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**Prevailing Symbols of Early  
American Studies as Depicted  
in Rockstar Games' "Red Dead  
Redemption 2"**

From the days of the first Puritan generation to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the American people have come up with, and held onto, various myths, legends and symbols that encapsulate the American experience and the uniqueness of the American project. All these themes, myths and symbols that have played a part in shaping a collective American consciousness have been translated, reinterpreted and redefined through a number of new mediums over the years, as is the case with the focus of this paper, the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* by developer Rockstar Games. The focus of this paper shall be to analyse how the game makes use of some prominent American myths and symbols to create an experience that goes a step beyond a leisurely video game and creates a homage that captures the American nerve. The myths and symbols in question, such as the myth of the frontier, the garden of the world, the machine in the garden and the socio-cultural impact of industrialisation, have been explored through various mediums before, namely literature and the visual arts, such as the works of Thoreau and Hawthorne or the paintings of Thomas Cole, but also through early American studies which played a big part in contextualizing, isolating and interpreting the implicit meanings and symbols of these works, creating a foundation for further redefinition down the years.

To properly begin the analysis, a few key points must be addressed. Namely, the reasoning behind choosing the medium and the specific title in question. For centuries the prevailing medium that has carried ideals and symbols and given them a place in the public consciousness has always been art. While the ideas, approaches and symbols have all been formulated in the academic works of American studies scholars such as Miller, Smith, Matthiessen or Marx, the articulator and perpetuator of these themes, ideas and symbols has always been art as a mode of expression. The artistic expression of ideas enables them to work their way into the public consciousness. Literary works from the likes of Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman or Fitzgerald as well as paintings such as the series by Thomas Cole titled "The Course of Empire," in which he depicts the life cycle of a civilization beginning with untamed nature, followed by the pastoral ideal, decadence of civilization, destruction and ultimately the return to nature, have had a fundamental role in establishing the symbols that form the American identity. This remains the case in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only with a shift in medium, that is, the video game format.

Video games are a global medium consumed by a wide and diverse audience, and a successful video game title has a strong and lasting grip on its audience, as is the case with timeless series such as *Super Mario*, *Pokémon* or *Sonic* that have since become pop culture icons. This impact is why the medium was chosen for this paper, as it has a similar lasting effect as great works of literature. The second question is that of the title itself. *Red Dead Redemption 2* was chosen for its setting and themes primarily, but it also has the added effect of being one of the more anticipated and successful titles in recent history, having sold over 50 million units as of the time of writing. The game is set at the turn of the

twentieth century, between the 1890s and early 1900s. It grapples with themes of freedom, redemption, and pastoral ideals. The main character is America itself, with the game becoming an allegory for the development of the American nation, effectively depicting the period to the point that many of the prevailing symbols put forward by early American studies scholars become identifiable.

The game is set in a fictionalized depiction of America. It depicts the western frontier, the American North and South and ultimately narrows down to the city of St Denis, a fictionalized representation of New York. The vast majority of the game map is covered in wilderness, with splashes of civilization here and there; however, this dynamic begins to shift the more the player heads east and towards St Denis. The wilderness becomes increasingly curated the closer the player gets to St Denis and even forms some more curated settlements on the city's outskirts, a buffer zone between wilderness and civilization. The other exception is the part of the map around the town of Rhodes. Rhodes is located in the county of Lemoyne, which is a representation of the American South; thus, the wilderness in the area is heavily cut back and curated into plantations.

By inspecting the game map, we can immediately discern some prominent themes from early American studies. The first and most glaring is the size of the game map, in the words of the game's protagonist, Arthur Morgan: "It's a big country" (*Red Dead Redemption 2*). The vastness of the New World, discovered in the age of exploration and previously untouched by Western civilization, is a theme that often goes hand in hand with various other myths and symbols of American studies. A good literary example of the vastness of the continent and its impact on the American consciousness is Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road," where the speaker celebrates the vastness of the continent and how the many roads and rails serve to connect these vast distances. Whitman sings of the potential of the land, of the beauty of nature and the people of the road in his poem, something that is well depicted in designing the vast space of the game map with various encounters, vistas, and hints of what is to come on the horizon. Historically, this can be seen most clearly from the idea of the errand into the wilderness of the early Puritan settlers (Miller 1). The early Puritan settlers thought they were on a mission ordained by God to settle the New World and in the service of this they kept pushing into this new land, often coming into conflict with its native inhabitants. This conflict is depicted in canonical literary works, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," where the devil in the woods provokes Brown with his forefather's sins in King Phillip's war against the natives, but it is also depicted well in the game, becoming a crucial plot point as well as a major test of character and ideals, as we shall see later.

The pushing of settlements further into the wilderness veers into the next, and arguably most pervasive symbol of American studies, that being the myth of the frontier. The frontier of the American nation was remorselessly pushed further west afield, creating continuous movement from east to west (Smith 24)

and required the belief that the settlers had a natural right to conquer the vast new continent. This could be construed out of the errand of the early Puritans as part of their mission to settle the New World (Miller 4). However, the themes of the frontier and the movement of east to west, or west to east, shall be explored later.

Possibly the greatest service the game map does in representing early American studies is the depiction of the natural beauty of the continent. The game's visual fidelity assists player immersion while the gameplay incentivizes the player through game rewards to spend much of the game time hunting, riding and interacting with the natural environment, while the neglect of such activities leaves the player underequipped and essentially crippled from a gameplay perspective and unable to progress the narrative. Indeed, though we are inspecting the full map for the purposes of this paper, the player must explore the game world personally in order to unlock it on their map, likening them to a frontier explorer character. The exploration of the natural environment isn't only a play to engage the player's immersion, it is a necessity for their in-game survival and progression. This aspect of the game reflects the importance nature had in forming the American nation. Many of these activities as can be found in the game are identified by Marx in his essay *Machine in the Garden* as typical American "leisure-time activities" (5) and are strongly associated with an escape from civilization into a more sanctified and serene natural environment typical of another major myth of the American nation tackled by the game; the myth of the Garden.

The myth of the garden is an agrarian ideal and striving of the American people to tame and curate the wilderness and shape society in the image of a garden (Smith 30) and represents a founding narrative of the American nation. America as a young nation had little to go on to form its own identity: it didn't have a unique cultural background like the nations of the Old World, it didn't have a unique religion, though the principles of the early Puritan settlers had a great impact on shaping the American identity (Miller viii), and it didn't have a unique language neither. However, what America did have was its nature – the vast, untamed and sublime nature unique to the New World.

America found itself with an abundance of land and a need for people, a stark contrast to the old world (Jefferson), and it is precisely this need for people and the raw potential of the vast natural environment that created the ideal environment for the realization of the pastoralist ideal and self-sufficient living explored in works such as Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). This fundamental symbol can be observed in the game just by looking at the game map. The game world is covered in acres and acres of space occupied by scarce farmsteads and even fewer towns, all based on a pastoral way of living, while the tight, east corner of the game map depicts industrialization, yet another key aspect of American identity. The east of the game map, in stark contrast to a self-sustaining farmstead, depicts logging, burning of coal, construction of railroads which meander

throughout the map and, most importantly, St Denis. It is no coincidence either that industrialization is relegated to the East and pastoralism to the West, as in early American studies the West was seen as the frontier, an empirical space of collective desires and imaginings (Smith 28), while the East came to resemble the Old World, a hub of culture, industrialization and urbanization and so it is reflected much in the same way on the game map.

It is important to note the detail of the game encounters, both with settlers and natives, visually impressive vistas of numerous American geographic wonders and the depiction of the movement of people and goods across the map, all of which gives off an air of a living, breathing ecosystem reminiscent of nineteenth-century America, or an idealized version of it. For example, depending on which part of the map the player is located in, a random encounter may vary anywhere from a hunter in distress if the player is in a wooded area, the game's own version of a Native American reserve may trigger a Wapiti raid, the Appalachian like mountain range may trigger an attack by a secluded community of isolationists, urbanized areas are home to brigands and outlaws, natural environments are hunting grounds for a number of predators and there is a whole series of side quests centred around urban dwellers in distress while escaping into nature. The one constant in the game is the movement of caravans from East to West.

Having tackled the setting, let us now bring our attention to the themes of the game and how they make us think of some prevailing symbols of early American studies. The game focuses on the van der Linde gang, a group of outcasts on the run from society headed by the eponymous Dutch van der Linde. The gang represents the dying of the frontier and the taming of the American wilderness. When it comes to Dutch, one could draw comparisons with the Daniel Boone character type. The character of Daniel Boone could be seen from two different perspectives: first, the empirical/historical perspective of a man who, in his exploration of the wilderness, inadvertently spreads civilization (Smith 26). Though it is harder to argue this perspective for Dutch, and by extension to his gang, it isn't entirely implausible. Dutch and his gang are on a constant move into the wilderness; running from civilization, they constantly push frontiers. However, they inadvertently pave the way for "the law" into these lands as they are constantly pursued by government agents and agents of the Pinkerton detective agency who seek to bring an end to the gang and bring order to the West, making the gang an unlikely accomplice. The second perspective is the imaginative/creative perspective of a fugitive from civilization. This seems to be the entire idea behind Dutch and his gang, fugitives on the run from the law in search of "virgin forests" and "virgin land in the west" (*Red Dead Redemption 2*), with the ultimate goal of purchasing land and working it, far from "Uncle Sam" (*Red Dead Redemption 2*). The goal of the group is yet another prevailing symbol, that of American pastoralism. The pastoralist ideal entails rendering the individual free from the corrupt practice of trade or commerce and completely self-sufficient, a theme thoroughly explored by Thoreau in his *Walden* yet taken

to a further extreme by the gang who, unlike Thoreau, aim to completely isolate themselves from society.

Dutch in truth, much like Boone, is somewhere between the two perspectives, creating a potential new character type, an idealist outlaw of sorts, to quote Mrs Grimshaw from the game: "Dutch is the American this country was meant to create" (*Red Dead Redemption 2*). The other half of this character type is the protagonist, Arthur Morgan. Arthur Morgan is one of the three founding members of the gang, along with Dutch and Hosea, and is the playable character. Arthur inherits much of his worldview from his two mentors and, with the death of Hosea near the game's climax, forms an opposition to Dutch who fails in his ideals and is corrupted by civilization whilst Arthur stays true to his, depicting the two possible outcomes for the character type. Much ink has been spilled in American literature on the themes of the redemptive power of nature and the corruptive influence of civilization, from Jefferson's pastoral economy to the transcendentalists such as Thoreau arguing against the commercial principle in *Walden*. However, what is interesting to observe when it comes to the game's depiction is the embodiment of this symbol in the form of the idealist outlaw.

To understand this, the narrative of the game must be contended with. The game sets off with the gang in a bad way – on the run from the Pinkerton detective agency, they flee to safety. Their flight, over the course of the game, takes them further and further east in a reversal of the typical journey west which they have been undergoing thus far. As we have stated earlier, the further the map heads east, the bigger the presence of urbanization and industrialization. The further the gang of outlaws, and vehement opponents of civilization, head east, the more their goals and morals get corrupted. Such is the case with Dutch who, through greater exposure to city character types, loses sight of his ideals and turns on his own people. On the other hand, we have the protagonist, Arthur Morgan, who veers in the opposite direction, resisting the corruptive influences of the city and forming an opposition to Dutch. It is interesting to observe the adaptation of a typical frontier character embodying the fundamental conflict of nature versus civilization in such a way. This character type couldn't work without the frontier in mind; in a sense, the character type is typical of a reverse frontier character, meaning a character whose journey has taken them from the western frontier back east. Such is the case in F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* where the story's narrator, Nick Carraway, undertakes a similar journey from the Midwest to New York in search of better employment, or as is the case in the game, a brighter future.

The frontier itself is amply represented in the game as well, more accurately, the pushing of the frontier. The aggressive pushing of the frontier in an endless manifestation of destiny is a subject often criticized among authors such as the transcendentalists. Such political criticism of aggressive expansion can be found in the game through details such as newspapers and city criers as

well as embodied by some characters such as Uncle, the lazy elder of the group. The most notable instance of such criticism can be seen when Uncle reads the paper and breaks out into a passionate criticism of the American government's invasion of the Philippines (*Red Dead Redemption 2*). However, the most notable representation of this can be found in the form of the game's incorporation of the Native Americans.

The topic of seizing land and violence towards natives is an old one, embodied in later works such as Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" where the devil in the woods calls out Brown's family sins in King Philip's war, a punitive war against the Indians (Hawthorne 2), or more obliquely in Thoreau's *Walden* when he discovers and ponders signs of previous Indian habitation near his temporary home, but the game formulates this as one of its central themes.

The conflict with the Indians lies at the heart of the story and here the delineation of the idealist outlaw archetype faces its first true testing ground. The Native Americans, inspired by the Wapiti Indians, form a central opposition to the government and the rich magnates of the city who seek to exploit their land, and as such they find cause with Arthur Morgan and opposition to Dutch van der Linde. Arthur, who stays true to the gang's founding ideals of pastoralism and hostility towards civilization, identifies himself with the Indian chieftain Rains Fall and their struggle, striving to help him and his people find their place in the world in the face of rampant industrialization and urbanization. Dutch on the other hand, having spent much time with various city character types, has well and truly started his downward spiral at this point of the story, choosing to goad Rains Fall's son, Eagle Flies, into a rash decision for his own personal gain, much like the city characters exploit Dutch with decisions such as this one. The entire gang is made up of diverse characters from all over America and this conflict drives a wedge between the gang based on the two outcomes of the character archetype. In a sense, the make-up of the gang resembles the make-up of America itself, a diverse group brought together, or torn apart, by shared ideals. The Indians ultimately lose the conflict and start a complete shift into St Denis and the civilization the gang had been running from where their ideals are pushed to the limit.

It is at this point that industrialization as a key part of American identity can be tackled. Up to this point, industrialization can be observed in the form of railways, a powerful symbol of industrial America, meandering across the country, a machine entering the garden, disturbing the sanctity and serenity of nature (Marx 12). Industrialism also represents the next step for American identity, the nature-based symbols standing aside for new ones. We had the concept of nature's nation, a vast untamed wilderness making way for the garden, then for the frontier and now industrialization, marking a symbol shift that coincides with the character's narrative journey. As Trachtenberg writes in *Brooklyn Bridge*

"Jefferson's hopes for local attachments to the soil were defeated by the very means necessary to open the continent, the means of transportation. Not the land, not the garden, but the road, from Jefferson's own national turnpike to the latest superhighway, has expressed the essential way of American life" (21).

This kind of interconnectedness is what ultimately brought an end to the pastoral ideal, connecting the rural with the urban, facilitating the movement of people and goods through the nation (Trachtenberg 13). This movement is well depicted in the game with constant railway traffic, carriages coming to and from towns, businessmen in rural towns and farmers in city markets. However, the finest example of this movement is Native American representatives making deals with the government and the gang making deals with the city's elite, shifting completely into civilization where their character would be tested.

Ultimately, the complete shift into civilization is the crescendo that brings forth the end of the gang's journey. Having moved so far from their original ideal, the gang falls apart. Yet, it is only after this that the characters get their redemptive, or damning, moments. In a sense, the plot depicts the journey of the American nation and the various myths and symbols that have led to the culmination of the story, and the culmination of the American identity.

The story becomes an allegory for the historical development of the American nation. It encapsulates the spirit of the age as could be seen described in works of early American studies and it takes care to incorporate them into the narrative and the world it is trying to build either through graphical fidelity, gameplay mechanics or narrative moments. Though it does well to represent these themes and symbols it must be stated that it does little to improve upon them. Although the game map serves as a practical and powerful summary of land development and East-West dynamics, it doesn't venture further to comment on the dynamic, to add an added layer of complexity. The game seems content to let the player live in its world, not ponder it. The sole exception to this rule is the idealist outlaw character type which, as we discussed, is a fundamental duality. It poses the question of the price of progress in the face of ideals and lets the player choose which path to take through the game's reputation system, a tally of good and bad deeds the player has committed by engaging with the game world - the singular forked road in the game's world.

In conclusion, the game *Red Dead redemption 2* continues a lineage of representation of prominent themes and symbols present in the development of the American nation, themes and symbols explored in early Americans studies. Although it serves as a well-researched and thought out modern homage that brings said themes and everything they encompass into a new medium, the game does little to add new complexity to them and merely serves as a reminder of the part they played in the development of America. The game's



narrative and even mechanical functions become an allegory for these themes and the technological and social development of America. The game's biggest contribution to American studies is a new medium and a new form for the same themes, as well as the introduction of a new character type. The idealist outlaw character type embodies the themes of America's founding; pastoralism and self-sufficiency, and pits them against a ruthless march towards industrialisation and progress. It is a character on the frontier of progress with a divergent outcome, a test of character and ideals in the face of advancement, an allegory within an allegory and a narrative summary of the game's themes posing perhaps the most poignant question in the game: which path did America take?

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