemption-2.html>

8 “Identity politics” refers to an approach to politics that prioritizes or focuses upon the interests and issues of particular groups of people, typically organized around racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation lines. In the past, identity politics was associated with movements that sought to attain equality and justice for minorities and marginalized people. More recently, it has come to refer to conflicts over social and national ownership, belonging, and control, and encompasses those in hegemonic and nonhegemonic groups. It is important to note that this article does not dismiss the idea that identity politics played an important role in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. We simply wish to explore the importance of how the game’s players have responded to such issues, and how the game represents such identity politics. For more, see Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, “Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction” in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, eds. Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–9; and Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–20.

9 E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (1961; Camberwell: Penguin Australia, 2008), 30. This phenomenon is not limited to video games. Scholars have explored how cultural memories are embedded within all sorts of artifacts and media. For more, see Astrid Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, Sara Young, and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2008), 1–16; and Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

10 See Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Andrew B. R. Elliot and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, “Introduction: To Build a Past that Will ‘Stand the Test of Time’—Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives” in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* eds. Andrew B. R. Elliot and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 1–30; *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014).

11 Dawn Spring, “Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 19:2 (2015): 208.

12 We opt to use “far-right” rather than “Alt-right” as the latter now refers to a specific branch of contemporary far-right thought. Andrew Marantz has highlighted that although the “Alt-right” label was once used as an umbrella term to describe a broad range of far-right organizations and individuals that saw themselves as a “movement,” particularly during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, they have since been divided between racial- and cultural-nationalists. The former is now identified as the “Alt-right” and the latter the “Alt-light.” As such, we use “far-right” as an umbrella term. See Andrew Marantz, “The Alt-Right Branding War Has Torn the Movement in Two,” *New Yorker*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-alt-right-branding-war-has-torn-the-movement-in-two>

13 Sara Humphreys, “Rejuvenation ‘Eternal Inequality’ on the Digital Frontiers of *Red Dead Redemption*,” *Western American Literature* 47:2 (2012): 200–15.

14 Esther Wright, “Current PhD Students: Esther Wright,” University of Warwick History Department, last revised May 3 2019, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/eportfolios/u1555369/>

15 Esther Wright, “Red Dead Redemption 2, L.A. Noire, and Battlefield V: The Real History Behind 3 Popular Video Games,” *HistoryExtra*, Nov. 20, 2018, https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/red-dead-redemption-1-a-noire-and-battlefield-v-the-real-history-behind-3-popular-video-games/?fbclid=IwAR0rdOzB0zgQYhHkQ_6deCviZykEyGh0gycEIpnRh68KsSasOaySuy6vRQ

16 See Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996).

17 For surveys of the era, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon:*

The United States, 1877–1919 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); and Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

18 Rockstar Games Inc., “The Gilded Cage,” Chapter 4, in *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

19 Reflecting the considerable overlap between the two, Rebecca Edwards has gone so far as to suggest abolishing the term “Gilded Age” altogether due to the presence of progressivism prior to the 1890s. Rebecca Edwards, “Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of American History,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8:4 (2010): 461–73.

20 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*.

21 See Robert Johnston, “Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Politics,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1:1 (2002): 68–92.

22 Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* and Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order*.

23 Robert Johnston, “The Possibilities of Politics: Democracy in America, 1877–1917” in *American History Now*, eds. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 117.

24 Johnston, “The Possibilities of Politics,” 96–124. Johnston argued in 2002 that the Progressive Era needed to be “re-democratized” and advised historians to again focus upon the era’s achievements as well as its problems. Johnston, “Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era,” 68–92.

25 See Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), esp. 3–13 and 207–425; Charles Postel, “If They Repeal the Progressive Era, Should We Care?,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13:3 (2014): 400–410 and Johnston, “Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era,” 68–70. Also see Paul Glasstris, “Why a Second Progressive Era Is Emerging, and How Not to Blow It,” *Washington Monthly*, Jan./Feb. 2015, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/janfeb-2015/why-a-second-progressive-era-is-emerging-and-how-not-to-blow-it/>; Derek Paulhus, “Why the United States Needs a New Progressive Movement,” *Harvard Political Review*, Oct. 14, 2016, <https://harvardpolitics.com/united-states/united-states-needs-new-progressive-movement/>; and Jeffrey D. Sacks, “The New Progressive Movement,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/opinion/sunday/the-new-progressive-movement.html>.

26 See John E. O’Connor and Peter C. Rollins, “Introduction: The West, Westerns, and American Character” in *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* eds. John E. O’Connor and Peter E. Rollins (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 1–34.

27 It should be noted that *Red Dead Redemption*, the first game, was geared toward the traditional, Hollywood-esque, cowboy experience, an environment where white men dominated the frontier landscape. *Redemption 2*, as this article suggests, shifts away from white men as the only voice in the history and narrative of this period of history.

28 See Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling and Identity Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), in particular Chapter Four, “Come Get Some: Damsels in Distress and the Male Default Avatar in Video Games,” 73–100. This chapter explores in-depth the ongoing relationship between alt-right gamers and the toxic masculinity present in the wider gaming community, particularly when it comes to representations of women in games, and interactions with the female gamers.

29 Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russoworm, “Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of Image” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* eds. Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russoworm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 3.

30 Matt Lees, “What Gamergate Should Have Taught Us about the ‘Alt-Right,’” *The Guardian*, Dec. 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump>

31 Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard, “Introduction: Not a Post-Racism and Post-Misogyny Promised Land: Video Games as Instruments of (In)Justice” in *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 6.

32 Gray and Leonard, “Introduction,” 6.

33 M. Melissa Elston, “Allegorical Confrontation Meets Gaming System: Rhetoric and Trauma within *Red Dead Redemption/Undead Nightmare*” in *Undead in the West II: They Just Keep Coming*, eds. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 150.

34 Elston, “Allegorical Confrontation,” 143.

35 Elston, “Allegorical Confrontation,” 156.

- 36 Jonathan S. Jones, “Red Dead Redemption 2 Confronts the U.S.’s Racist Past and Lets You Do Something About It,” *Slate*, Feb. 4, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/02/red-dead-redemption-2-racism-civil-war-rockstar.html>
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Hilary Jane Locke is a PhD candidate at Macquarie University, Australia. Her project examines the influence of historical fictions on the public’s perceptions and reception of history. She recently completed a Master of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide, focusing on the presence of chivalry and courtly love in the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII. In 2018, she published a chapter on *Game of Thrones* and medievalism in *Medievalism and Early Modernisms: Adapting the English Past* (Routledge, 2018) and has a forthcoming journal article exploring the works of popular historian and historical fiction author Alison Weir in *Parergon* in 2020.

Thomas A. Mackay is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. His PhD explored confidence issues in U.S. banking during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. His research interests include the history of capitalism, nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries’ U.S. history, and twentieth-century Australian history. He has had sole and co-authored articles published in journals including *Enterprise and Society*, *American Nineteenth Century History*, and *History Australia*.

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