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Modern Transcendentalist Vision: How Video Game *Red Dead Redemption 2* World Builds Visions of America's Environmental Past and Future

"Lack of something to feel important about is almost the greatest tragedy a man may have."
-Arthur Morgan, in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*

In the game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*), winner of four Game Awards, including game of the year, and set in near the end of Wild West Era in the Gilded Age of American history, one particular side-quest stands out above all others¹. Near the conclusion of the game, the player is able to encounter a man sitting on the ledge of a rock, overlooking a vast landscape and journaling. If you approach him, he will begin to talk to you and you will learn his name is Evelyn Miller, a major philosopher and writer in the world of *RDR2*, whom your former gang leader, Dutch van der Linde, admired and often quotes. After this encounter, you can find him again in his small, one room cabin next to a large pond, where only there you learn more of his philosophy and his contempt towards people who encroach on natural land only to plunder it, rather than use it as a means of peace and reflection. In fact, in one encounter with him, if there are poachers in the vicinity, he may even antagonize them and, prior to arriving at their site,

¹ The Game Awards, often considered the Academy Awards for video games, is one of the most prestigious awards a game and the crew that created it can receive- the most prestigious being Game of the Year (GOTY). The winners are nominated through a committee of video game journalists from all over the world, and are voted by the players through the Game Awards official website.

exclaims to the player that their existence is “a sign that our way of life has come to an end” (Rockstar). Eventually, Miller decides to not eat or drink until his latest work is done, prompting the player to deliver him food to his cabin every in-game week. It is only then that, when you arrive one last time, you force yourself into the cabin to unexpectedly discover he has committed suicide, finding a letter instructing the player to burn his cabin down with him inside of it, to “soar with the eagles” rather than be buried in the ground like the ordinary citizen.

This quest lends credence to the intricately detailed world of *RDR2* and reveals that, in addition to its entertaining gameplay, there is a deeper vision concerning nature and the environment. As mentioned, *RDR2* is set in a turbulent, yet transitional period of American history- a period of a declining frontier, progressive and imperialist politics, increased industrialization, the rise of unions, the push for women’s suffrage, and the growth of monopolies in an increasingly large gap between the working and upper class². The game itself captures these ideals through juxtaposing the frontier with the city, and creates dynamic biomes and environments in the process³. Each biome, whether it has a few towns, cities, or is simply unpopulated and all nature, has a unique story and history to tell that educates and immerses the player in a seemingly accurate recreation of America in the 1890s. While this a major element to the players worldview of the game, it ultimately serves as a backdrop for the main narrative, which, amidst what the player would think is a classic, western “shoot em up”

² Coined by author Mark Twain in American History as the Gilded Age, this era mainly consisted of the rise of rich barons who owned monopolies that would spark political corruption in government and increase the gap between the upper class and the working class. Put between the Reconstruction Era and the Progressive Era, *Red Dead Redemption 2* takes place at the end of the Gilded Age in 1899, but nonetheless captures all three eras together in its environment.

³ By the conclusion of the game, the player will have navigated and experienced a detailed version of every single biome on earth, including a tundra, forests, shrublands, plains, swamps, marshes, rainforests, deserts, taigas, and coastal estuaries in a replica of majority of the United States and a snippet of the Caribbean.

story with countless tropes, they might be surprised to see that action ultimately remains subordinate to the complex themes and storytelling that the world of *RDR2* develops⁴.

The story itself follows the player as seasoned outlaw Arthur Morgan, a brash, loyal outlaw with a moral compass, who, helping create the van der Linde gang with its idealist leader Dutch, is struggling alongside the rest of the gang on the run eastward from the Pinkerton Agency, who are hunting them for a bounty to turn them into the US Federal Government.⁵ Originally priding themselves on being the “Robin Hood” of gangs, Dutch insists on his diverse gang of outlaws from all backgrounds to only rob from the rich and give to the poor, all while preserving their strongly individualistic lifestyle, based on Evelyn Miller’s philosophy of being independent and self-sufficient in nature. As the story progresses, Dutch becomes increasingly contradictory in his ideas, and despite Arthur’s critique of him straying away and twisting the ideals of Evelyn Miller that made everyone in the gang extremely loyal, the gang collapses largely as a result of Dutch’s own unraveling.



Figure 1. Arthur reflecting in an empty town in the snow



Figure 2. Arthur with his distinctive hat

⁴ It is not to discredit a lack of action in the game; In fact, inside of the game's 100+ hour play time of new events, there is plenty of action, but in a majority of cases, the action can be avoided or prompted based on the player's choices within the story or the world. Ultimately, the amount of action is up to how the player likes to play.

⁵ The Pinkerton Agency, which as a private security company still exists today, is largely agreed by historians to be the forerunner of the US Secret Service and Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Throughout this dramatic process in the narrative, Arthur often reads about Evelyn Miller and other philosophers, and, after being diagnosed with tuberculosis, to which he was exposed while extorting a sick farmer for his gang, he realizes that he only has a few months left to live. Knowing this, Arthur begins to reflect in the natural world on his own, and in doing so, he realizes Dutch's insanity. In absorbing the environmental wisdom from Native Americans and interacting with a traveling nun, Arthur takes "a gamble that love exists, and [does] a loving act" and returns to society to right all the wrong he's done by being a good man and saving those he cares about from Dutch. With the fall of the gang at hand and Arthur nearly about to die, he gives his life for John Marston and his family, fellow gang members with good hearts, and helps them escape by diverting the Pinkerton Agency and Dutch's attention away from them and onto him. Early in the morning, after a fist fight with Micah Bell, another gang member who betrayed him, Arthur dies facing the rising sun in the east, rather than the setting sun in west like he had wanted to.

With Arthur dead, the game fast forwards seven years into the "Epilogue," where the player becomes John Marston, who intends to avenge Arthur, with Micah and Dutch still alive, while



Figure 3. Scene of Arthur's death, facing the east



Figure 4. Micah Bell, Arthur's killer and betrayer

also trying to start a new life with his family. With John successfully killing Micah in the finale, the game world remains explorable and interactable.⁶ It is here where Evelyn

⁶ In a sudden turn of events at the finale, Dutch breaks the Mexican Standoff and shoots Micah, prompting John to kill him. It is hotly debated in the fan community if Dutch betrayed Micah on behalf of wronging Arthur or not.

Miller is encountered, with John being a student to his teachings and learning more about the philosophy of Dutch and Arthur, from the initial philosopher himself.

In creating such a complex narrative that include themes of redemption, individualism, morality, and death, Rockstar Games spent almost a decade writing and creating the deep and complex world of *Red Dead Redemption 2*.⁷ With over 2,000 people on the team that developed, engineered, voice-acted, and wrote *RDR2* into existence and a budget of \$540 million in combined developing and marketing costs, making it the most expensive video game in history to develop at the time, *RDR2* truly fits the definition of a AAA Game. However, while Video Game Studies scholars often associate AAA Games with stereotypes of being unfinished cash-grabs made with unrealistic realistic release dates decided by investors, *RDR2* seemingly defies the traditional AAA game stereotypes in creating a deep, meaningful narrative and a rich, detailed environment.⁸ In traveling around America, the developers and writers took inspiration from the still standing natural landscapes, landmarks, and the artists who painted them in the 19th century, including Albert Bierstadt, in trying to decipher the challenge of creating a memorable American cultural piece (Goldberg). The lead developers, brothers Sam and Dan Houser, being British, were raised on Westerns and the tropes they presented, but wanted to go beyond that and look directly into American culture, and create a game that remains accurate to its setting. However, they also wanted to convey a legible American cultural identity to the rest of the world, including both what you would expect of the Wild West and

However, this leads into *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), the sequel set in 1911, where Dutch is the main antagonist to John, now reluctantly working with the FBI.

⁷ Development on the second title *Red Dead Redemption 2* began in 2010 immediately after the first title, *Red Dead Redemption*, was released, making the development an eight-year process.

⁸ This is not to dismiss the stereotype of developers working 100+ hour weeks to develop a game. This was indeed a problem in the development that received media attention. Rather, *RDR2* defied the AAA stereotypes in what a finished product of a AAA game could potentially be if done right.



Figure 5. Landscape painted by Albert Bierstadt

Figure 6. *RDR2* Landscape, based off of Bierstadt's work

what you would not expect with the accurate realism of the time period. In fact, in creating a narrative true to the time period and true to the culture, the cast of voice actors were pulled from real-life western lifestyles. John Marston, voice acted by Rob Wiethoff, is a real-life rancher from Texas, with the same being said for other voice actors in the van der Linde gang.⁹ Being passionate about the legendary lifestyle of the American West, the cast of *RDR2*, in one panel, noted that they “put their heart and soul into the process for five years” (3:10-3:19). In fact, in the words of Benjamin Byron Davis, voice actor of Dutch van der Linde, this sentiment is especially evident in some scenes near the end of the game where Arthur was suffering from tuberculosis and Dutch was purposely mistreating him, where they were so hard for him to do as an actor that he “cried [his] eyes out... it [sometimes] took three or four takes” (0:41-0:46). The emotion, effort, and dedication put into making the narrative and environment of *RDR2* in such a way that it emotionally affected the actors should indicate that the game itself is more than just a traditional AAA game, but rather, the elaborate process of presenting a deep message of life, death, morals, and Transcendentalism today.

⁹ John Marston is the main protagonist of the first title, *Red Dead Redemption*, and at the time, Rob Wiethoff was so overjoyed by the letters of praise of his character and acting sent to his ranch, that he turned his chicken coop into a home office filled with art, gifts, and the letters from fans (Whitaker).

If it is not already clear, the ideals expressed by Evelyn Miller can be attributed to a recreation of famous American writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, and along with Thoreau's individualist ideals of independence, they are both critiqued



Figure 7. Evelyn Miller presented in *RDR2*



Figure 8. Thoreau as Compared to Miller

and praised through the design of Evelyn Miller as an explorable character in the narrative. In fact, when the player meets Miller, it is long after the fall of the van der Linde gang and the life of Arthur, and the interaction with him serves as means of the player's own take on the idea of Transcendentalism itself, since you are able to hear the writer of Transcendentalism's own reasons for writing.¹⁰ It is important to note that with Miller's philosophy in the game- alongside it being absorbed by Dutch, Arthur, and the rest of the gang- Rockstar Games, did not explicitly go into creating *RDR2* with a transcendentalist message in mind. Instead, what they were trying to accomplish was to build a historically realistic world of America in the 1890s, and along with successfully creating that, the American Transcendental ideas becomes gradually woven into the game, which reflects how big of a role Transcendentalism truly played in the creation of the American state that exists today. With great transcendental works such as *Walden* by Henry

¹⁰ Interestingly, Arthur does meet Evelyn Miller, but not in a deep philosophical context as seen with John. Rather, he meets him outside of a government office with Wapiti tribal leaders, where Miller is trying to help the Tribe with a petition to remain on their land in one of many brief interactions within the city. While Miller is not the focus of this interaction, it is one of the only times in which Arthur interacts with him as a character.

David Thoreau, *RDR2* largely buries Thoreau's philosophy within the environment and narrative of the game, but rather, it naturally serves as a translator to what many ordinary people would consider literary highbrow ideas, restricted to scholars of the humanities. In addition to this translation, the game also puts forth the scholarly debates about transcendentalism and Thoreau's individual politics and explores these debates through the narrative to the player with the environment acting as a backdrop, which when combined with choices given to the player, help him or her develop their own take on these ideas. Overall, *Red Dead Redemption 2* serves as an effective translator of Transcendentalism and the scholarly conversation surrounding it to an audience of ordinary people to help reflect on the environment and American individualism today. This is seen in particular within Dutch and Arthur's clash of ideas about Transcendentalism, Arthur's own redemption according to Thoreau's original intentions, and the mechanics of game with its honor system and elaborate virtual ecology.

In the beginning of the game, Arthur is blindly loyal to Dutch and his seemingly righteous ideology set within the context of the Gilded Age. Being an era defined by the "Robber Barons," rich business magnates aimed at exploiting the working, ordinary citizen, Dutch prides himself on robbing them and giving money to the poor – or, in other words, money to the people. It is not until the Pinkertons, under the employment of the Federal Government, finally narrow in on him that his ideology of giving money and power to the people is shifted to giving only to the gang and himself, as their own survival becomes increasingly strained. His once generous ideology has turned increasingly anarchist, and Arthur is resistant to this change. Arthur notes in his diary, "What a goddamn mess we're making of things," after Dutch feels remorseless in allowing one of Arthur's friends to die when they have made it

eastward, and, during his own reflection within nature in the latter half of the game, he remarks that Dutch “seems half crazed by all we gone through” calling out Dutch’s selfish, anarchist point of view of America. The gradually more ruthless anarchist version of Dutch is in proportion with how far eastward the gang moves. In fact, as Futurasound Productions, a video game studies YouTube Channel notes, “Dutch is a white male with low social standing lacking ties and money... An agrarian type... when he would much rather be an aristocrat, as conveyed by his fancy vest and way of dressing” (7:38-7:51). By Dutch gradually entering society eastward, it reminds him of society being structured with a government, and this only makes him more crazed to kill its officials, to better fit his once independent agrarian agenda inside of him, but to also satisfy an ulterior agenda of his flawed individual, yet aristocratic power over others. In contrast, Arthur becomes less centered on himself, and more centered on helping others while maintaining an individualistic identity, even after being pushed eastward with Dutch¹¹. Arthur remains true to his agrarian roots, but he too is transformed, except, instead of becoming an



Figure 9. Dutch in his distinct way of dressing, unique and separate from the rest of the gangs’ style

¹¹ This is not to say that Arthur is welcoming to the city environment, as he journals, “I can’t decide which I like less, the swamps or the city. Both are full of parasites, reptiles, and slime... We’re a long way east of land we know... and far from real, open country.”

anarchist, he embraces a balance in both society and nature, all within his own volition.¹² While the increasingly polarized nature of Dutch and Arthur is evident in the game to the player, this is more than just a story conflict, but a reflection of the ideological debate inside American Transcendentalism and the scholarly conversations surrounding it.

To better understand Dutch's and Arthur's justification for their change in character throughout the story, we must also understand the main source of their beliefs: Evelyn Miller. Given that Miller and his writings are a translation of Henry David Thoreau, the philosophical clash presented in the game is no different than the scholarly debate surrounding Thoreau's most quintessential work, *Walden*. At the broadest level, the collective definition of Transcendentalism is the belief that humans being are inherently good in nature, but are corrupted by large institutions and society. In nature, Thoreau believed, humans could have divinity and rather than waiting to go to heaven for divinity – it could be experienced every single day by living simply, and shackled not by society (Thoreau 31). However, upon these statements, many scholars have debated if Thoreau was true to his ideals, or if he was simply a coward who could not truly commit to them. Besides this argument, there is raised the question of whether he was an early anarchist, or simply an early libertarian, reflecting the distinct, yet organic difference between Dutch and Arthur's views of Transcendentalism. Anarchism can be interpreted in his dislike of the growth of society and his respect of those whom he considers truly civilized together and ungoverned in nature, and by early libertarianism can be noted in the desire to not completely reject society, but instead maintain individualist qualities within both society and nature.¹³

¹² While Arthur is characterized as brash, some of the only times the player sees him laugh and smile is in the city within the side quests involving the various people he meets. In a sense, this directly parallels *Walden*

¹³ One major essay attributed to Thoreau's anarchist view of thinking would be his essay "Barbarism and Civilization," where he talks about Native Americans' supremacy due to their education, moral influence, and self-governance by nature. Scholars often cite this essay as an example of his anarchist thought, while others counter

While it can be safe to say that he has influenced both areas of political thought, Thoreau's own true alignment is rather cryptic and convoluted, similar to how Evelyn Miller is presented in his ideals in *RDR2*. In the view of Roderick Frasier Nash, Professor of Environmental History at University of California Santa Barbara, Thoreau had a rather anarchist tendency to patronize society, and that, overall, "Thoreau's wilderness philosophy is most meaningful when juxtaposed to this sense of discontent with his society" (86). In counter to this, other scholars, including Peter Cannavò, Associate Professor of Government and Dean of Environmental Studies at Hamilton College, states that Thoreau is more of an Environmental Libertarian defined as someone who believes in little influence of institutions with nature, but still believes in an existence of society in general¹⁴. Cannavò argues that Thoreau proposes a balance between society and nature, an argument commonly cited among scholars towards Thoreau not being an anarchist (120).¹⁵ With these two conflicting ideas of Anarchism versus Libertarianism appearing in *Walden*, and reflected in the game through the perspective of Arthur seeing the downfall of Dutch and his anarchism, I fall onto the side of Thoreau being an early Libertarian. I can appreciate interpreting him as an Anarchist through *Walden* and his early college essays as a means of promoting environmental anarchy, but in looking at his overall life and the context outside of the period *Walden* is written, it can be claimed that Thoreau is libertarian and republican in his other works such as *Civil Disobedience*,

this stating that it was simply his youth influencing this rebellious thought, citing his book *Maine Woods, Writings*, where he nearly retracts his previous statements made due to his discomfort being alone in the remote woods of Maine (Nash).

¹⁴ This thought of being an Environmental Libertarian is influenced by Agrarianism, a Jeffersonian Era ideology centered around self-sufficiency in farming and political decentralization, rather than Anarchism and a discontent with society (Cannavò 121).

¹⁵ The argument of a "balance" between nature and society stems from parts of *Walden* where Thoreau writes of his frequent but brief trips to the town of Concord, Massachusetts to converse and hear about the gossip every once in a while (Thoreau 175). This claim is further backed up by the fact that he despised living truly remotely, shown in his time living in Maine alone, far away from any society.

where he proposes a nonviolent approach to conflict as a means of promoting as little institutional influence as an outcome.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Arthur and Dutch both represent both sides of this scholarly conversation, not intentionally, but organically as an indication that these complex questions regarding Transcendentalism and Thoreau have always been intertwined within American attitudes towards the environment and society. As such, Evelyn Miller's characterization is intentionally vague, reflecting Thoreau's own ambivalence, which the game translated to its players through the virtual world it has created.

While without a doubt the player is put onto the libertarian side of the scholarly debate, this is a result of the fact that Arthur remains true to the ideal's specifically expressed in Thoreau's *Walden* – notably from balancing society and nature, and by finding divinity in the world and others throughout the narrative. Arthur goes from being an antihero, a henchman the player is in control of, to a tragic hero, dying but doing good deeds with the time he has left throughout the narrative. For most of his life, Arthur is guided by the ideals and attitudes of Dutch, and in blindly following someone who inflicts violence on people, justifying it under the term of being a “Robin Hood.” All Arthur has seen in the early half of his life is pain and tragedy, all by being misguided by a person who has inflicted these plights all along.¹⁷ With Dutch, he does not see other people as strong with valuable lives, but rather as weak and trivial. It is not until he is diagnosed with tuberculosis that Arthur realizes the value of his own life, prompting him to reflect in nature, away from Dutch and the rest of the

¹⁶ While *Civil Disobedience* can be cited in the sense that it defends Thoreau as a libertarian, it can also be used in the opposite way, some scholars argue. This argument originates from the chapter “Resistance to Civil Government,” where Thoreau states “I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually” (206).

¹⁷ To further Arthur's tragic life, he recalls “I had a son... he passed away. I had a girl who loved me... I threw that away. My momma died when I was a kid, and my daddy... well, I watched him die. And it weren't soon enough.”

gang. With society slowly taming nature, Arthur realizes there are consequences for both men-in-society and men-in-nature on the basis of morals, paralleling with scholars' take on Thoreau promoting a balance of nature and society (Thoreau 175). In running into a nun at a relatively remote train station, Arthur for the first time in the game opens up about his emotions to another person, not knowing who he really is, and what he is going to do with his time left. The nun says that perhaps Arthur does not know himself well enough, and that he should "be grateful that for the first time, you see your life clearly," in that Arthur really is a good person who has done good already for so many people, but he just refuses to see it in his negative upbringing. She notes that "life is full of pain. But there is also love, and beauty," and that perhaps, if he were to believe in the transcendental mindset of the innate good of humanity that is dealt pain from others corrupted in the wrong way by society, Arthur will have nothing to fear on the eve of his death.¹⁸ Upon returning from nature to gang, Arthur is a changed man, and truly realizes that Dutch's anarchy is flawed, and does the ultimate loving act: giving his life to save John, his wife, and his son from danger – redeeming him as a person. Arthur would ultimately



Figure 10. "I'm afraid." In talking with the nun, Arthur opens up on his own mortality and fear of death

¹⁸ "In the end, Micah... Despite my best efforts to the contrary... It turns out I've won." In laying about to die after fighting Micah, Arthur no longer fears death, and he has won in coming to peace with himself, by ultimately helping others.

finish his life with Thoreau's most famous quote from *Walden*, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (106). By focusing on the necessities of life in reflection in the woods, Arthur finds that by the end of his life he is his own redemption, by finally seeing his life clearly, through helping others, contrary to the individualist, anarchist philosophy Dutch displays.

The sentiments expressed in the narrative of Arthur's redemption in the latter half of the game are the focal point of the sandbox environment that *Red Dead Redemption 2* is set in. If the narrative is weighted so heavily, it begs the question of why specifically *RDR2* as a medium is a game, and not a movie. As a video game, what it does do better than a movie, book, or any other potential medium, is it puts the player inside of the ideological debate, by creating a world that is interactable, and where the choices the player makes lead to specific consequences. The sentiments in narrative regarding Arthur and the other characters serve as moral pressure in the players choices for how much they would want to adopt transcendental virtues, and with game mechanics that explore the morality expressed in Transcendentalism, including an honor system with a world that reacts to it in an elaborate ecological environment, the player has the freedom to give into this pressure, or defy it.

To understand the game's mechanics, the game's honor system is the center of all activities and serves as a backdrop to the narrative. Everything in the world you interact with has choices tied to it, which in turn affect the honor bar of how morally good a character you become. From anything to simply antagonizing non-player characters (NPCs), to not mercy-killing a wounded animal, to even denying help to someone on a task, these all heavily affect Arthur's honor status throughout the game. As Michael Brodrick, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University, puts it, Thoreau's

transcendental philosophy was centered around the fact that “moral action is not governed or called forth by a theory; it is a spontaneous response to the feeling of one’s individual potentiality combined with one’s natural love” (Brodrick). With these thoughts organically included within the world of the game, the player's own natural love is tested and the individual's potentiality is hindered by consequences on both Arthur and the world of the game through an honor bar. As a result of either having high honor or low honor, the narrative is affected with changes of dialogue, cutscenes, and even the ending itself.¹⁹ The rigid system in place in the game is nonetheless effective, but its strength in pushing transcendental moral questions of what is right and wrong can be attributed to the realism of the world the game has built. As Ian Bogost, video game designer and director of Film and Media Studies at Washington University, notes, players are more likely to find a game understandable when it can be strongly tied to the real world and real world problems, where only then does a game feel less fantastical and more real (118). The realism shown through the consequences of one's actions, visualized in an honor system, embodies real world consequences for a world built intentionally to be life-like with conflicts and problems. It is only a matter of what the player believes, whether or not they want to be like Dutch or even Micah, or what the Nun wants Arthur to be, that the scholarly debate on different takes of Thoreau’s idea of transcendentalism is really tested on the moral choices of the player.



Figure 11. The honor bar on the bottom of the players screen, changing to the low left or high right based on actions

¹⁹ The ending is not drastically affected, as Arthur still dies in the end from Micah, but it's a matter if he is shot by Micah after being beaten or not. Getting shot being the low honor ending and Micah abandoning you to watch the sunrise being the high honor ending.

In addition, the principal moral teacher in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is the environment surrounding it, which, similar to the honor system, is an important backdrop to the focal point of the narrative and the transcendental debates therein. The game's large and elaborate virtual ecology serves as a catalyst for the honor system and moments in the narrative to further develop the transcendental debate of Thoreau, while simultaneously encouraging a transcendental way of thinking for the player, by immersing them in the nature presented in-game. Outside of simply sticking with the narrative, the player is encouraged to collect herbs and document, hunt, or tame animals in nature. The ecology is so prevalent within the game, that there are over 200 species of animals – ranging from grizzly bears to parrots to crocodiles – all uniquely interactable to the player. This ecological realism, defined as creating a naturally occurring ecosystem much like the real world, immerses the player and creates a connection between the player as Arthur and the nature around them. In fact, according to Matthew Silk and Edward and Sarah Crowley, Researchers at the University of Exeter, by experiencing the ecological realism from immersing yourself in the remote nature of the game, players “reported learning about animal behaviors and interspecies interactions” in the process of hunting and documenting the animals.²⁰ For example, a large part of the game's narrative and world are the horses that you, Arthur, ride, along with the other characters' horses. With over 19 different breeds and 59 styles of coats within the game all having unique looks and statistics, the player heavily relies on their horse to get from one point to another in the massive environment.²¹ The encouragement the player is given to

²⁰ In the research described, Matthew Silk and Edward and Sarah Crowley conducted a study involving dozens of participants who have played and completed *RDR2*. The study consisted of testing their knowledge and memory of certain natural environments and details of animals.

²¹ The health of your horse, whether you feed it, clean it, or give it mane rubs, all contribute to the “bonding level” the player has with the horse, in turn making it more brave in situations with animals like bears or unlocking new movement tactics, due to its trust in you as the player.



Figure 12. Arthur's Journal, a book that updates every time a player discovers something new or has a new experience, sketches out all of what you may discover or find in the environment.

interact with nature, in effect, promotes a transcendental worldview, that nature is in a symbiotic relationship with the player that rewards them for exploring it in its divinity and beauty within the world of the game (Thoreau 46). Alenda Chang, associate professor of Film and Media Studies at University of California Santa Barbara, notes in her book *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games* in the chapter regarding "Scale" that the limited scale a game environment may directly present has the power to suggest a bigger imagined environment by honing in on specific environmental elements (76-77). While *RDR2*, can somewhat defy this principle of scale proposed by Chang in having one of the most largest and intricate worlds in a video game, this principle still applies in the sense that *RDR2* chooses to have a specifically large and



Figure 13. American Buffalo in RDR2's Ecology

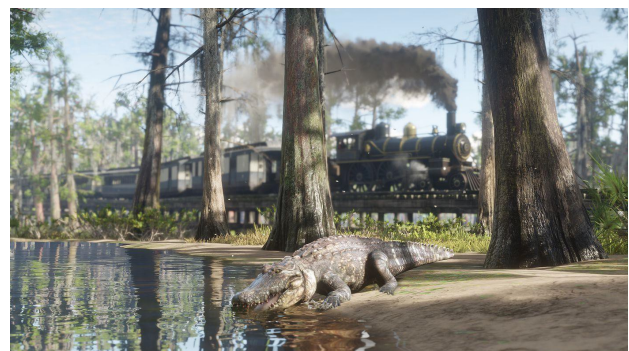


Figure 14. American Alligator by the bayou railroad

elaborate ecology for the player to interact, implicitly encouraging a transcendental connection with nature beyond the game. The connection itself is not forced, but inevitable in the way the player navigates the vast world and narrative, curiously forging a transcendental connection with the ecology of the world amidst the backdrop of the narrative.

Perhaps one way to describe the worldbuilding inside of *Red Dead Redemption 2* is that it is merely a simulacrum of the natural world and the Gilded Age of American history. Usually having a negative connotation, a simulacrum aims to blur the line between reality and virtual representations of that reality. In this case, however, *RDR2* achieves the exact opposite. *RDR2*'s attempt at being a simulacrum of the natural world and environment has instead encouraged its large following of fans to get out and embrace a transcendentalist lifestyle in the real world, as a result of the implicit American Transcendentalism expressed within the game. In fact, on online Reddit forums and on YouTube, users have posted about their seemingly unwittingly transcendental journeys across America's environmental beauty.²² One user, u/insectspecific, recently shared some photos of their journey to Saguaro National Park, a desert area *Red Dead Redemption 2* took as inspiration for its virtual landscapes. Another user, u/KalebMM7845, shared photos of his and his grandfather's exploration of various National Parks, simply because *Red Dead Redemption 2* encouraged them to go beyond the virtual environment and into the real one. Again, these examples illustrate how effectively *RDR2* serves as a transcendental translator in the guise of a video game. The *RDR2* community's frequent debates on the philosophy of Dutch and Arthur are simply a non-academic extension of the continuing scholarly conversation surrounding Transcendentalism, where Arthur's commonly discussed redemption invites players

²² By unwittingly journeys, I am referring to the fact that even though they enjoy the transcendentalist ideas expressed in *RDR2*, they may not be fully aware it is titled as Transcendentalism, but still follow the ideals of it and enjoy partaking in life through its philosophy.

to explore a transcendentalist view of living, and the honor system and intricate ecology encourage a transcendental way of thinking. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is truly the apex of what the art of video games could be, and its power in conveying a transcendental message to the audience does not signify the end of a western, environmental era as commonly described within the game, but rather the start of a new era to the audience – perhaps, a hopeful transcendental future.

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