

Francesca Razzi

# Re-enacting the American Frontier in Contemporary Popular Culture

## The Western Fantasy of *Red Dead Redemption II*

### Abstract

*Grounded in the theoretical framework of adaptation theory (Hutcheon 2006; Flanagan 2017), the present paper discusses the transmedia recreation of the myth of the Western frontier in American contemporary culture. The case study of the blockbuster video game Red Dead Redemption II (Rockstar Games 2018) will help illustrate the enduring success of the Western mythology, whose pervasiveness in American history and 20th-century popular culture cuts across different media and artistic forms (Slotkin 1992; Rosso 2010; Moretti 2018). In fact, Red Dead Redemption II can be understood in terms of creative reinterpretation and interactive counterpart of the literary tropes pertaining to the Western imagery and its representation, a “postwestern rewriting” construed upon textual, rhetorical, and socio-cultural layers (Cawelti 1999; Rosso 2008 and 2016). Defined in a review by The Washington Post as “jaw-dropping,” Red Dead Redemption II simultaneously contains narrative elements (Juul 2001), and matches a kind of “aesthetics of excess” deeply rooted in the late 19th-century literary imagination, which ranges from dime novels to naturalistic fiction (Denning 1998; Newlin 2011; Rosso 2014). At the same time, Red Dead Redemption II represents a transmedia storytelling of the American frontier, whose ‘history’ and experience the player can interactively rewrite. Thus, in its economic and artistic value, this video game renegotiates a cultural myth still appealing to the entertainment industry and its marketplace.*

**Keywords:** *American studies, western, adaptation, frontier, game studies*

*“Do you enjoy tales of the Wild West?”*

*(John Marston in Red Dead Redemption II)*

Halfway between history and myth, the American socio-cultural experience has always been characterized by the so-called Western frontier, a space both physical and imaginary, whose meaning has constantly been shifting and has thus been reframed time and time again (Smith 1950; Slotkin 1998; Frye 2016; Cartosio 2018). Since the time of 17th-century Anglo-Saxon colonizers and settlers, the frontier has represented the ideal line dividing the

'known' from the 'unknown' (i.e., order and civilization vs. wilderness and barbarianism). Due to its historical value as a process of expansion, the American frontier typifies an example of 'contact zone,' creating signifying practices based on social interrelations and encounters (Pratt 2003, 4-7). Especially during the 20th century, the liminal space of the frontier marking the boundary with the West has proved a powerful symbol for contemporary mass culture—even through cases of 'postwestern' rewritings—pervading not only the literary field, but also media culture at large, as hosts of movies and songs show (Rosso 2008, 2010 and 2016; Moretti 2018). The frontier landscape of cowboys, outlaws, and Indians, fitting into narrative schemes exploring the tensions between good and evil, triggered the literary imagination of Elmore Leonard in stories like "Three-Ten to Yuma" (1953) or *Hombre* (1961), and informed the visual imagery of movie Westerns, from John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) to Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015). Similarly, the popularity of the Western imagination marked the dawn of the video game industry throughout the 1970s and 1980s, when titles like *Gun Fight* (1975), *Outlaw* (1976), or *Gun.Smoke* (1985) were successfully released on the entertainment mass market (Wills 2019, 60-72).

Starting from this background, the present essay aims at exploring the complex intersections among the different cultural dynamics characterizing the Western mythology, its reconstruction through storytelling in popular culture, as well as its inner dichotomies. The case of the blockbuster video game *Red Dead Redemption II* (released in 2018 by Rockstar Games, the well-known company of the *Grand Theft Auto* series) will show how Western tropes once substantiated by 19th-century literature are re-imagined and re-configured through a process of media adaptation in contemporary popular culture, testifying to the success of a myth still alive in American culture, albeit in different forms and meaning.

The critical significance of *Red Dead Redemption II* as a case study for both Western and cultural studies can be attributed to its being a postwestern rewriting, what Stephen Greenblatt has called a "cultural artifact,"<sup>1</sup> made up of historical and literary dimensions reiterated by and inextricably interwoven within the pattern of the video game imagination. Following the path of most recent scholarship on postwestern as a genre (such as Sara Humphreys's 2021 study aptly titled *Manifest Destiny 2.0*), it can be asserted that the rhetorical construction of *Red Dead Redemption II* is grounded in a narrative storyline deeply indebted to the repetition of consolidated literary tropes and structures: as Humphreys contends, "Durable literary genres

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<sup>1</sup> Understood as "the restless process through which texts, images, artifacts, and ideas are moved, disguised, translated, transformed, adapted, and reimagined in the ceaseless, resourceful work of culture" (Greenblatt 2009, 4).

direct the procedural rhetoric of a game world [...]. Not only do durable literary genres mediate the procedural rhetoric in a game world, their conventions tend to control the narrative as a whole” (2021, 1).

Consequently, since a process of archival research also stands at the core of the *Red Dead Redemption* saga (Wills 2019, 79), a brief overview of the literary hypotexts founding the socio-cultural basis of the video game imagination may prove useful in order to further investigate the reasons for the ongoing popularity of the Western myth, whose appeal cuts across different media and cultural productions, and is, at the same time, expressive of a radical process of rewriting in contemporary culture. In fact, the development of the Western as a popular genre (in literature, in movie and game culture, too) heavily relies on formulaic constructions, which are based on the collective significance given to narrative patterns and textual features, such as setting and characters (Cawelti 1999, 11-56). As the literary origins of the Western myth can be traced back to the 19th century, its consolidation parallels the wide circulation of the popular press, especially in the last decades of the century. The Western myth, then, is closely intertwined with the success of literary genres and movements connected to emergence of the modern marketplace, along with its mass culture and readership—dime novels above all (Denning 1998; Cartosio 2018, 315-324), but also established and canonical forms of fiction, such as late-19th-century realistic and naturalistic literature.

The same popular appeal marks the Western fantasy of *Red Dead Redemption II*, whose mechanics involve the player narratively, immersing him/her in the adventures of a gang of outlaws. The gameplay is developed through three kinds of interaction: main storyline missions, side missions, and side quests (such as Treasure Maps and Collectibles). Building upon Linda Hutcheon’s theories on adaptation (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013), *Red Dead Redemption II* will be read as a kind of interactive storytelling that translates the artistic conventions of the Western genre into a media re-enactment, directly engaging the experience of a single player in a continuous process of cultural rewriting and consequent commodification of the image of the American frontier, which takes place on multiple textual levels: setting, characters, and narrative pattern (with related symbols).

## **1. Treading Western crossroads: from 19th-century fiction to contemporary game culture**

Among the forms and movements that marked the development of the American literary field through the second half of the 19th century, popular genres such as dime novels, as well as realistic and naturalistic fiction, helped shape the mythology of the West; the late-19th-century

literary perspective on the Frontier land is shared and reinterpreted by contemporary mass culture and, in turn, by the video game imagination. Fueled by the circulation of such literary works, during the 1890s the very image of the West developed significantly in American culture, while paradoxically signaling the conclusion of the socio-historical stage related to the conquest of the continental Frontier—as traditionally highlighted by Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 study “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Indeed, in the last two decades of the 19th century, the West started to be identified as a mass-culture mythology, whose “significance as a *mythic space* began to outweigh its importance as a real place, with its own peculiar geography, politics, and cultures” (Slotkin 1998, 61, italics in the original); this occurred in the very moment of the transition of the United States from the 19th to the 20th centuries, a process that mirrored well the socio-cultural contradictory conditions of the Gilded Age, raising crucial issues in terms of race, gender, and class. In other words, these three paradigms modified to some extent the perception of the frontier too, shaping it into the forms of a modern myth. In the first place, from a literary viewpoint, dime novels can undoubtedly be placed at the roots of the Western genre. From the time of their introduction into the literary market in the early 1860s, dime novels centered on Western stories gained a wide readership, and consolidated their popular appeal and commercial success in the following decades;<sup>2</sup> these novels, with their recurrent narrative patterns characterized by sensationalism and violence (Rosso 2014, 66-69), constitute the core and the origin of the fictional reconstruction of the West. By the 1890s, the textual conventions related to the Western genre—that is, setting, characters, structure, and plot—were fully established (Jones 1978). All these textual and rhetorical features contributed to securing dime novels a most favorable outcome as a form of popular entertainment: at the end of the century, dime novels came indeed to represent a thriving business, a commercial product aimed at the amusement of young, urban, working-class readers (Denning 1998, 27-46). Nevertheless, in the late-19th-century literary field Western tropes can be detected not only in ‘low-brow’ cultural forms as dime novels, but also in the works of canonical authors, firmly included within the historical development of the main literary movements characterizing the second half of the century, that is, realism and naturalism. Among these works, Bret Harte’s “The Luck of Roaring Camp” (1868) and “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” (1869), or Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* (1872) stand out as western narratives: these three works feature stereotyped themes and characters, while casting an ironic glance on the West and its literary representation (Rosso 2014, 70-72). This tragicomic perspective marks the fictional treatment

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, after the publication of the first series of dime novels between 1860 and 1874, a second series was issued by the New York-based publisher Beadle up to 1885.

of Western tropes even in subsequent 1890s fiction, reflecting the symbolic transition to modernity deriving from the historical closure of the frontier occurred in 1890. This is the case, for instance, of Stephen Crane's Western tales "The Blue Hotel" (1898), "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), "Twelve O'Clock" (1899), and "Moonlight on the Snow" (1899). Based on a combination of elements pertaining to both realism and romance, these stories dramatize the twilight of the 'Old' West while ironically debunking its ideological conventions through narrative strategies founded on the depiction of a melodramatic violence, which often subverts the traditional image of the West through the form of a "countermyth" (Vorpahl 1971; Collins 1985; Gross 1988; Zanger 1991). In fact, these forms of late-19th-century literature deploy narrative strategies based on determinism, sensational elements and excesses in plot, dialogue, and characterization, resulting in a kind of "aesthetics of excess" (Newlin 2011, 6-10) that well mirrors the fictional reconstruction of the West in dime novels. In their artistry, the works of authors like Harte, Twain, or Crane all share with the video game imagination of *Red Dead Redemption II* a basic theme: the idea of the late-19th-century American West as a changing locale, embodying the transition from the Old to the New, and staging a clash between Eastern middle-class values, and frontier heroism, violence, and wilderness. As the opening scenes of the video game recall, "By 1899, the age of outlaws and gunslingers was at an end. America was becoming a land of laws... Even the west had mostly been tamed. A few gangs still roamed but they were being hunted down and destroyed" (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Introduction). In the last decades of the 19th century, as the United States struggled to redefine its national boundaries and rearrange a social order, the West became a cultural crossroad expressive of this kind of transformation.

But the development of realism and naturalism in the late-19th-century literary field helped to further consolidate the success of the Western genre also from a socio-cultural perspective, paralleling the forms of circulation of dime novels. As realistic and naturalistic fiction also significantly developed through a widening literary marketplace reaching a mass audience (Radway 2009, 198-199), "every writer in the pantheon now associated with naturalism apprenticed with essays in the columns of fast-multiplying newspapers and then went on to write for monthlies" (Radway 2009, 215). In this sense, the role of mass-culture print market proves crucial for the circulation of this kind of fiction, often published in illustrated magazines and periodicals, such as *McClure's Magazine*, *Collier's Weekly*, or *Munsey's*. These periodicals featured both literature (short stories and poems) and journalism (reports and articles), and could count on an expanded readership, thanks to business practices related to advertising and syndication, which narrowed the economic and cultural gap between different print forms while

progressively commodifying the literary object; this mutual dependence between popular press and book trade is epitomized by the strategies used by some leading publishers, taking advantage of a commutation between print genres, which merged magazine and book businesses (Ohmann 2009, 107-110).<sup>3</sup>

Analogous strategies of popularization and commodification of the Western myth, along with its complex treatment, can be traced in contemporary game culture, as testified by the commercial success of the *Red Dead Redemption* series, despite the time-span of over a century that separates the video game saga from its literary predecessors. The perspective of a changing West, under the pressures of the modern age, is anticipated by the first episode of the series, released in 2010: *Red Dead Redemption* portrays the “notion of a complicated West” at the beginning of the 20th century (Wills 2019, 79), reframing the cultural legacy of the frontier (Humphreys 2021, 15-34). *Red Dead Redemption II*, instead, is set along a fictional Western frontier earlier in 1899, and features the adventures of one Dutch Van Der Linde and his gang of outlaws, among them the two protagonists Arthur Morgan (Chapters 1-6) and John Marston (Epilogue Parts 1-2). Whether by following the main storyline or getting involved in secondary missions and side quests, the video game takes place in a geographical and socio-cultural environment, where all dichotomies connoting the Western mythology and its transformation are deployed: growing metropolises and small frontier towns, old Southern families and new urban entrepreneurs, outlaws and sheriffs, gangs and detectives. Consequently, the player is given the possibility of choosing among numerous activities, mostly connected to the Western imagination, and ranging from group interactions (bank or train robberies, moonshining, gambling, gunslinging, and looting) to lone wanderings through the wilderness in order to hunt, fish, or simply sightsee.

Then, in its interactive storytelling of the end of the Old West, *Red Dead Redemption II* represents an example of video game engagement with the American myth, culture, and society (Wills 2019, 6), and simultaneously performs a threefold function: cultural, artistic, and socio-economic. First, being presented as a narrative (Juul 2001), the American frontier is reframed as a “reenactment of history”, expressive of a peculiar “relationship to the past” (Taylor and Whalen 2008, 2)—in other words, as an experience which can be continuously re-played and thus becomes a specimen of user-generated history. In turn, this commodified re-creation of a playable past builds upon a kind of “representational artistry” (Flanagan 2017, 442), that relies on technical and rhetorical strategies, such as melodramatic actions, cinematic conventions, and

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, publishing houses like Doubleday and McClure, or Harper and Brothers often reprinted in volumes tales and sketches which had previously appeared in their magazines.

the use of soundtracks; their use suggests what has been defined as “selective authenticity” considered “as a form of narrative license, in which an interactive experience of the past blends historical representation with generic conventions and audience expectations” (Salvati and Bullinger 2013, 154). Finally, because of it being a mass cultural medium, *Red Dead Redemption II* also fulfills a socio-economic task, since it has proved a worldwide profitable product in media marketplace; as its publisher Take-Two Interactive reported at the beginning of 2020, *Red Dead Redemption II* has been ranking as the top-selling title of the previous four years, establishing new records in terms of US dollar sales in the video game market (“Rockstar Games Breaks New Records”). An effective reason for this success resides in the video game performance and “jaw-dropping” qualities: thorough characterization, technical advantages in dialogue system, innovations in the cinematic camera mode, realistic portrayals of urban and natural sceneries (Byrd 2018).

Therefore, as a consumer-oriented product, the video game adapts the Western tropes by means of a compelling re-enactment, which involves the player’s active engagement in a high degree of physical immersion—that is, visual, aural, and kinesthetic (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, 135-136). From a formal and hermeneutic perspective, this kind of interactive storytelling operates through a transmedia translation of the textual levels of space, characterization, and imagery (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, 50-52).

## **2. Adapting (hi)stories: levels of interactive storytelling**

The transmedia translation of the twilight of the old American frontier, typical of late-19th-century Western fiction, into *Red Dead Redemption II* lends itself to a discussion based on the three main textual levels: space, with clear reference to the Western setting and environment; characterization, based on the treatment of stereotyped (the so-called ‘stock’) characters; and narrative pattern, centered on the imagery connected to key socio-cultural symbols of the West. The first level of adaptation of Western tropes consists in the depiction of the landscape associated with the setting of the video game. In *Red Dead Redemption II*, the conventional Western landscape undergoes a rhetorical shift from mythic wilderness toward turn-of-the-century civilization. Even though the picturesque representation of the frontier wilderness retains a stereotyped cultural background involving the idea of the West as an untamed, dangerous, violent place, the video game addresses the complex transition to modernity by ideologically reframing the different locations of the Van Der Linde gang. As the status of outlaws and outcasts of its members conventionally requires, the gang mainly lives in camps detached from towns and cities, whether among icy and snow-covered mountains (Chapter 1:

Colter), in the woods (Chapter 2: Horseshoe Overlook), or in open plains by the lake (Chapter 3: Clemens Point). The visual imagery characterizing these landscapes closely matches the Western pattern of action as “background and source of dramatic conflicts” (Cawelti 1999, 24-26). This strategy of depiction rhetorically defines the space in *Red Dead Redemption II*, since the landscape reflects the characters’ sense of displacement in the transition from the old Western frontier to the new urban reality. This idea is visually strengthened thanks to the use of cinematic cut-scenes, which show the characters questioning the nature of the changing world they inhabit. For instance, one of these cut-scenes portrays Arthur while writing his journal and concluding his entry with the following statement: “It always seem to be more, more and more civilization. I wanna get back in the open country, or the west, or what’s left of it, but even that ain’t the way I remember it” (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Chapter 3).



**Fig. 1:** Western wilderness (Rockstar)

The opposition between Old West and new civilization also marks the video game on the level of characterization, grounded on the use of stereotypes typical of Western fiction. Although the plot interactions mostly revolve around the classic dichotomies, the use of stock characters is reframed in order to deal with the socio-cultural transformations of the age. On the one hand, clear-cut oppositions still retain their function in terms of polarization: the traditional (and possibly romanticized) tension ‘outlaws versus sheriffs’ can be found in *Red Dead Redemption II* too, as explained in a cut-scene dialogue between Dutch and Arthur, as the latter observes



that “We’re thieves in a world that don’t want us no more” (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Chapter 3). To this extent, the Van Der Linde gang replicates the stereotyped vision of the Western outlaws endlessly fighting their enemies (be they other gangs such as the O’ Driscolls, town marshals, or even private detectives as the Pinkertons), in a conflict that from a social perspective dramatizes the evolution of the mythology of Western banditry, leading to forms of hybridization of the traditional frontier hero in a new, civilized environment (Slotkin 1998, 127-129; 143). Then, the dialogue testifies to a more complex characterization, since the gang embodies a transition from a stereotyped treatment into a combination between the opposite poles of the outlaw and the sheriff (or detective). This process is enabled also thanks to the player’s interaction, who decides whether Arthur may behave or misbehave, choosing among the possibilities given in the main storyline as well as in side quests—for instance, helping strangers in completing their tasks, like a reporter finding famous gunslingers in the frontier wilderness (“The Noblest of Men, and a Woman”), a drunken old man (actually a former slaver) recovering his few items left by the bank (“The Iniquities of History”), or a monk opposing slave practices in the metropolis of Saint Denis (“Help a Brother Out”). Likewise, the features of a hybrid frontier hero are outlined in John, the protagonist of the game epilogue. In the last mission, “American Venom,” John acts simultaneously as a gunslinger and a family man: he takes revenge on the former gang member Micah, who had previously betrayed Arthur and left him to die after a cruel fight, but he soon marries his longtime girlfriend Abigail (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Epilogue Part 2). In this sense, the boundaries between good and evil characters are decidedly blurred, giving way to a hybrid socio-cultural realm where it is impossible to distinguish outlaws from sheriffs, gamblers from farmers, or gunfighters from magnates: the video game reshapes the conflict between civilization and savagery through a host of ambiguous characters, according to a representational strategy typical of the most popular Western forms (Cawelti 1999, 31-44).

In addition, characterization in *Red Dead Redemption II* is given a further connotation in terms of both ethnic and gender discourse. Considered from this standpoint, the Van Der Linde gang might reflect the multifarious mosaic that frames the frontier as a contact zone, a melting pot where the outlaws meet and share their experiences, regardless of their race, ethnicity, and gender: among them, the gang includes indeed the black gunman Lenny, the Irish immigrant Sean, the Mexican revolutionary Javier Escuella, and women like the charismatic Susan Grimshaw (Dutch’s female counterpart of sorts), John’s girlfriend Abigail, Sadie Adler (the co-protagonist of the two-part Epilogue), and Karen, who plans and joins in the bank robbery in Valentine (in the mission titled “Sodom? Back to Gomorrah”). On the one hand, this process is

expressive of a cultural dynamics that addresses the multiethnic quality of the frontier, its evolution, and its eventual confluence into the new American reality at the end of the 19th century. The historical creation of the new and civilized West, then, testifies to the nature of a cross-racial phenomenon hardly limited to the crystallized opposition between ‘whites’ and ‘Indians’—i.e. dominant and subaltern poles; conversely, this process includes further minority groups in relation to both the socio-historical making of the Western frontier (Limerick 1987, 259-292), and, more broadly, the late-19th-century American racial politics and literary culture (Sundquist 1993; Warren 1993). Analogously, the role of women in *Red Dead Redemption II* transcends the limits of the closed realm of the gang, triggering further gender dynamics which refer to the historical and metaphorical development of the frontier grounded on the idea of “land-as-woman symbolization” and, simultaneously, on women’s attitudes toward the West (Kolodny 1975 and 1984). For example, a character like Black Belle engages conflictually with this model of Western femininity.<sup>4</sup> Far from being a submissive woman, Black Belle is “the grande dame of the gunslingers,” the last and most dangerous member of an old gang; she lives alone in a shack in the marsh outside Saint Denis, fiercely fighting bounty hunters and opposing their onslaughts (*Red Dead Redemption II*, “The Noblest of Men, and a Woman”). Black Belle, then, represents a subverted image of the feminine landscape seen as the privileged object of a male-centered process of (Western) conquest and mastery. Instead, she might rather be a metaphor for the closed frontier, which has determined the eventual disillusionment brought about by unattended gratifications, promised by the land in its double role of mother and mistress (Kolodny 1975, 133-137). Accordingly, the historical and mythic end of the frontier coincides with the ultimate decline of 19th-century female-oriented perspectives on the West: Black Belle’s territory is an unbridled land of struggle and conflict rather than an Edenic garden of idealized domesticity (Kolodny 1984, 3-13).

The third and last level of textual adaptation in *Red Dead Redemption II* involves the narrative pattern and the related imagery centered around two key cultural and popular symbols of the West: the train and the saloon. In the video game, the imagery connected to these emblems builds on the dichotomy between frontier and civilization, as they function as socio-cultural microcosms reflecting the transformation of the Old West. Moreover, both the train and the saloon may be read as paradigms typically pertaining to a regional symbolism, which is exploited to create effective and recognizable formulas for the mass entertainment, while

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<sup>4</sup> In the fictional world of *Red Dead Redemption II*, Black Belle (Maybelle Elizabeth Colter) is a nod to the actual outlaw Belle Starr, ‘Queen of the Oklahoma Outlaws,’ and a member of the James-Younger Gang.

dealing with the traditional Western iconography—from fashion and architecture, to peculiar habits and activities, even to food and drink (Cawelti 1990, 99; 102).



**Fig. 2:** Dutch and his gang (Rockstar)

With regard to the train, in *Red Dead Redemption II* the imagery connected to this symbol seems grounded upon a socio-cultural bias which reinforces the central tensions discussed so far. In the video game, trains and railroads lead to a further development of the dichotomy between frontier and civilization, the latter characterized by a richness expressive of the economic power of the rising middle-class. The railway emblematically refers to the success of the new urban entrepreneurs, in contrast with the decline of the lone frontier heroes. In fact, one of the earliest missions in the game soon introduces the player to the middle-class world of the railway magnate Leviticus Cornwall. In the mission titled “Who the Hell is Leviticus Cornwall,” Arthur and the gang plan and commit a robbery on Cornwall’s train. While looting the private carriage, they are strongly impressed by its luxurious furnishings, carpets, curtains, and decorations, as their remarks show: “Look at this place. It’s like a palace,” “Now I’ve seen everything” (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Chapter 1). The train is seen as an emblem of modernity—precisely, of technological modernity linked to an expanding middle-class, which at once builds upon the main tension between characters: greed and hunger for money underline the antagonism between the gang (especially its leader, Dutch) and Cornwall throughout the whole story. For example, in “The Bridge to Nowhere” Arthur and John are ordered to destroy a railroad bridge

by planting some dynamite on its pillars; the two men comment on the rivalry between their leader and the magnate (“You hear about Dutch and Cornwall? [...] this is what I’m talking about. More enemies, more chaos”), concluding that “old Dutch got all the smoke he wants” as soon as they accomplish their task (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Chapter 6). Whereas the gang is the last witness to the old frontier life, Cornwall embodies fictionally the late-19th-century railroad tycoons who, thanks to their huge financial power and controversial political relationships, helped build the modern American world by recasting the idea of the ‘far’ West into a symbolic space of technological advancement and conquest (Schwantes and Ronda 2008; White 2011).

A traditional feature of Western fiction, the saloon often represents the pivot of a narrative structure marked by repeated actions, such as drinking, gambling, fighting, and paying. The same pattern is reiterated in *Red Dead Redemption II*, since the player can independently choose to let Arthur join gamblers and drinkers in any town saloon anytime. Nevertheless, there are also single moments in the game storyline which are centered on the interactions occurring in the microcosm of the saloon. For example, in a mission ironically entitled “A Quiet Time,” Arthur and his fellow gang member Lenny have to deal with a number of situations taking place at the saloon in the frontier town of Valentine: they first get drunk, then start quarrelling with other men, and finally get involved in a fight, but avoid getting arrested (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Chapter 2). This structural use of irony in the titles marks further stages in the game, for instance some missions occurring in Saint Denis (*Red Dead Redemption II*, Chapter 4). In “The Joys of Civilization” Arthur chases after a kid who has snatched his satchel, and in “Urban Pleasures” Dutch, Arthur, and Lenny manage to rob a trolley station: as these titles suggest, the antiphrasis connoting the urban experience and the related (mis)adventures of the gang in the metropolis parallels the comic strategies underlying Western fiction—especially in the cases of Twain or Crane, as previously pointed out.

The comparison drawn between the video game features and the 19th-century literary Western tropes has shown how, in terms of transmedia adaptation, *Red Dead Redemption II* represents a peculiar way of dealing with the main theme of the transformation of the Old West in its transition toward modernity. Yet, the video game performs a more complex and pervasive function, which involves three distinct degrees of re-enactment of the Western myth—textual, literary, and socio-cultural.



**Fig. 3:** In a saloon (Rockstar)

First, from a textual point of view, analogies and differences can be outlined between *Red Dead Redemption II* and the literary paradigms of the Western genre. Whereas dime novels still retain more defined boundaries between the old and the new West, thus reiterating the traditional image of the frontier by means of clear-cut oppositions (at least concerning the levels of setting and characters), in late 19th-century fiction and *Red Dead Redemption II* the dichotomies are often more nuanced, giving way to more elaborate forms of negotiation of the twilight of the frontier experience. On a literary level, however, *Red Dead Redemption II* enacts a broader process of rewriting: the video game re-elaborates the key features typical of the Western genre from its origins, resulting in a contemporary recreation of the fictional representation of the American frontier as first shaped by 19th-century dime novels and canonical fiction. Finally, from a socio-cultural perspective, this kind of transmedia dialogue between literature and game culture addresses the concept of a mutual dependence between artistic object and ideology (Toscano 2020, 1-16). In other words, *Red Dead Redemption II* and its literary hypotexts reiterate the American myth of the frontier as much as they are informed by the legacy and significance of its cultural and social value at the same time. In turn, this socially construed discourse of the American frontier is deeply characterized by a popular appeal, which has further contributed to the configuration of a mythic and commodified West in both literature and game culture. Thus, this process of commodification of the American West testifies to the market-oriented nature of transmedia storytelling, which gives the audience the

enduring possibility to take part in the construction of the meaning of the text itself, enacting a collective and endless process of historical rewriting.

**Francesca Razzi** is PhD and research fellow in American literature at “G. D’Annunzio” University (Chieti-Pescara). Her research areas include 19th-century American and comparative literature. She has published on the transcultural and intertextual functions of the literary and artistic tradition in American authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, William Carlos Williams, and Thomas Pynchon. She has presented at national and international conferences in American Studies (American Studies Association of Italy Conferences in Naples 2015, Milan 2017, L’Aquila 2021; European and British Association for American Studies Conference London 2018; American Literature Association Conference Boston 2019).

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