

# Myth, Memory, and the Melting Pot: Anti-Imperialism in Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2*

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*Red Dead Redemption 2*, Historical Games, Empire, Anti-Imperialism, Spanish-American War.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

*Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018; *RDR2*) provides a useful lens for analyzing how contemporary players encounter historical narratives of American identity, imperial expansion, and political conflict. Set at the turn of the twentieth century, after the Spanish-American War and amid the United States' expanding global ambitions, the game presents a nation shaped by racial violence, rapid industrialization, and anxieties surrounding national progress. Rockstar is widely known for its sharp satirical critique of American culture, capitalism, and political hypocrisy. In *RDR2*, that satirical edge remains, but is channeled through a more muted and melancholic reflection on the end of the frontier and the contradictions of American exceptionalism. This paper builds on discussions of *RDR2*'s mechanics (Vanderhoef and Payne 2022), parody (Bello 2024) and progressivism (Locke and Mackay 2020; Wright 2021) to consider how Rockstar present American national and global identity.

Rockstar have stated that although *RDR2* strives for a 'lifelike' world, it remains a work of historical fiction (White 2018). This ambiguity raises a central question: how can a historical world be lifelike without its full historical context? The game's historical accuracy has become a sustained area of interest for scholars and content creators alike. Historical video games scholars consistently show that historical representation varies widely across titles, shaped by design, ideology and genre conventions (Champion 2011; Elliott and Kapell 2013; Apperley 2013; Shaw 2015; Copplestone 2015; Chapman 2016; Hammar 2017; Donald and Reid 2020; Stirling and Wood 2021; Burgess and Jones 2022; Wright 2022). Twitch and YouTube creators likewise have scrutinized the game's historical fidelity (Adichu, n.d.; RealPixels, n.d.) but its critical and commercial success suggests that Rockstar's framing of history and American identity holds broad cultural appeal. I argue that the game invites analysis of its absences just as much as its representations.

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Although set in 1899, *RDR2* only indirectly gestures towards the real historical events of the Spanish-American War and the annexationist politics surrounding Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. The game's thematic landscape covers frontier collapse, federal expansion, corporate greed, racialized violence, and anxieties about manifest destiny, but it minimizes commentary on America's transformation into an imperial power. The game's brief detour to Guarma (a fictional island modelled on the plantation economies and revolutionary struggles of Cuba and Puerto Rico) has long prompted speculation among players that it was meant to play a larger narrative role. Guarma's forced labor regime, racial stratification, and anti-colonial insurgency evoke both Spanish colonial rule and the forms of indirect U.S. intervention that followed 1898. As the Van der Linde gang becomes entangled in these conflicts, the game unexpectedly opens a geopolitical framing rarely explored in AAA titles, linking the collapse of the frontier to the emergence of an outward-looking imperial state (Murray 2018; Wright 2022).

However, this engagement with imperialism is limited by a significant omission. The period depicted in *RDR2* witnessed the rise of the Anti-Imperialist League whose members argued that annexation and overseas expansionism betrayed republican and American values (Tompkins 1970; Trask 1986; Donald 1999; Kramer 2002; Love 2004). Their speeches, pamphlets, and mass-circulation newspaper campaigns shaped national debate, making anti-imperialism a mainstream political force rather than a fringe concern. This stands in contrast to the non-playing characters that the player encounters that discuss eugenics, suffrage, and other contemporary issues. As Wright (2021) notes, the city uses certain characters as a mouthpiece for 'old-fashioned' beliefs, yet the historically (and contemporarily) significant debates surrounding imperialism and American global power are absent. The result is a historical world where U.S. expansion appears uncontested, reinforcing a mythology of national consensus that never existed.

The omission is especially resonant when read against the political climate of Trump-era America. Contemporary nationalist rhetoric emphasizing border security, immigration restriction, and a nostalgic return to 'greatness' that often hinges on similarly selective historical memory. Promoting expansionist narratives while downplaying dissent. I argue that for some players, *RDR2*'s selective historiography may feel familiar or even affirming. For others, Guarma's depiction of imperial violence may serve as a partial critique, highlighting the continuities between America's overseas interventions and its domestic struggles over race and power. These divergent responses underscore the game's role as a platform for negotiating contemporary ideological tensions, much like the historical debates that shaped the period it depicts.

*RDR2* constructs a world where the effects of U.S. imperialism are visible, but the debates about empire that are so central to the historical moment, are not. This is notable given Rockstar's willingness to confront and satirize political excess and complex identities. By depicting Guarma while excluding the Anti-Imperialist movement, the game acknowledges imperial history but sanitizes its political contestation. I conclude that this selective framing shapes how U.S. and international audiences engage with questions of identity, power, and global responsibility. In doing so, *RDR2* reveals not only the complexities of representing empire in digital form but also the continuing cultural struggles over how American imperialism is remembered, contested, or forgotten.

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