

Re-Mythologizing the Frontier, Jungian Archetypes and the American West in Red Dead Redemption 2

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Abstract: *This abstract explores how Rockstar Games' Red Dead Redemption 2 () operates as a site for re-mythologization, critically engaging the foundational American Frontier Myth through the innovative platform of the open-world video game. Anchoring this analysis in Jungian Archetypal Criticism, this study asserts that RDR2 performs a cultural hermeneutic, moving beyond the mythic structures catalogued by Northrop Frye to deconstruct the "terrible burden of the American past" identified by Leslie Fiedler. The narrative arc of the protagonist, Arthur Morgan, exemplifies a late-stage, self-aware collapse of the classic Hero/Persona archetype. His journey is framed by a persistent confrontation with the Shadow, the inherent violence and epistemological failure of the vanishing American landscape. The game's interactive paratextuality, enabled by its open-world design, grants the player agency over Morgan's ethical trajectory, thus transforming the passive reception of myth into a dynamic, ethical negotiation. This mechanism achieves a novel form of digital storytelling, challenging the traditional linearity of the quest romance. RDR2 functions as an elegiac counter-narrative, using cutting-edge simulation to examine the moral and historical anxieties of American culture. The paper contends that this interactive, technologically mediated experience is not a mere perpetuation of the myth, but a critical, self-reflexive sublimation of the Frontier, offering a compelling case study for the intersection of classical literary theory and contemporary popular media.*

Keywords : *Re-Mythologizing the Frontier, Jungian Archetypes, American West*

Introduction: Archetypal Structures in Red Dead Redemption 2

The trajectory of American cultural self-conception remains indelibly linked to the Frontier Myth, a foundational narrative of redemptive violence, individual self-reliance, and the inexorable march of telos across a supposedly empty continent (Smith, 1950; Slotkin, 1992). Yet, as the historical and ideological foundations of this myth have been subjected to rigorous, often agonizing, scholarly scrutiny, a deeper and more troubling truth emerges: what Leslie Fiedler termed the "terrible burden of the American past" is not merely an historical footnote but a persistent, contaminating force in the national consciousness (Fiedler, 1968, p. 385). The critical imperative, therefore, lies in re-examining these fundamental American narratives through the lens of contemporary media, particularly those with a significant cultural footprint and capacity for hermeneutic depth.

The blockbuster video game Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) transcends its designation as mere popular entertainment, positioning itself instead as a rich, interactive site of cultural hermeneutics. Its immense critical acclaim and commercial success establish it as a text worthy of serious academic engagement, a complex digital narrative that mediates and

problematizes the very genre it inhabits. This article posits that *Red Dead Redemption 2* performs a systemic deconstruction of the Frontier Myth through its interactive digital narrative, specifically by employing and simultaneously subverting a constellation of mythological and archetypal structures.

To rigorously analyze this deconstructive performance, this study employs Jungian Archetypal Criticism as its primary analytical framework. Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, wherein "primordial images" or archetypes: such as the Shadow, the Anima/Animus, and the Wise Old Man: reside, offers a potent vocabulary for dissecting the profound symbolic resonance of the game's characters and narrative arcs (Jung, 1968).

Complementing this, the study acknowledges the critical insights of Northrop Frye's mythic structures, particularly his system of mythoi and modes, which enable the contextualization of the game's narrative within the cyclical patterns of Western literary tradition (Frye, 1957). Leslie Fiedler's incisive analysis of American literary archetypes, focusing on the recurrent motif of the homoerotic retreat from civilization into the wilderness, provides a crucial subtext for the Van der Linde gang's doomed communal experiment.

The methodology is inherently concerned with how interactive paratextuality transforms the player's relationship to this mythic content. Unlike passive media, the player's agency: the choices, moral alignments, and experiential navigation of the simulated world: compels a subjective embodiment of the myth's dismantling. The digital text, therefore, ceases to be a fixed object and becomes a dynamic process of mythological engagement. The article's focus is subsequently delimited to three critical vectors: the game's environmental worldbuilding as a commentary on the "closing" of the American West; its narrative structure, which privileges tragic downfall over heroic triumph; and the crucial mechanism of player agency in shaping the protagonist Arthur Morgan's archetypal transformation. This intervention demonstrates how video games, far from being simply diverting, offer a novel and potent mode for interrogating and ultimately dissolving the ossified narratives of the collective unconscious.

The American Frontier Myth: Theoretical Foundations and Digital Interrogation:

The American Frontier Myth, a pervasive cultural construct, traces a distinct literary and historical genealogy from the nineteenth-century dime novels to the grand cinematic narratives of the mid-twentieth century, embedding itself deeply within American exceptionalism (Cawelti, 1999). This myth is fundamentally structured around a dualistic encounter civilization versus the wilderness. Henry Nash Smith's seminal *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) established the Virgin Land thesis, identifying the agrarian West as a core symbolic source of American innocence and democracy. Conversely, Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) profoundly reframed the narrative, arguing that the myth's ideological investment relies upon the brutal paradox that American identity is forged: or "regenerated": through the violent destruction of the wilderness and the displacement of its Indigenous inhabitants.

Applying Northrop Frye's comprehensive system from *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), the Frontier narrative aligns with the structure of the quest romance. This archetypal pattern, typically featuring a hero's journey into a liminal space to achieve a redemptive cycle,

functions to perpetuate the ideology of Manifest Destiny within a seemingly universal framework. The wilderness, in this reading, becomes the symbolic "Green World" of rebirth, ready to be mastered (Frye,1957).

However, a psychological and moral reckoning with this inherited tradition is necessary. Leslie Fiedler, in works like *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968), critiques the romanticized mythology, characterizing the nation's historical trajectory as bearing the "terrible burden of the American past." This critique highlights the figure of the vanishing American as a potent symbol of unresolved historical trauma: a nation perpetually fleeing the moral compromises embedded in its foundational narratives. Fiedler's analysis, focusing on patterns of displacement and loss, posits the Frontier myth as a site of psychological stasis, demanding a critical externalization. This scholarly interrogation finds a uniquely fertile ground in contemporary digital narratives. Video games, distinct from static texts, introduce the concept of interactive paratextuality, transforming the audience into an active participant. This new mode of mythological engagement forces the player to embody the myth's choices and consequences, rendering the ideological investments of the Frontier immediate and personal (Juul, 2001). It is precisely this capacity for experiential subversion that makes a critical text like *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018) an ideal laboratory for analyzing how these deeply ingrained traditions can be both inherited and dramatically subverted in the digital age.

Jungian Archetypes and the Psyche of the Frontier:

The utility of Jungian Archetypal Criticism in analyzing the American Frontier narrative lies in its capacity to access the profundum of the collective psychological experience. At its core, Jungian theory posits the Collective Unconscious: a deep, inherited repository of human psychological patterns: that manifests across cultures and time through archetypes (Jung, 1968). These "irrepresentable" yet universally resonant forms structure human narratives and motivations (Jacobi, 1959). For the Frontier's mythology, key relevant archetypes include the Hero, the Shadow, the Mentor, and the Trickster, each contributing to the overarching goal of individuation: the psychological process of integrating the personal and collective unconscious to achieve wholeness (Jung, 1953).

The Hero/Persona Archetype in Frontier Mythology:

The traditional frontier hero: the resolute gunslinger, the industrious settler, the romanticized outlaw: epitomizes the successful deployment of the Persona archetype. This social mask, necessary for functioning within the community (or gang), often presents a façade of moral clarity, rugged self-reliance, and righteous purpose (Sharp, 1991). Classic Western narratives, from Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) to cinematic portrayals, reinforce the Hero's triumph as a validation of American exceptionalism and a clear-cut victory over primal chaos. The Persona, in this context, systematically obscures the foundational violence inherent in the expansionist project, sustaining the myth of the *terra nullius* (Turner,1893).

The Shadow Archetype: Violence, Morality, and Repressed History:

The Shadow archetype, defined as the repository of a psyche's disowned, inferior, or repressed aspects, is critical to understanding the Frontier's darker resonance (Samuels, 1985). The

systematic violence, genocide, and dispossession that underpinned the westward expansion serve as the collective Shadow of American “civilization” (Slotkin, 1973). This psychological burden is not abstract but manifests concretely in the narrative landscape itself. The frontier: that liminal space of conquest: is saturated with the results of this repression, becoming a literal and figurative repository of unacknowledged historical trauma (Hinshelwood, 1991). The landscape of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, with its stark juxtaposition of natural beauty and sudden, brutal violence, embodies this persistent Shadow (Rockstar Games, 2018).

Arthur Morgan as Post-Hero: The Collapse of Classical Archetypes:

The protagonist, Arthur Morgan, functions not as a classical Hero but as a late-stage, post-heroic deconstruction of the archetype. His journey is a protracted confrontation with the inherent ethical flaws of his Persona, which is the mask of the loyal, efficient outlaw (Mogen, 1993). As the gang's collective delusion: led by the corrupted Mentor/Trickster archetype, Dutch van der Linde: collapses, Arthur is forced into an accelerated process of individuation. The game's ethical core resides in his persistent, often reluctant, confrontation with his own Shadow. His moral ledger, influenced heavily by player choice (Juul, 2001), becomes the interactive expression of a culture grappling with its historical transgressions, ultimately leading to a tragic, redemptive self-reckoning that subverts the traditional frontier narrative of untainted triumph (Smith, 1950). His final actions demonstrate the necessary, albeit painful, integration of the Persona and the Shadow (Jung, 1968).



Figure 1. Arthur Morgan in Early Game (Pristine Persona)



Figure 2. Arthur Morgan in Late Game (Post-Tuberculosis)

The visual contrast between Arthur's early-game embodiment of the capable, stoic outlaw (Figure 1) and his late-game deterioration after the onset of tuberculosis (Figure 2) provides a material, visible axis for reading his post-heroic collapse. These images, when placed in dialogue, stage the dissolution of the Persona at the level of the body itself: the muscular, upright figure of the early chapters constitutes the outward-facing mask of frontier virility, whereas the frail, hollowed, and fatigued Arthur of the final act registers the Shadow's ascendance as a somatic truth that the narrative can no longer suppress. The transformation is not merely aesthetic; it externalizes the psychic fracture at the heart of the Western myth, dramatizing how the frontier's moral debt inscribes itself onto the flesh. In this juxtaposition, the body becomes an allegorical surface through which the game makes visible the implosion of the heroic ideal and the painful emergence of a subject capable of ethical self-recognition.

Red Dead Redemption 2: Worldbuilding and the Reconstituted Frontier Landscape:

The open-world environment of Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) is not merely a setting for action but an act of **archaeological reconstruction**: a digitized palimpsest bearing the traces of historical and mythological conflict (Ryan, 2018). The game's commitment to an immersive geographical verisimilitude transforms its map into a potent **mythological space**. This spatial complexity fundamentally subverts the linear narrative progress inherent in the traditional **quest romance** (Frye, 1957). Instead of a unified path toward a singular destiny, the player's free-roam navigation encourages a simultaneous experience of the Frontier's ideological and ecological collapse, moving beyond mere backdrop to become a narrative actor in itself (Jenkins, 2004).

Regional Geography and Environmental Representation:

The game's vast continental microcosm is geographically stratified, allowing for a nuanced representation of competing American mythologies.



Figure 3. Saint Denis (Urban Modernity)



Figure 4. Snowy Hills (Opening Sequence, Ambarino)



Figure 5. Dense Forest Wilderness



Figure 6. Desert Landscape (New Austin Region)

This layered cartography finds powerful visual expression across the game's contrasting environmental tableaux: Figure 3 through Figure 6: each functioning as an ecological and ideological signifier. Figure 3, depicting the gaslit sprawl of Saint Denis, crystallizes the urban modernity that supplants the mythic wilderness, embodying the industrial and moral corrosion

of the frontier ideal. In stark contrast, Figure 4, set amid the snowbound isolation of Ambarino, visualizes the frontier's genesis in a state of elemental blankness: a tabula rasa that paradoxically conceals histories of violence beneath its purity. The dense forest of Figure 5 operates as the game's psychological locus, a site of introspection and sublimity where the natural world mirrors Arthur's oscillation between instinct and reflection. Figure 6, the arid expanse of New Austin, performs the desert as terminal landscape: the exhausted residue of the Western imaginary, stripped of both abundance and transcendence. Collectively, these spaces dramatize the collapse of spatial teleology: progress gives way to recursion, and the landscape itself becomes a mnemonic archive of imperial ambition, erasure, and decay.

The Heartland and Temperate Zones:

The New Hanover region, representing the American heartland and its temperate zones, is presented as a site of intense ideological friction. Its rolling valleys and nascent frontier towns embody the enduring myth of settler expansion and agrarian opportunity (Smith, 1950). Yet, the visible scars of early industrialization and resource extraction: logging camps, polluted rivers: immediately complicate this romanticized vision, positioning the landscape as a contested space where environmental complexity rapidly succumbs to capitalist entropy (Slotkin, 1973).

Roanoke Ridge and the Appalachian Frontier:

The harsh, mountainous terrain of Roanoke Ridge functions as an analogue for the Appalachian frontier. This region is a spatial representation of cultural marginalization and resistance, where isolated homesteads and tightly knit rural communities exist outside the burgeoning legal and economic systems. The Native Americans, as shown in Figure 7, are depicted in their struggle with the establishment. The wilderness here is not an Arcadian retreat but an isolating refuge and, simultaneously, a prison, reflecting the social exclusion experienced by those who cannot or will not adapt to the demands of modernization (Tuan, 1977).



Figure 7. Native American Settlement/Interaction

Swamps and the Untamed South:

The Bayou Nwa and Scarlet Meadows: the game's Southern swamps: create a space of profound ecological and social liminality. Dominated by Gothic elements: misty, dilapidated structures and environments reclaimed by wildlife: this region explicitly deconstructs the idea of a fully "tamed" frontier – see Figure 8. The environment, hostile and inscrutable, embodies the uncanny and the repressed anxieties of the past, serving as a material manifestation of the collective Shadow (Jung, 1968), where violence and history lie submerged beneath the surface.

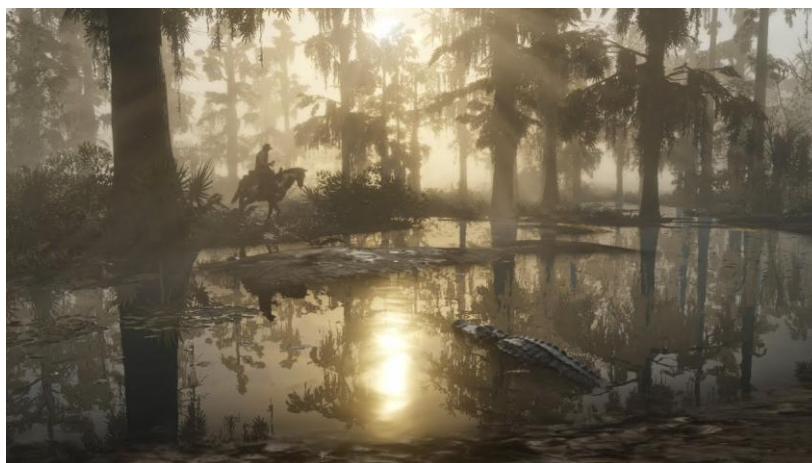


Figure 8. Swamp Region (Bayou Nwa)

The Western Frontier: Deserts and Civilization's Edge:

The western regions of West Elizabeth and the Grizzlies represent the frontier's final, receding boundaries. The mountainous passes and arid deserts function as a space of mythic compression, as seen in Figure 6. The aridity of the environment often mirrors a corresponding moral and spiritual barrenness in the narrative, suggesting that the traditional promise of the West is exhausted, leaving behind only the stark reality of human endurance against an indifferent natural world (Mogen, 1993).

Urban Environments: Saint Denis and the End of the Frontier:

Saint Denis (see Figure 3), the game's sprawling, industrialized metropolis, stands as the ultimate counter-frontier space. Its dense architectural hierarchy and visible concentrations of wealth and poverty signify the conclusive death of the romanticized West (Fiedler, 1968). The urban design, characterized by rapid modernization and technological advancement (streetlights, nascent automobile traffic), visually embodies the terminal tension between rural mythology and urban modernity, emphasizing that the Frontier is closed, replaced by the complexities of the twentieth century's industrialized social ecology.

Microcosms of Worldbuilding: Camps, Settlements, and Social Ecology:

The Van der Linde gang camps, (see Figure 9) act as critical **microcosms of frontier society**. The spatial and social dynamics within these settlements: the placement of tents, the allocation of tasks, and the resources available: are powerful reflections of the characters' ideological positions and individual arcs. The environmental storytelling of these domestic,

communal spaces directly registers the moral and psychological decay of the gang, transforming simple cabin interiors and communal areas into barometers of the collective Persona's collapse.



Figure 9. Van der Linde Gang Camp (Group Dynamics)

The Landscape as Witness: Environmental Narrative and Archaeological Layers:

The landscape functions as an active witness to history, imbued with archaeological layers of pre-colonial, colonial, and industrial traces. The inclusion of ruined structures, Native American artifacts, and abandoned settlements creates a palimpsestic landscape (Cosgrove, 1998). This meticulous environmental detail reinforces the game's themes of historical erasure and loss, challenging the myth of a "new" world by revealing the presence of countless previous, often violent, inhabitants beneath the surface of the playable map.

Interactive Paratextuality and the Player's Ethical Agency:

The analysis of Red Dead Redemption 2 necessitates an engagement with interactive paratextuality, extending Gérard Genette's foundational theory of mediating frames to encompass the dynamic elements of digital media (Genette, 1997). In video games, paratextual elements: such as the Heads-Up Display (HUD), dialogue trees, and mission choice architecture: do not merely present the narrative; they function as a continuous mediating frame that structures the player's relationship to the core text (Rockstar Games, 2018). This shifts the experience from passive, linear narrative consumption to interactive co-creation.

Arthur Morgan's Ethical Trajectory: A Player-Mediated Journey:

Arthur Morgan's psychological evolution: his process of individuation: is directly mediated by the player's choices, quantified by the Honor system, see Figure 10. This system transforms the protagonist's journey into a scale for interpreting the Hero's archetype. Low-Honor playthroughs reinforce Arthur as a tragic anti-hero, embodying the violent Shadow of the dying West. Conversely, High-Honor playthroughs represent a difficult, self-aware transcendence of the Persona, aligning with the redemptive pattern of the traditional quest romance, albeit with

a profound sense of futility (Frye, 1957). These diverging paths demonstrate how player decisions actively transform the mythological manifestation of the character.



Figure 10. Honor System HUD

Agency and Moral Choice in Open-World Design:

Within the open-world paradigm, player agency is a central axis of mythological subversion. This agency is distinct from narrative determinism; while the main plot remains largely scripted, RDR2's design simultaneously constrains the path of the narrative and enables profound ethical choice within its framework (Juul, 2001). The central tension arises from the conflict between the narrative's tragic trajectory and the player's moment-to-moment autonomy, forcing a critical reflection on the inevitability of the Frontier's collapse (Mogen, 1993).

The negotiation between authored narrative and player freedom becomes visually and mechanically articulated across Figure 11 and Figure 12. The Braithwaite Manor cutscene (Figure 11) exemplifies the reassertion of authorial control: a meticulously scripted cinematic sequence in which the illusion of agency is suspended, and the player becomes a passive witness to tragedy. Here, the game punctures ludic autonomy to reaffirm its tragic inevitability, foregrounding the tension between the myth of choice and the necessity of narrative fate. By contrast, the Interaction HUD (Figure 12): the circular "Greet/Antagonize" menu: transforms dialogue into a moral instrument, translating the ethics of encounter into a quantifiable decision space. This ludic structure enacts what Espen Aarseth calls ergodic authorship, where meaning is co-produced by mechanical selection rather than by narrative exposition. Together, these two figures map the oscillation between control and contingency, defining the player not as sovereign agent but as moral co-author trapped within a preordained mythos.



Figure 11. Braithwaite Manor Mission Cutscene



Figure 12. Interaction HUD (Greet/Antagonize Wheel)

The Shadow Made Interactive:

The game's ethical core is realized through the interactive confrontation with the Shadow. Opportunities for moral transgression: random encounters, robbery, and violence: are constantly available, creating a palpable sense of player complicity in the narrative's underlying violence (Slotkin, 1973). By demanding that the player actively participate in these darker actions, RDR2 implicates the audience in the "terrible burden of the American past" (Fiedler, 1968), transforming the Shadow from a repressed national idea into a mechanism of immediate psychological engagement.

Arthur Morgan: Archetypal Collapse and Moral Reckoning:

Arthur Morgan functions as a deliberate inversion of the classical frontier hero, positioning him squarely within the tradition of the American anti-hero: figures whose moral ambiguity and eventual tragedy serve to interrogate the nation's foundational myths (Fiedler, 1968). His late-stage, self-aware collapse is a distinctive feature of contemporary narrative, contrasting sharply with the righteous triumph demanded by earlier cultural texts.

Arthur's constructed identity as a loyal, ruthless outlaw constitutes his Persona mask: a survival mechanism that rationalizes the gang's systemic violence (Jung, 1968). The game strategically introduces moments of mask-slippage through vulnerable camp interactions and introspection, granting the player glimpses of an authentic, troubled selfhood that destabilizes the notion of the stable, unified Hero required by the myth.

This instability is heightened by his escalating moral awareness, which leads to an intense confrontation with the Shadow and its subsequent psychological toll. The systemic violence of the Frontier is not merely external but becomes an unavoidable Shadow, forcing Arthur to internalize the moral cost of his life (Slotkin, 1973). This psychological dread is physically registered through his tuberculosis, a literal manifestation of existential and historical consequence, where the infected body serves as a profound moral register for a polluted way of life (Ryan, 2018). The game's ultimate trajectory is one of Redemption as Impossibility, fundamentally subverting the traditional quest romance. RDR2 refuses easy, cathartic resolution, opting instead for a complex moral closure earned through self-sacrifice rather than triumphant conquest. Arthur's trajectory becomes an elegiac confrontation with human limitation and the historical inevitability of change, confirming that the mythology of the autonomous, conquering Hero cannot survive the complexities of the modern world (Smith, 1950). His physical transformation throughout the game: scars, degradation, and sartorial decay: functions as a powerful final layer of visual storytelling, marking his moral and psychological metamorphosis.

The Frontier Myth Reconsidered: Deconstruction and Re-Mythologization:

Red Dead Redemption 2 systematically interrogates the **Frontier Mythology** through its core **gameplay** mechanics, ensuring that the player's actions continually undermine the narratives of progress and civilization (Rockstar Games, 2018). By meticulously portraying the aftermath of the Wounded Knee massacre and the systemic dispossession of Native American peoples, the game refuses the sanitization common to earlier Westerns. The narrative underscores that "civilization" is merely a thin veneer atop exploitation and bloodshed, making it impossible to celebrate the westward expansion as a righteous act (Slotkin, 1973). The myth of American exceptionalism collapses not in theory, but in the interactive performance of conquest. The game profoundly engages with Leslie Fiedler's concept of the Vanishing American, which symbolizes America's difficulty in reckoning with historical displacement and loss (Fiedler, 1968). Set at the turn of the 20th century, the game's historical specificity: the 1910s-1920s: captures the moment of definitive frontier closure as officially declared by Frederick Jackson Turner (Smith, 1950). Environmental and cultural loss thus form the narrative's emotional substrate, presenting the Van der Linde gang not as heroic pioneers, but as anachronisms clinging to a dying way of life.



Figure 13. Full World Map, RDR2

The Full World Map (Figure 13) becomes a meta-textual device through which Red Dead Redemption 2 visualizes the ideological geography of the American mythos. Unlike the static cartographies of classical Western narratives, this map is dynamic and responsive, continually redrawn through player traversal and moral action. Its layered design: revealing territories gradually as they are “discovered”: enacts the colonial logic of inscription, echoing what Henri Lefebvre terms the production of space (1991). Yet RDR2 subverts this colonial cartography by embedding erasure within its very logic: regions corresponding to Native American lands and war-torn frontiers are often marked by absence, ghosted topographies that remind the player of what has already been lost. Thus, the map performs both discovery and disappearance, functioning as a visual palimpsest of conquest and mourning. In this sense, the cartographic interface ceases to be a tool of mastery and becomes, instead, an ethical archive: each waypoint a trace of vanishing histories, each journey an act of reluctant remembrance.

The game’s aesthetic and thematic concerns often share the brutal, unforgiving moral landscape of Cormac McCarthy’s literary vision, particularly *Blood Meridian*. This resonance offers a visual and interactive adaptation of McCarthy’s refusal of redemptive hope (Bloom, 2009). The frequent portrayal of barrenness, systemic cruelty, and moral meaninglessness in the game’s final chapters positions the narrative as an apocalyptic counterpoint to the romantic West.

RDR2 functions as an elegiac counter-narrative, achieving a form of **re-mythologization** not through celebration, but through mourning and preservation. By meticulously modelling the vanishing landscapes and ecological detail, the game’s technological sophistication becomes a powerful form of memorial to the vanishing West (Ryan, 2018). It preserves the aesthetic memory of the Frontier while ensuring that its moral memory: the reckoning with its violence and tragedy: remains unavoidable for the player.

Digital Storytelling and the Intersection of Form and Content:

The very open-world design of Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) functions as a crucial narrative form, mirroring the thematic openness and moral ambiguity of the historical Frontier (Juul, 2001). The expansive sandbox simultaneously offers a mythic sense of absolute freedom while exposing the player to constraints imposed by systemic forces: legal, environmental, and economic (Tuan, 1977). This structural tension creates a powerful parallel between the frontier’s paradoxical promise of limitless liberty and its historical reality of determined closure.

The game uses simulation as a hermeneutic tool to examine the inherent logic of frontier expansion. Game mechanics embody ideology: systems like hunting, resource management, and the Honor system function as arguments (Bogost, 2007). For example, the need for continuous resource acquisition, even in a pristine environment, becomes an interactive persuasion that critiques the insatiable nature of American capitalism and its role in the Frontier’s destruction (Slotkin, 1973).

Applying Walter Benjamin’s framework, the work of art in the age of digital reproduction finds new complexity in video games. While Benjamin focused on mechanical reproduction, RDR’s digital simulation achieves its cultural authority through technical sophistication and the

illusion of unmediated experience (Benjamin, 1968). This fosters affective investment through player immersion in the frontier landscape. However, the tension between ludic narrative(gameplay) and spectatorial distance remains, particularly when the scripted cutscene reasserts authorial control, momentarily overriding player agency to enforce narrative determinism and drive the tragic theme (Ryan, 2018). The pervasive screenshot culture surrounding the game serves as an ongoing form of visual documentation, a collective meaning-making process that extends the analysis of its environmental and narrative-thematic registers beyond the gameplay session.

Player Experience and the Phenomenology of the Frontier:

The engagement with Red Dead Redemption 2 extends beyond narrative analysis into the realm of phenomenology, focusing on the lived experience of the player within the digitized West. The player's avatar, Arthur Morgan, functions as a crucial mediator, bridging the self and the vast narrative space (Ryan, 2018). The ability to switch between third-person (spectatorial distance) and first-person (immersive embodiment) offers a choice of phenomenological positioning, transforming the frontier landscape from a merely visual representation into a **felt space**: a concept central to geographical studies (Tuan, 1977).

Temporality and the Experience of Expansion and Contraction:

The game's structure forces a complex understanding of temporality. On one hand, player time, spent in meandering exploration, hunting, and side quests: suggests the possibility of limitless expansion, mirroring the boundless promise of the historical frontier. On the other, **narrative time**: driven by mission progression and Arthur's terminal illness: enforces a strict sense of inevitable contraction and closure (Rockstar Games, 2018). The Frontier, therefore, becomes a space of temporal paradox: a place where the illusion of infinite expansion is perpetually undercut by the reality of historical and mortal determinism (Smith, 1950).

Solitude and Witness: The Landscape as Interlocutor:

The most profound psychological engagement often occurs during moments of solitude and environmental contemplation. The long, unbroken rides across expansive environments are not filler; they are a critical mechanism of narrative pacing and emotional register. The sheer scale and indifference of the landscape serve as an interlocutor and a mirror for Arthur's psychological states, embodying the silent, moral witness to his slow process of individuation and confrontation with the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968). This meditative solitude is poignantly captured in Figure 14, where Arthur sits alone at his campfire: an image that visually encapsulates the game's existential core. The flickering light against the vast darkness becomes emblematic of fleeting human agency amid the immensity of nature and history. In these quiet interludes, the player experiences a suspension of narrative urgency; the environment itself assumes the role of a confessor, translating silence into meaning. The landscape's beauty and simultaneous hostility deepen the player's affective investment, ensuring that the sense of historical and personal loss is not merely understood, but profoundly felt.



Figure 14. Arthur setting up a camp, alone

Comparative Analysis: RDR2 and Earlier Frontier Mythologies:

Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) marks a significant inflection point in the evolution of Frontier narratives across media. Unlike earlier representations in gaming or film, which often simplified the West into a backdrop for clear-cut morality or heroic violence, RDR2 leverages its technical capacity for environmental and narrative complexity to enable a genuinely critical perspective (Juul, 2001). Its sheer technological sophistication: evident in its worldbuilding and physics: is not merely spectacle but a marker of its artistic ambition and cultural seriousness, allowing the simulation to carry the weight of historical critique.

Literary Precedents and Their Transformation:

The game directly engages with literary precedents, transforming the discourse established by canonical American criticism. The narrative strategies echo the moral exhaustion and historical violence analyzed by Richard Slotkin (1973), the elegiac sorrow over historical loss critiqued by Leslie Fiedler (1968), and the nihilistic, amoral aesthetics of Cormac McCarthy (Bloom, 2009). The crucial difference lies in the interactive medium's contribution: interactive design forces the player to embody these complex, often dark, moral positions. This mechanism compels a deeper, affective form of mythological engagement than passive consumption allows, preserving literary complexity within a medium traditionally associated only with entertainment (Bogost, 2007).

The Frontier Myth Across Media:

Each medium's formal properties: the linearity of literature, the visual determinism of film, and the interactivity of video games: uniquely enable or constrain mythological interpretation. Film often aestheticizes the violence; literature analyzes its psychological origin. RDR2's distinctive contribution of interactivity is its ability to make the player complicit in the myth's violence while simultaneously witnessing its decay. The game acts as a synthesis and transformation of frontier mythology, using digital simulation to perform a retrospective deconstruction that functions as a profound cultural critique of the American past.

Limitations, Critiques, and Alternative Readings:

Any rigorous analysis of a mass-market digital text must acknowledge its inherent limitations and potential critiques. A primary methodological risk is the tendency to overvalue artistic

intention while underestimating the plurality of player agency and interpretation (Juul, 2001).
While Red

narrative's moral reckoning, while compelling, is delivered through fictionalized Dead Redemption 2 exhibits sophisticated narrative design, many players approach it solely as entertainment, spectacle, and a commercial product (Rockstar Games, 2018). The core critique remains: does the game's narrative depth truly override its fundamental market function?

A further limitation involves the game's relationship to **historical accuracy and fictionality**. The characters and settings. Scholars must avoid assuming that technical sophistication automatically produces meaningful critique: a form of technological determinism. The distinction between representation and advocacy is crucial; the game represents historical trauma and moral failure, but this representation is always mediated by violent, entertaining gameplay. Moreover, player agency can easily complicate or undermine the game's critical potential if players utilize the sandbox solely for gratuitous transgression, thus negating the intended moral arc.

Finally, this study engages with the ongoing debate about the cultural authority and "Serious Game" status of video games. Institutional recognition of video games as legitimate sites of cultural analysis remains a contentious issue. Balancing the critical seriousness demonstrated by the game's nuanced engagement with the Frontier Myth (Slotkin, 1973; Fiedler, 1968) with a pragmatic acknowledgment of its immense entertainment value is essential to avoid academic legitimization built on genre-denial. The analysis must, therefore, be tethered to the interactive experience as much as the textual content.

Conclusion: The Elegiac Frontier and the Future of Digital Mythology:

The preceding analysis affirms the thesis that Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) operates as a critical, self-reflexive sublimation of the American Frontier Myth. The game achieves this by leveraging the unique properties of the interactive digital medium to deconstruct the myth's ideological investments. Jungian analysis illuminated the text's sophisticated archetypal structures, revealing Arthur Morgan's trajectory as a forced process of individuation: a painful shedding of the Hero/Persona in confrontation with the collective Shadow (Jung, 1968). Crucially, the concept of interactive paratextuality proved significant, demonstrating how player choice (Juul, 2001) and the Honor system transform mythological engagement from passive reception into active, ethical co-creation.

Arthur Morgan as Post-Hero Exemplar:

Arthur Morgan emerges as the exemplar of a post-heroic representation in digital media. His acceptance of moral ambiguity, inevitable failure, and physical limitation serves as a potent alternative to the traditional frontier narrative's insistence on redemptive triumph (Smith, 1950). The game's refusal of easy answers: its preference for elegiac resignation over cathartic closure: is not a narrative failing but a hallmark of its ethical and narrative sophistication, aligning it with high-canonical critiques of American culture (Fiedler, 1968; Slotkin, 1973).

Implications for Game Design and Narrative Theory:

RDR2's approach holds significant implications for game design and narrative theory. Its meticulous, archeologically dense worldbuilding and its seamless integration of player agency into a determined tragic plot set a new standard for narrative complexity. The game's critical success mandates a more serious engagement with the potential for video games to engage with complex literary and philosophical traditions. The effective application of frameworks from Frye (1957) and Jung demonstrates a crucial convergence of classical literary theory and contemporary popular media, affirming the medium as a worthy subject for rigorous academic discourse.

The Frontier as Mirror: American Culture and Historical Reckoning:

In its totality, RDR2 contributes meaningfully to contemporary discussions of American identity and historical trauma. The digital Frontier functions as a mirror, compelling players to meditate on the relationship between individual ethical agency and systemic determinism: a central tension in American self-conception. By using the power of simulation, the game acts as a technological medium for critically revisiting foundational national narratives, transforming the burden of the American past into a digitally preserved memorial.

Future Directions:

Future scholarship should explore alternative readings, such as applying post-colonial theory to the game's portrayal of indigenous displacement, or Marxist analysis to its critique of nascent industrial capitalism (Bogost, 2007). Further inquiry should also address the relationship between video games and national mythology in global contexts, examining how interactive media, like RDR2, shape cultural understandings of history and identity for a transnational audience.

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