On the Precipice of Modernity: Photography in Red Dead Redemption 2
Rebecca Sandelin 29.11.2021 History of Contemporary Photography – Assignment 2

It's 1899. I'm seated on the back of my horse. A wide-open landscape of golden plains and clear blue skies stretch before me. I dismount and pull out a box camera from my bag as a herd of buffalo graze around me. A tree sways in the breeze as a train whistle pierces the still air in the distance. I remove the lens cap with a leathery 'pop', lift the camera to mid-belly and look down the viewfinder. After framing the red barn and the cattle ranch just so, I press the shutter. The film winds forward as I look up and reattach the cap and stow away the camera. I mount my horse and with a click of my tongue and a slight press to its sides, we continue onwards as the buffalo continue grazing undisturbed.

I was eight-years-old when I first used a photographic camera in a video game. It was 1999 and I was playing *Pokémon Snap*, a game based on the practice of wildlife photography.[1] What was then novelty has since become a regular feature in many triple-A games across different genre.[2] The implementation of photography in contemporary gaming varies. In *Red Dead Redemption 2* for example, photography is remediated through a box camera players can use throughout their gameplay to photograph their experiences, photographic studios players can visit to have their portrait taken and a separate Photo Mode that simulates the aesthetic qualities of 19th century photographic processes, including daguerreotypes and tintypes. The box camera is also used as a narrative device during two non-essential quests: 'The Noblest of Men, and A Woman', where players must locate and photograph legendary gunslingers, and 'Arcadia for Amateurs' where players must photograph local wildlife.[3][4] Cindy Poremba argues that photography manifested thusly in video games extends photography's physical functions as a cultural practice, technical mode of production and an aesthetic, into the virtual.[5] I argue that the appropriation of the box camera in *Red Dead Redemption 2* also serves a symbolic function through its contextualization within the game's historical setting and environment.

Video games are not the only media or artfrom to appropriate photography. Cinema has frequently used photography in intertextual, narrative, and aesthetic capacities. *Memento*, directed by Christopher Nolan, frames its story chronologically using the aesthetics of Polaroid to suggest a nonlinear flow of time through transitions between latent images, black-and-white and colour.[6] Polaroids are also used as a narrative device as protagonist Leonard

[1] Alexandra Orlando and Betsy Brey, *Press A to Shoot: Pokémon Snap-shots and Gamespace Ownership* (2015) <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/press-a-to-shoot/> [accessed 21.11.2021]
[2] Edward J. Crowley, Matthew J. Silk and Sarah L. Crowley, 'The educational value of virtual ecologies in Red Dead Redemption 2', People and Nature (2021) <https://doi/10.1002/pan3.10242> [accessed 23.11.2021]
[3] Jeff Ramos, Red Dead Redemption 2 gunslinger mission and weapons (2018) <https://www.polygon.com/red-dead-redemption-2-guide/2018/11/15/18053266/rdr2-gunslinger-mission-weaspons> [accessed 23.11.2021]
[4] James Billcliffe, Red Dead Redemption 2 Arcadia for Amateurs Stranger Mission – Where to find Albert Mason (2019) <https://www.vg247.com/red-dead-redemption-2-arcadia-for-amateurs-albert-mason> [accessed 23.11.2021]
[5] Cindy Poremba, 'Pont and Shoot: Remediating Photography in Gamespace', Games and Culture 2.1 (2007), 49-58 (p.50)
[6] *Memento*, dir. by Christopher Nolan (Newmarket, 2000) [on DVD]

Shelby, suffering from anterograde amnesia, uses them to supplement his short-term memory loss. Phillip Prodger argues that photography and cinema share commonalities in their ability to freeze and restart time, much like in *Memento*. He also notes photography's ability to dissect realities while cinema reconstructs them, a trait both media share with video games.[7] It is no coincidence that video games, as amalgamations of different media and artforms, appropriate the photographic within their virtual realities. Extending Prodger's metaphor, if Eadweard Muybridge's sequential photographs of a galloping horse reanimate the still photograph into the moving image; then video games reanimate the horse, the rider, the camera, and the photographs digitally, into virtual realities. And no finer example of this, I argue, can be found than in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, colloquially abbreviated as *RDR2*.

The world of *RDR2* is astounding. The sights and sounds transport you to another era, back when cowboys, gunslingers and outlaws roamed the American West and buffaloes ranged freely. The more I explore, the more I realize the work and effort made in creating the world. Whether I'm hunting, picking wildflowers, camping, or wandering the streets of Saint Denis, watching townspeople live their everyday lives, every inch of the world is teeming with it. Yet the more time I spend in the game, I begin realizing that this world is no longer as free and untamed as I imagined, nor is it the romantic ideal I'd hoped. Instead, I notice the intrusions of modernity as railroads snaking through forests are completed, entire swaths of nature are deforested, and ever-present telegraph lines appear in remote locations. This is a world increasingly marked by the unstoppable march of progress.

History, as Aneesh Bhargav notes, is deeply embedded within *RDR2*, whether in the main story, the side quests, the game's systems or the open world exploration.[8] All the elements are interwoven, creating a harmoniously detailed, if problematic and inconsistent, representation of the American West caught between the Old and the new.[9] Despite attempts at historical accuracy and authenticity, *RDR2* misses the mark in representing the indigenous people in the region and its depiction of the environment is, according to Iain Donald and Andrew Reid, inauthentic.[10][11] In general however, the technological implementation of formal and narrative techniques from other media and art in *RDR2* reinforces the game's realism and provides players with an immersive experience.

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[7] Phillip Prodger, *Photography and Cinema: A Tale of Two Closer-Than-You-Think Siblings* (2015) <https://time.com/3818034/photography-and-cinema/> [accessed 23.11.2021]
[8] Aneesh Bhargav, *Capitalism, Camping & American History: Analysing the Storytelling in Red Dead Redemption 2* (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LXk_Vd56fs> [accessed 23.11.2021]
[9] Matt Bertz, *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) <https://www.gameinformer.com/review/red-dead-redemption-ii/an-open-world-western-for-the-ages-0> [accessed 21.11.2021]
[10] Iain Donald and Andrew Reid, 'The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in Red Dead Redemption 2', *Media Educational Journal* 66 (2020), 15-23 (p. 19)
[11] Esther Wright, 'Rockstar Games, Red Dead Redemption, and Narratives of "Progress"', *European journal of American Studies* 16.3 (2021) <http://hournals.openedition.org/ejas/17300> [accessed 23.11.2021]

Like many video games, *RDR2* draws heavily on intertextual references and historical influences to create a seemingly living, breathing world. For *RDR2*, the cultural history of the Western genre and the American West serve to enrich and contextualize its narrative and aesthetics within a longer history of representation. Clayton Ashley argues that the game's graphical aesthetics is heavily influenced by Albert Bierstadt's and the Hudson River School's paintings, an unavoidable connection, he argues, as the paintings themselves are part of the cultural history of the Western.[12][13] Furthermore, the game's map and environmental design is influenced by the topography, climate, and ecology of regions in the United States of America.[14] Players can also collect cigarette cards in-game, which were popular collectibles from the late 1870s onwards.[15] The catalogue used for purchasing goods and equipment in-game is likewise influenced by real-world catalogues used by retails stores, including Sears & Roebuck, throughout the mid-to-late 1800s.[16] Yet among the other ephemera and equipment used in the game, it is the small leather-covered box camera that catches my eye.

Arthur Morgan is a weary, well-travelled man. When we first meet him at the beginning of *RDR2*, he has evaded a posse of lawmen together with a band of fellow outlaws led by Morgan's mentor, de facto father figure and unrepentant romantic idealist, Dutch Van Der Linde. Within the first hours of gameplay, it becomes clear that Morgan is part of a community accustomed to living on the fringes of society, constantly evading the civilizing authority of the law. Der Linde believes that freedom and liberty can be found further afield while Morgan, a realist in comparison, realizes that Der Linde's ambitions are but figments of imagination. The tension between the two carries throughout the game's main story, shaping each encounter and the player's perception of the landscape. As the story progresses, so too does the landscape evolve with signs of modernity appearing. Morgan is also well-equipped for navigating the changing landscape. While most of his equipment, including firearms, holsters and lasso, is familiar to audiences of Western media, other tools seem surprising, such as the box camera. While not directly referred to as such, it's outwardly appearance and picture format suggests it is a Kodak No 3, or similar Kodak box camera, produced sometime between 1888 and 1899.[17] Beyond its narrative uses, the camera remains with the player throughout their explorations. When viewed in relation to the game's historical setting and its influences from cultural history, the camera emerges as a symbol of modernity.

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[12] Clayton Ashley, *Why does Red Dead Redemption 2 look so much like these paintings?* (2018) <https://www.polygon.com/videos/2018/12/14/18141082/red-dead-redemption-2-video-hudson-river school> [accessed 21.11.2021]
[13] Arthur Gries, *The painted world of Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) <https://www.polgon.com/red-dead-redemption/2018/10/26/18024982/red-dead-redemption-2-art-inspiration-landscape-paintings> [accessed 21.11.2021]
[14] Jared Carvalho, Red Dead Redemption 2 Assigns Regions to Real US States (2021) <https://gamerant.com/red-dead-redemption-2-map-regions-real-us-states/> [accessed 21.11.2021]
[15] Duke University Libraries Repository Collections & Archives, *W. Duke, Sons & Co. Advertising Materials, 1880-1910* (2015) <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/wdukesons> [accessed 23.11.2021]
[16] Kean Sullivan, *Red Dead Redemption 2 Fan Makes Incredible Find at Used Book Store* (2021) <https://gamerant.com/red-dead-redemption-2-book-store/> [accessed 21.11.2021]
[17] Jerd Kamp, *No. 3 Kodak (1889)* (n.d.) <http://www.kodaksefke.nl/3-kodak.html> [accessed 21.11.2021]

Much like the Hudson River School paintings, photography played a pivotal part in shaping real-world perceptions and imaginings of the American West and continues to do. Rebecca Solnit notes while discussing the history of the technological development in the West towards the late-1800s, 'The world was growing larger and more complicated, and photography was both an agent in this enlargement and a device for trying to sort it all out, to make it manageable.'[18] Combined with the railroad and telegraphy, photography set the stage for modern America. While the West certainly existed in the American imagination before photography's invention, it helped bring the foreign western frontier closer to early American settlers on the eastern coast. Martha A. Sandweiss notes that photographers preceded settlers, travellers and tourists in the West, and it later '[…] bore witness to the epic story of the American settlement of the western half of the continent.'[19] Kodak cameras were especially influential, Sandweiss argues, in making photography ubiquitous in late-nineteenth-century American culture, the same period *RDR2* is set in.[20] The Eastman Kodak Company altered the practice of photography by replacing complex physics and laborious chemistry with an affordable, pre-loaded, easy-to-use camera and clever advertising.[21] Contrary to earlier practices, Kodak's streamlined and simplified modern process revolutionized the industry and their cameras become symbolic of American modernization and industrialization during the late-nineteenth-and-early-twentieth century.[22]

To understand the significance and meaning of photography as it is transported into virtual and digital worlds, we need to examine examples such as *RDR2* to understand which histories are represented in the digital age and the implications of appropriating the photographic in video games. If you removed the box camera, the photographic studios, and the Photo Mode from the game, the main story would progress just the same. However, the remediation of photography in *RDR2* adds a layer of meaning and a different way of relating to the game world, the characters who inhabit it and the real, physical environment. It places a symbol of modernity in the player's hands and forces them to acknowledge the effects of modernization on the landscape and the remains of an Arcadian ideal. It forces me to look past the grazing herd of buffalo and acknowledge the fact that buffalos were nearly eradicated during the 19th-century, and we are very fortunate have a stable population today. But the image of meters-tall pilesß of buffalo skulls and ash has left an impression, an impression the creators of *RDR2* perhaps infer to. The story of *RDR2* tells us that development comes at a steep cost and it forces us to reconsider the worth of progress.

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[18] Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), p.17
[19] Martha A. Sandweiss*, Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.13
[20] Ibid, p.11
[21] Marc Olivier, 'George Eastman's Modern Stone-Age Family: Snapshot Photography and the Brownie', *Technology and Culture* 48.1 (2007) 1-19
[22] Reese V. Jenkins, 'Technology and the Market: George Eastman and the Origins of Mass Amateur Photography', *Technology and Culture* 16.1 (1975), 1-19