

Red Dead Redemption: *History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*. Edited By John Wills and Esther Wright. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023. Pp. 240. Illustrations, abbreviations, index), \$29.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780806191850; \$65 Hardcover, ISBN: 9780806191928.

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“The violent, tragic, poetic deaths of John Marston and Arthur Morgan as depicted by Rockstar—and their embedded claims that a man cannot outrun his foul deeds, no matter how steadfastly he seeks redemption—mark these stories with the indelible notion that such white men are the ultimate victim of American ‘progress’ and civilization, and those who elicit such sympathies” (4). So write John Willis and Esther Wright in their introduction, giving us a glimpse of what to expect from the various essays within *Red Dead*. Focusing on the portrayal of the American West in the *Red Dead* series, which comprises three games: *Red Dead Revolver*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *Red Dead Redemption II*, this anthology provides an in depth looked at this video game series through an interdisciplinary lens that examines various topics that not only “bridge disciplines” by interweaving “cultural and media studies, environmental and Western history, film studies, and historical game studies” (18), but also the many ways individuals, especially media consumers, are exposed to and informed about the frontier myth, the “Wild West,” and social and cultural aspects of this era in United States history. The individual essays presented in this anthology situates *Red Dead* within various academic fields. By incorporating multiple themes and topics within the essays, contributing authors present many opportunities that allow for in-depth conversations amongst fans, critics, and those in the aforementioned fields to not only critically think about how this era in history is portrayed and presented in *Red Dead*, but also understand that “games challenge us all to sometimes think a little differently”(18). *Red Dead*, as an interdisciplinary collection, provides and adds to our understanding of how media, especially video games designed by Rockstar Games, characterizes underrepresented social groups such as communities of color and women, denotes cultural and social norms of specific historical periods through their viewpoint and understanding, addresses authenticity and entertainment, and methods of selling a vision of the West that contributes to a skewed sense of the era.

Divided into three parts, *Red Dead* provides various essays focusing on the previously mentioned themes and topics. These three sections contribute to addressing this edited collection’s primary goal of illustrating how studying video games can lead to the bridging of disciplines that create in-depth analysis and critiques regarding the game’s realism and historical, cultural, and societal accuracies. Part one comprises three essays that focus not only on game mechanics but also on their correlation to media in the Western genre of entertainment and history. Part two focuses on the themes and topics of “damage and othering” in *Red Dead*. The various essays focus on the traditional notions of violence and their portrayal in multiple games depicting the West, ecological violence during Westward Expansion, discourse and representation of medicine and medical history, and the issues of representation of groups such as women and indigenous peoples that contribute to a “problematic gameworld” (19). The essays in part three focus on themes such as capital, ethics, experience, and representation while asking broader questions regarding the *Red Dead* series. Questions that inform the reader about the economic systems within the game and producing it, morality and citizenship, and Rockstar’s ability to create specific experiences

in the gameworld reminiscent of “depictions and experiences in of the American West” from previous games (20).

Editors Willis and Wright’s approach to organizing the essays in this anthology begins by informing the reader what the *Red Dead* franchise is as a game and product from its publisher, Rockstar Games, and its relevance to other western-themed games. By starting the anthology in this manner, Willis and Wright give the reader a background of the *Red Dead* series, its place in the study of the western genre of video games, and an introduction to the various themes and topics the contributing authors focus on in their essays. For instance, Sören Schoppmeier examines the game mechanics and how player choices within this interactive game challenge the “linear narratives” provided in Western literature and film (18). Shannon Lawlor provides an in-depth look at masculinity and the paternal male presence in the game, focusing on the anxieties of fatherhood, paternal legacy, certain aspects of masculinity in the West, and relationships that male characters forge throughout the story. Robert Whitaker provides an in-depth analysis of how law and order is presented in *Red Dead* and explains that the “depiction of law enforcement as morally bankrupt” in Rockstar game titles justifies and “contributes to the credibility of lawless player characters” (60). Nicholas Blower’s essay explains how various games portray the West by transcending “traditional understandings of violence” (78) by depicting ecological violence and harm rampant during westward expansion. In contrast, Arno Görgen explains how *Red Dead Redemption II* explores the “epistemic and narrative fragmentation” of the discourse and representation of medicine and medical history (95).

One of the strengths of this anthology is the editors’ ability to bring together various scholars who are experts in Game Studies, American and Western Histories, and Media and Culture Studies, to create a piece of scholarship that significantly contributes to their respective fields. Regarding weaknesses, a few are addressed in this review. First, most essays use secondary sources such as monographs, journal articles, and websites—leading to the minimal use of primary sources. The primary sources noted within a few essays stem from the video game chapters. Second, the editors insinuate that the overall scope of this anthology focuses on the *Red Dead* series. Though the editors note that essays regarding *Red Dead Revolver* are minimal, the lack of analysis of this game weakens the book’s overall purpose and argument. Having one or two more essays on *Red Dead Revolver* would strengthen the purpose and argument and provide an in-depth analysis of the series overall. Still, *Red Dead* is a good anthology that those in the academic field could use in their undergraduate and graduate history courses—especially those in Western, Borderland, Mexican, and American Histories.

At the time of publication, Dr. John Willis was a Professor of American History and Culture at the University of Kent, teaching in the School of History and the Center for American Studies. He has contributed to *Red Dead* as an editor and researched and provided insights on how video games resonate with many of their players, most notably the Grand Theft Auto series. Dr. Esther Wright, a senior lecturer in Digital History for the School of History at Cardiff University, focuses her research on the field of Historical Game Studies and explores how video games based on historical eras or events create meaning and represent the past. Her publications include her monograph, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity*, co-editor for *Writing Game Histories* set to be published in 2026, and she is a series editor for the *Video Games and the Humanities* series.

Overall, *Red Dead* is an anthology that combines various scholars and experts from different fields to provide an in-depth analysis of the *Red Dead* series and how all three games inform, and at times perpetuate, the frontier myth of “The West” to video game players. As contributing authors deconstruct this frontier myth by focusing on different themes and topics, they challenge the preconceived social and cultural aspects of this historical era in United States History. As John Marston tells Arthur Morgan in *Red Dead Redemption II*, “Sometimes I wonder if things are ever the way we remember ‘em, if we were ever who we thought we was.”