

Review: Tore C. Olsson. *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past*.

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Tore C. Olsson. *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2024. Pp. 288. \$30.00.

In the Preface of *Red Dead's History*, Tore Olsson notes, “one thing a History PhD can do is ruin a great deal of historically themed pop culture” (x). As a historian who is often guilty of ruining pop culture but who is (at best) a hesitant gamer, I approached Olsson’s book with curiosity and a bit of uncertainty about how to engage a book about a wildly popular video game. Fortunately, one of the great strengths of Olsson’s work is in how he invites in all kinds of readers to the virtual historical world of *Red Dead Redemption II*, including “diehard gamers,” students who have not previously found history classes engaging, and history instructors who have not yet considered video games as pedagogical tools (6).

Olsson’s entry into the world of *Red Dead Redemption II* came by way of a personal, pandemic-era return to gaming and a course he developed in 2021 at the University of Tennessee titled “Red Dead America: The Real History Behind the Hit Video Games.” In the book, Olsson focuses on *Red Dead Redemption II*, part of a franchise of video games developed by Rockstar Games. Released in 2018, *Red Dead Redemption II* takes place in 1899 and centers the protagonist-outlaw Arthur Morgan and the “van der Linde gang” as they travel through the landscapes and towns of the U.S. West, the Deep South, and Appalachia. (The game also spends time in fictionalized U.S.-Mexico border states and the Caribbean, but Olsson does not cover those.) Olsson introduces his readers to the premise of *Red Dead* in the Preface and Introduction. The structure of the book then follows the geography of the game, and each chapter weaves in vignettes from *Red Dead* as points of departure for Olsson’s broader historical contextualization and historiographical analysis of key themes in U.S. history during the Gilded Age.

Olsson’s stated goals are twofold: first and foremost, to delve into histories not covered by the game and flesh out the game’s historical world, circa 1899, and second, to assess the accuracy of historical depictions in *Red Dead*. One of his central critiques of the game is its asynchronicity. While the game takes place in 1899, Olsson argues that *Red Dead*’s world more closely matches the American political and social life of the 1870s. Olsson also critically examines the graphic violence in *Red Dead* and its relationship to historical violence during the Gilded Age. While affirming that Appalachia, the Deep South, and the U.S. West were “unusually violent places” in the late nineteenth century, Olsson underscores that the game consistently exaggerates violence (4). One of the book’s strengths is its attention to specificities in chronology and region which all too often get lost in popular culture portrayals and broad national narratives of the post-Civil War United States. Throughout *Red Dead's History*, Olsson persistently and meticulously debunks common historical misconceptions, using examples from *Red Dead* when applicable to assess the game’s accuracy and explore the gaps between myth and reality in U.S. historical narratives.

The book’s first section, titled “The West,” explores the genre of the western and the history of ideas about the West. The seven chapters in this section cover topics ranging from Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, railroads and cowboys, the Pinkertons, and Indian Wars. While noting the persistent problem of asynchronicity in *Red Dead*’s portrayal of the U.S. West circa 1899, Olsson argues that most of the topics covered in the first section reflect the long “political and economic campaign” to “harness” the West (23). According to Olsson, violence was a key feature of that process, although not with the ubiquity and randomness portrayed in *Red Dead*, where an “honorable” playthrough (playing the game from start to finish with minimal violence) still results in more than

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900 killings over the course of the game (4). Instead, Olsson argues, historical violence in the West was political in nature and intimately tied to increasing capitalist exploitation of the region and resultant backlash, in places such as “boom towns, mining camps, and contested ranching country” (58). While these places in the Gilded Age West could be “strikingly violent,” Olsson underscores that in reality, they “never produced *Red Dead Redemption*-style body counts” (58). Collectively, the chapters in this section paint a kaleidoscopic portrait of the imagined and real U.S. West from the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century.

In the second section, Olsson follows Arthur Morgan and his gang into the Deep South, where they encounter the postbellum New South’s agricultural and urban landscapes (including the New Orleans-inspired city of Saint Denis). Olsson takes on some of the thorniest topics in the book in this section as he explains the promises and failures of Reconstruction, lynching and racialized violence, and the Lost Cause myth. Olsson also devotes a chapter to gender, both in contemporary gaming culture and the historical world of *Red Dead II*. Regarding the latter, he focuses on the intersections of white supremacy and the women’s suffrage movement. Olsson also comes down unequivocally against racist and white supremacist misconceptions about the post-Civil War South, especially when *Red Dead* gameplay replicates harmful stereotypes. Here he is effective in doing so in a way which invites in students and readers, whether gamers or not, who might be encountering those ideas and critiques for the first time.

Though Olsson consistently praises the nuance and complexity of *Red Dead’s* portrayals of the West and the Deep South, he is much more critical of the game’s historical rendering of Southern Appalachia, which he covers in the book’s third and final section. Olsson deconstructs the myths of Appalachian isolation and blood feud violence, recasting the history of the region as one of capitalist extraction and natural resource plunder, which fueled national industrial growth. While this is the shortest section in the book, it provides an important reframing of the history of a region which may be less familiar to many students and general readers.

Olsson’s approach in *Red Dead’s History* offers several ways to invite undergraduate students into the discipline of history. From his unconventional book promotion events, such as hosting an “Ask Me Anything” thread on Reddit and launching the book at San Diego’s Comic-Con with Roger Clark, the voice actor for the game’s protagonist, Olsson has taken a thoughtful and creative approach to reaching an audience of readers who may never have picked up an academic history monograph before. The book integrates, for instance, primary sources by opening each chapter with a historical photograph—immediately introducing novices to the essentials of studying the past. As Olsson acknowledges, however, the visual design of the video game itself is stunning and transportive, and readers might have benefited from more visual representation of gameplay and characters.

Red Dead’s History could be used in introductory or specialized topics courses. Beyond his integration of the video game, Olsson’s approach to debunking myths and misconceptions about Gilded Age U.S. history makes it a useful resource for designing units or writing lectures on Reconstruction and the U.S. West. Olsson also offers some glimpses of how he has implemented video games in an undergraduate history classroom. In the Preface, Olsson briefly outlines his teaching methodologies for his *Red Dead* course, including combining lecture with YouTube videos and hands-on gameplay of *Red Dead*. He also describes a clever primary source assignment, in which he has students compare front pages of historical newspapers to *Red Dead’s* fictional newspaper. An appendix in the book or supplementary digital teaching resources would have been a helpful addition for those interested in teaching *Red Dead* or other games. Still, the Preface is a rich resource for instructors wanting concrete examples of how to incorporate video games into the classroom.

While many history instructors, especially the non-gamers among us, may not feel comfortable making gaming a central component of a course, Olsson’s book has inspired me to consider smaller ways of incorporating games into my teaching to engage students in an unconventional modality and explore the intersections of historical memory and popular culture. The potential for integrating video games into the undergraduate history classroom seems especially promising for courses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. and environmental history. In addition to teaching Olsson’s book and *Red Dead Redemption II*, for example, one could pair Sarah Keyes’s *American Burial Ground* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023) with the *Oregon Trail* game. Other

possibilities include Alice Bucknell's *The Alluvials* (2023), a video game about climate change and drought in Los Angeles, and *Rising Waters: A Game Based on the 1927 Mississippi Flood* (Central Michigan University Press, 2023), a board game designed by environmental historian Elizabeth Blum and winner of the American Society for Environmental History's 2024 Public Outreach Award. Lastly, a new historical mystery game, *Blackhaven* (2025), explores history and memory on a former plantation-turned-historical museum. *Blackhaven* could be paired with a monograph on histories of enslavement and historical memory, such as Tiya Miles's *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Ultimately, Olsson's *Red Dead* project makes a compelling case for integrating popular culture and our non-academic interests into our teaching and offers a reminder that fun and rigorous history in the classroom need not be mutually exclusive.

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