

Cowboys, Outlaws, Ghouls and Spacefarers: The American Frontier within and without the United States

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Keywords

frontier, spatial politics, global identities, western (genre), dystopia

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at traditional studies of the American Frontier to learn about the role this liminal space plays in the configuration of (American and non-American) identities in video games. The American Frontier is studied here as a trope whose history and symbolism influences the political articulation of spaces beyond the American Far West. As a result, after studying the American Frontier as well as some games that take place within this liminal space, this paper will suggest a connection between the narratives and identity discourses produced around the unexplored territories of the Far West and other frontiers, such as the ones present in dystopian visions of the future in which radiated wastelands are predominant. The American Frontier as an ideologically and historically-charged space that leaks into many other spaces and times brings with it a very specific form of gameplay mechanics, narratives, and forms of understanding agency and morality. In this sense, regardless of whether these resulting frontiers are natural spaces to be explored and conquered in the North America of the 19th and early 20th centuries, radiated wastelands populated by monsters and radioactive zombie-like humanoids, or planets and stars in the vastness of space, they all reproduce similar existing identity discourses that borrow from very specific narratives. These discourses shape and are shaped by past, present, and future history(ies).

Games analyzed in this paper will include titles such as *The Oregon Trail*, *Red Dead Redemption 1* and *2*, *Wasteland 1* and *2*, *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, and *Outer Worlds*, and will be used to show how games set in the American Far West, in dystopian futures based on Earth, or in outer space all share common forms of understanding space, power, expansion and personal worth. This is because the American Far West, as a very specific form of looking at and understanding history, has been used globally as a way of articulating national and identity discourses that are then re-used in the depictions of wastelands and new frontiers as well as in the portrayals of individuals and narratives that populate these spaces. By studying critical literature connected to the Western and beyond (Kolodny, 1975; Slotkin, 2000; Newell and

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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Lamon, 2005; Wark, 2007; Rabb and Richardson, 2008; Carter, 2014; Heikkinen and Reunanen, 2015; Triana, 2015; McClancy, 2018; Reid and Downing, 2018) this paper will study the dystopian and futuristic reinterpretations of the West in video games to highlight the specific ways video games borrow tropes from more traditional forms of thinking, writing and playing with the West while implementing other features that are specific to games.

This ongoing research will be completed during a 3-month long postdoctoral research stay at the University of Utah funded by the Fulbright Commission from February 2020 to May 2020.

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