



VIA
PANORAMICA

Revista de Estudios Anglo-Americanos
A Journal of Anglo-American Studies

FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

THEMATIC SECTION

GUN: Representations of North American Myths and Stereotypes in the Controversial 2005 Western

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the intersections between video games and American myths and minority stereotypes. It specifically focuses on the 2005 game *GUN* and its relation with co-representatives of the western genre, *Assassin's Creed III* and the *Red Dead Redemption* series. It analyses and compares the narratives of the games in question, as well as key gameplay elements within. The study reveals a myriad of similarities in the stereotypical topics covered, as well as crucial differences in how certain aspects of Native American portrayal were handled by the developer teams. *GUN* included an orphaned, mixed-ethnicity protagonist prior to *Assassin's Creed III*, a gunslinger who looks and shoots very similarly to the main character of *Red Dead Redemption*, among other notable correlations. Crucially distinctive was the inclusion of player-controlled scalping as the pinnacle of Native American dehumanization in *GUN*, in addition to other violent tropes limiting the identity of those characters to one that is only associated with combat. This study shows how *GUN*

RESUMO: Neste artigo, exploram-se as interseções entre os videojogos e os mitos e estereótipos das minorias americanas. Centra-se especificamente no jogo *GUN* de 2005 e na sua relação com os co-representantes do género western, *Assassin's Creed III* e a série *Red Dead Redemption*. Analisam-se e comparam-se as narrativas dos jogos em questão, bem como os principais elementos de jogabilidade contidos neles. O estudo revela uma infinidade de semelhanças nos tópicos estereotipados abordados, bem como diferenças cruciais na forma como certos aspectos da representação dos nativos americanos foram tratados pelas equipas de desenvolvimento. *GUN*, com um protagonista órfão e de etnia mista, antecedeu *Assassin's Creed III*, um pistoleiro que se parece e dispara de forma muito semelhante ao personagem principal de *Red Dead Redemption*, entre outras correlações notáveis. Um elemento diferenciador foi, contudo, a inclusão da remoção de escalpes controlada pelo jogador como o auge da desumanização dos nativos americanos em *GUN*, além de outros



88 featured potential-laden ideas, yet its conclusion is that the game ultimately perpetuates the common fallacies of the western genre, rather than make a genuine attempt at deconstructing them.

KEYWORDS: Western, Myth, Native American, Stereotype, Video Games.

motivos violentos que limitam a identidade desses personagens a uma identidade associada apenas ao combate. Este estudo mostra como *GUN* apresentava ideias carregadas de potencial, mas chega à conclusão de que o jogo acaba por perpetuar as falácias comuns do género ocidental, em vez de tentar desconstruí-las.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Western, Mito, Povos Nativos Americanos, Estereótipo, Videojogos.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of North American media, westerns have traditionally played a pivotal role in shaping the entertainment landscape, as evidenced by the many different “garments” they embody. Those include the spaghetti western (*A Fistful of Dollars*, 1965, being the most famous example in film), the space western (such as the *Star Wars* franchise), or the post-apocalyptic western (*Mad Max*, *The Walking Dead*), to name only a few (Pfeiffer 2025; Pohorski 2025; Holtz 2023; Keeler 2018). As in film, video games have exhibited similar trends as relates to the proverbial “branching out” of the western genre, yet there is still ample space for the traditional western to occupy its worthwhile place at the center stage of creations of the ludic persuasion. Throughout the 21st century, several studios have attempted to create a successful game set in the Wild West. In particular, Ubisoft’s highly rated *Assassin’s Creed* series, and the acclaimed reception and popularity of Rockstar’s *Red Dead Redemption 2*, have signalled that the interest in the genre has far from diminished, as the latter highlighted title has cemented its spot in the top 10 best-selling video games of all time, ranking in at number 7 per IGN (Sirani 2025). Both games mentioned above have been the subject of multiple analyses and dissections related to their portrayal of the Wild West and pervasive North American myths and Native American stereotypes. However, very little attention has been devoted to a title that, upon its release, was the subject of solid reviews, admirable popularity, and also some intense notoriety: 2005’s winner of GameSpy’s Xbox 360 Action Game of the Year award, *GUN*, developed by Neversoft and published by Activision (Dopefish). The topic of this article is to assess how *GUN*’s depiction of myths and stereotypes related to the frontier and Native Americans can be compared to those other esteemed co-contributors to the genre, thus highlighting key commonalities and attempting to illuminate significant differences.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since their emergence in the latter half of the 20th century, video games have garnered increasing attention from both the general public and academic circles alike. Video game theory has developed through the years with the recognition of the new medium’s importance. Despite controversy surrounding how they should be viewed, video games are generally seen as containing several elements: an algorithm, player activity, interface, and graphics (Wolf and Perron 2004, 14). The algorithm involves a predefined set of rules and

responses that build the game's core (*idem*, 15-16). Player activity denotes "the heart of the video game experience" (*idem*, 15) and the uniquely direct involvement of the player in the medium. Interface relates to the means participants use to affect play, while graphics are the visual representation, or essentially what adds the "video" in video game (*ibidem*). Similarly, Murray refers to games as digital environments that possess several characteristics: procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopaedic (2016, 72). Video games are both interactive and immersive. Narratology primarily observes video games through the lens of narrative, specifically the story the game presents to the player. This approach employs tools commonly used in media such as literature and film to analyse the meaning contained within video games. Archetypes, plot devices and other concepts, such as Bakhtin's chronotope – the time-space encapsulated within the narrative and its relation to the consumer of the work of fiction, are involved in narrative studies (Barbosa Lima 2016, 47). The perception of fictionalized time and space is generated by the individual's engagement with the narrative's representation, which is achieved through its representation in language, images, sounds, and interactivity (*idem*, 48). Ludology focuses its attention on video games as processes that are played out. The specific rules the game system allows serve to create "a possibility space" (Bogost 2007, 121), which can be used to explore topics and processes from the material world in a new and fascinating way. It is through the means of player participation within these spaces that video games obtain their meaning, express ideas and make persuasive arguments on what is right and wrong (*idem*, 125-6). Procedural rhetoric, Bogost attests, is thus used by video games to intentionally or unintentionally present claims on real-world ideology (*idem*, 137). Another concept of interest is the ambient operation. It constitutes an in-game-generated occurrence that is peripheral to the player's attention, but either carries the potential to become central to it or conveys meaning in other ways (Schoppmeier 2013, 33-36). Video games are clearly complex cultural artefacts that would benefit from utilizing a variety of available tools in their interpretation.

Reproduction of culture is vital to its preservation and continued existence, and video games play a pivotal role in this (*idem*, 3). They not only reflect ideas, habits, dispositions, and other structures circulating in a culture; they actively participate in it and are thus inseparable from it (*idem*, 1-3). The establishment of a shared culture is a crucial step in the formation of a national identity. As Europeans settled the North American

continent, they were united under an ideological framework built around their (supposedly) inherent superiority. Preeminent scholar on the topic of the myth of the frontier, Richard Slotkin stresses the interconnectivity of “two themes as the basis for spiritual and secular regeneration, taking up the ‘free’ or ‘virgin land’ of the wilderness, and defeating the savage natives in a war of races” (1998a, 32). The lands not occupied by white European settlers are considered, for all intents and purposes, uninhabited, at least by “civilized” men, and thus open to colonization. Slotkin adds that the “Myth of the Frontier had always linked the battlefield triumph of white society with the secular progress of civilization and an increasing perfection of moral character” (1998b, 283). Overcoming the hardships of not only the rough lands but also the battles against the Indigenous people living in those lands became representative of the white settlers’ moral superiority – an inherent quality they believed they possessed a priori, and which they further developed through their “Social Darwinian survival of the fittest” (Slotkin 1998a, 15). White settlers continually defeated Native Americans, thus re-establishing their moral transcendence above the “primitives”, pushing the boundary of the frontier farther and farther westwards. By acquiring territory during the conquest, they also fulfilled “the promise of abundant freeland and resources for the great mass of the population” (Slotkin 1998a, 100-138). Wide expanses of land, available to be conquered, and battling “savages” are characteristic representations of the American West. Through this “continual engagement in the ‘hardships and privations’ of frontier life and Indian warfare” (Slotkin 1998a, 125) emerges the figure of the western hero: a frontiersman, or a self-made cowboy who embodies rough and rugged individualism, entrepreneurship, and a strong capability of accomplishing tremendous feats and vanquishing formidable foes (*idem*, 64-67). The white man is superior based on his gender and race, and he is thus able to dominate over minorities, who are presented as not as capable or virtuous. He is able to defeat enemies and solve conflicts that others cannot, and, by doing so, he reaffirms his position as the rightful sovereign over the North American land.

Native American stereotypes center around two main premises, the first being that of the bloodthirsty, or ignoble savage. Through this stereotypical image, the Indigenous are murderers, kidnappers, and scalpers of white settlers, often driven by animalistic desires. Their representation is dehumanized; they are portrayed as godless and dangerous creatures, living “like beasts” (Pearce 1988, 5), and purely antagonistic towards civilized

life. The second stereotype is that of the “noble savage”: “an individual living in a ‘pure state of nature’—gentle, wise, uncorrupted by the vices of civilization”, “selfless, noble, in accordance and balance with nature”. This interpretation basically strips indigenous Americans of any human concerns and characteristics, depicting them instead as some sort of fairytale characters” (Ellingson 2001, 1; Krystyník 2018, 11). Author Ondřej Krystyník also discusses another important stereotype in his work “Representation of Native Americans in Video Games” (2018), which is the white saviour trope. The white man is presented as a saviour, both to his race and Native Americans as well. He is represented as a “brave ally” (Krystyník 2018, 13) who takes agency from the helpless savages and restores equilibrium to the realm through his superior abilities, further perpetuating the stereotypical dehumanization and inferiorization of Native Americans (*ibidem*).

WESTERN VIDEO GAMES AND AMERICAN MYTHS

Just as westerns in the medium of film, video game versions typically represent the “cowboy [as] a man on a horse with [a] six-shooter and no home who travels around the West solving problems” (O’Sullivan 2024, 8). The hero exists on the precipice of two worlds, that of civilization and the wilderness. The influence and inspiration of the frontier and frontiersman are evident through visiting archetypal Western locales as well — canyons, frontier outposts, homesteads, and plains, while Mexican land and reservations exist merely as othered, exotic spaces for the white male hero to prove his mettle, the mythic lone gunslinger (Wills and Wright 2023, 16-45). In *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence in the Video Game West* (2023), the authors contest that “the occasionally Native-friendly narrative that this game dispatches (...) disguises a deeply colonial mode of play in RDR2 that involves the player in an all-too-familiar narrative of Western conquest” (Wills and Wright *idem*, 113). Furthermore, the myth of the frontier, and its racial war of extermination, is promulgated, according to Wills and Wright, by the Native American-centered storyline that is part of *Red Dead Redemption 2*’s plot:

Not only do the game developers want the Wapiti around long enough to include this storyline—wherein Native peoples cannot manage for themselves, and thus have to be rescued by the player to simultaneously save the “vanishing race” and also stop them from being “bloodthirsty savages”—but they want them around long enough to wipe them off the map

themselves, when it's appropriate for their timeline and the world that they wish to cultivate for their players. (2023, 123)

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Clearly, the myth of the white saviour is also at play here with the stereotypical depiction of Native Americans as requiring the assistance of the white male protagonist. Native American stereotypes surrounding the myth of the noble savage are also present in *Red Dead Redemption*. However, one such portrayal features an inventive attempt at deconstructing the stereotype through the character of Harold McDougal, who plays on that trope and refers to it on numerous occasions. He is an anthropology professor who is addicted to cocaine, and whose reasoning is passed judgment upon as absurd. Author Phill Alexander has referred to this deconstruction as a “solid step in the right direction, an attempt to see the Native American as part of an organic world and not a historical relic or decoration” (Alexander 2014).

Another popular title in this new age classic western video game genre is *Assassin's Creed III*, which, as noted by John R. Ess, “contains all of the essential elements of a Western, though some are in a modified form” (2019, 33). According to Krystyník, a subversion of the white saviour trope is used to great effect in *Assassin's Creed III's* prologue:

The game starts by serving the player a run-of-the-mill White Savior story, using familiar motives of a white hero helping the indigenous people against other, more vicious white characters. It is safe to say that the narrative counts with the fact this sort of story is well integrated in the Western culture and the players will recognize its basic characteristics. By utilising the impact of a shocking revelation, the narrative creates a powerful emotional association of the White Savior story and a villainous character. It is more or less impossible to consider this anything else than a conscious decision to subvert a well-known stereotype – and to use a very smart and creative way to do so. (2018, 39-40)

In “The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin's Creed III*”, Adrienne Shaw discusses the efforts put by Ubisoft in “ensuring a sensitive, accurate representation of Mohawk/Kahnawake language and culture” (2015, 11), with the Native American characters crucially speaking in their own mother tongue, with subtitles available for the audience (*idem*, 12). The protagonist Ratonhnhaké:ton, or Connor, despite his mixed Native American heritage, embodies typical white saviour trope

characteristics as well. He is portrayed as hypermasculine, superheroic, self-sufficient, independent, slow-talking, which can also be viewed as a Native American stereotype, even during dramatic and adrenaline-induced episodes. Ess further elaborates that another layer of explanation regarding the white saviour reality of *Assassin's Creed III's* protagonist is “the submersion of a Native American identity into a white identity: Desmond Miles, accessing Ratonhnhaké:ton’s genetic memories of the time period surrounding the Revolutionary War, is portrayed as a white man technologically putting on an American Indian ancestor’s persona” (2019, 35). Connor also shares characteristics with stereotypical depictions of Native Americans; in addition to the speech pattern previously outlined, Ess adds: “Native American characters ‘often simultaneously’ embody the noble savage and ignoble savage stereotypes. Ratonhnhaké:ton embodies these tropes through his frequent acts of violence while also playing the role of the hero by saving colonists who are in trouble” (*idem*, 34).

Despite bemoaning the game’s “missed opportunities”, Ess also emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the game, praising the themes it dares to explore and the uncomfortable mental journeys into historical realities it provokes, by bringing “issues of the history of American Indians to the foreground” (*idem*, 38). Furthermore, he quotes a review of *Assassin's Creed III* that compares the game to the multiple award winning musical *Hamilton*, calling it “a fascinating take on a morally intriguing philosophical idea”, while referencing a “Native American assassin with a Black mentor, caught in a war between Americans and British with no good outcome for his people either way” (Ess 2019, 36).

AMERICAN MYTHS IN *GUN*

GUN is also set in the Wild West and takes place in the late 19th century. Players take on the role of young Colton White, whose father is murdered during a raid on a steamboat, and whose quest for retribution puts him through a fast-paced, blood-and-guns-fuelled rampage across the American frontier. The first encounter between settlers and Natives in *GUN* begins with the protagonist committing the mass murder of a group of Apache. However, revelations of the identities of those responsible for the events on the steamboat, and of Colton’s ancestry, cause the narrative to take a twist, and for him to ally with the Apache tribe whom he had previously been slaughtering. The game shares a lot

of similarities with other open-world video games in the Western genre — it features vast, beautiful, traditional natural landscapes outside of some urbanized areas, which in turn include typical locales like the sheriff's office, jail or saloon. For its time, it offers plenty of exploration, significantly more than contemporary competitor *Red Dead Revolver*, progenitor of the *Red Dead Redemption* games (Dopefish). The expansive swathes of plains that can be roamed freely strengthen the ties to the myth of the frontier and “‘free’ or ‘virgin land’ of the wilderness” (Slotkin 1998a, 32). *GUN* also presents typical western activities—hunting, gambling, herding cattle, bounty hunting—, conflicts between “homesteaders” (*idem*, 275) and “American Indians” (*idem*, 112), the concept of vigilante justice often embodied by a strong reclusive character with innate abilities and knowledge related to hunting and understanding natives, as well as a stereotypically fetishized selection of weapons. The depiction of the saloon as a seedy gambling den filled with prostitutes, and often violence, is promoted by very similar portrayals of the classic western institution by both the *Red Dead* series and *GUN*, with both featuring poker and bar fight content. Furthermore, the romanticized endless opportunities of the frontier that Simelane describes in his article regarding *Red Dead Redemption* can also be ascribed to *GUN*, one specific instance thereof being the trope where “farmers and cattle wranglers lived off the land, and miners dug the ground for precious minerals” (Simelane 2023). Whilst exploring the natural beauty of the landscapes in *GUN*, players encounter deposits of shiny, gleaming gold ore that are out in the open, available for anyone with a pickaxe and an action key on the keyboard to “mine” for a quick 10\$ payout. These actions constitute clear allusions to the time of the “gold rush” and “living off the land”. The player can quickly accumulate funds through mining due to the simplicity of the game mechanic. In addition to turning in bounties or performing other tasks, this straightforward method of earning in-game currency serves to perpetuate the American ideal of meritocracy and self-sufficiency.

The myth of the self-made man is expressed from the onset of the action through the player's introduction to the world by learning how to hunt, and thus how Colton would be able to make a living for himself, evoking also the myth of the hunter, a “progenitor to the frontiersman” (Slotkin 1998b, 70). This is further amplified by the protagonist's orphaning, which is seen “as [a] symbol of the self-made man” (*idem*, 200). Rugged in character and appearance, the video game frontiersman is typically portrayed with brown leather attire — a traditional cowboy hat — ammunition slung across the shoulder, and

with slightly longer than average, and somewhat messy hair, as is the case for the protagonist of *Red Dead Redemption*, John Marston, and the *GUN* hero, Colton White. Conflicts regarding the industrialization of the frontier have been depicted as well, albeit without receiving significant focus. As Slotkin highlights, the reality of the changing American landscape of the late 19th century embodies “the yeoman farmer who represents the vanishing American, and the railroad man who will be the new lord of the earth” (Slotkin 1998b, 216). In *GUN*, the players complete side missions for an NPC (or non-player character), dubbed simply “The Rancher”, who teaches Colton the ropes of cattle herding. The protagonist assists the quest-giver with various tasks until the latter eventually takes his cattle for sale on the train to the big city, leaving behind “life on the land”. Through their participation in the missions, the players also experience the agrarian myth and the idea of the righteousness of those who earn their living off the “vast and untamed” land. The Rancher’s move out of the country and into the city also signifies a reflection on the age of technological advancement, which is further developed through the Pony Express side quests. In this context, one competes on horseback to deliver messages faster than the set target time, thereby winning over delivery routes. The culmination of this storyline is a race to deliver railroad plans to workers, only for Colton to discover upon its completion that the construction of the railroads has caused the profession of horse-riding delivery messenger to become obsolete. This is one of the more intriguing ways *GUN* employs procedurality to convey meaning. By succeeding in their work for the Pony Express, players effectively contribute to the loss of their own jobs through the technological advancement of the Industrial Revolution. The idea that people participate in their own exclusion from the workforce and thus decline in social standing is a poignant one, not only in the 19th century, but also relevant in the current era.

The in-game portrayal of the railroad is somewhat nuanced. One facet of its depiction is the association it carries with the main antagonist of the title. He is a confederate major named Thomas Magruder, who is described in *GUN*’s game manual as “a railroad and mining magnate [... who] roams his holdings in the New Mexico territory in the custom cars of his gilded ‘Black Train’” (Activision 2005, 15). The hero Colton is even tasked with derailing one of those trains in order to disrupt the machinations of the evil Magruder as part of the story campaign. Nevertheless, the protagonist is also frequently called upon to protect the construction of the railroads, inflicting serious

casualties on the opponents of their expansion – the Native American tribes. Despite its connection to Magruder, the railroad is predominantly depicted as a vehicle for progress, and those opposing it are consequently depicted as uncivilised.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN *GUN*

The portrayal of Native Americans in the game could be seen as problematic even from their very first graphic depiction, prior to any playable content, where a travelling group of European colonialists is killed by an indigenous tribe in a gruesome cutscene, especially memorable through the splattering of blood across a golden cross. In the scene, a party of conquistadors led by a priest is ambushed and bloodily murdered by a group of Indigenous people. During the assault, the sky darkens as the Native Americans attack; their faces are markedly obscured by shadows, and they are portrayed as merely wearing a loincloth, thus evoking imagery of the animalistic and barbaric. Both for the duration of this video introduction to the plot, as well as during in-game combat, Native Americans only engage in non-verbal communication – battle cries, screams, grunts, ululation. All mentioned tropes are consistent with the stereotypical dehumanization of Native Americans prevalent within the Western genre. A further example of the dismissive attitude toward Native Americans' humanity can be observed through the names such characters have been granted. While aiding the sheriff of Dodge, the first settlement Colton encounters during the game, in rebuilding a bridge, Colton struggles against a group of Apache. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (2021) outline the stereotypical blending of different Native American tribes and their customs into one umbrella “Indian” trope, and when a specific group was invoked, it was usually the “Apache tribes [who] became synonymous in Hollywood films with the bloodthirsty savage stereotype” (116). In line with that trope, *GUN* frames the Apache at the bridge as merciless murderers out to disrupt the righteous lives of the settlers. Their leader, whom the protagonist is forced to exterminate, is called “Quick Killer”. Other named Native American characters also share that same dehumanizing trait: their names only contain references to combat, as for instance “Many Wounds” and “Fights-at-Dawn”. Their identities are thus confined to fighters, nothing more than a part of the mythical frontier war of extermination.



Although the game ostensibly features multiple Native American tribes, the Apache and the Blackfoot are not permitted to occupy unique spaces in the narrative chronotope. They are simply portrayed as “other” to the white settlers, but lacking their own identity in the possibility space of the game world. As intriguing and perhaps even monumental as featuring interactions between two different Native American tribes in *GUN* could have been, the fact that they were both included in the game is, in itself, a source of controversy. The Apache and the Blackfoot live in lands separated by over 1000 miles of distance, in the Southern state of Oklahoma and the Northern state of Montana, respectively (Field 2023; R. Graetz and S. Graetz 2017). This is but one instance of the lack of attention to detail and care provided to the depiction of Indigenous people within *GUN*. Especially offensive are the insinuated accusations of sexual assault on white women on the part of the Apache. Prior to travelling through the wilderness beyond the town of Dodge, one of the few female characters is quoted as saying to the protagonist: “Promise you’ll put a bullet in my head before they have their fun”, referring to the Apache (Neversoft 2005). Research by author Edwin Sweeney on the history of the tribe indicates the allegation is historically inaccurate, in addition to a perpetuation of stereotypical fearmongering against the “othered” Native Americans (qtd. in Trimble 2014).

The issues within the representation of Native Americans in *GUN* are not exhausted by those examples. In fact, the offenses were considered so grievous by The Association for American Indian Development that they started an online campaign to demand the game be edited and re-released, or else recalled:

Citing the charge as to how the game is “damaging, socially harmful and insensitive,” the boycott lists how the myth of the “savage Indian” is perpetuated — including the practice of scalping human heads and killing sacred white animals. AAID Treasurer Litefoot pointed out how in neither the game nor the manual instructions provide historical details or references to attempt to explain the westward expansion of 150 years ago. (Ross 2006)

Although the AAID as an organization and their website “BoycottGun”¹ have since ceased to function, the full text of the call to boycott can still be read on the internet.² In it, game producer Activision is targeted for whitewashing and presenting in an acceptable light the genocide of Native Americans, while the company’s response simply states that the game “was designed to reflect the harshness of life on the American frontier at that

time” (Reid 2012). It certainly succeeds in bringing the brutal nature of the frontier to the forefront — the player character can shoot the heads and limbs off enemies, use NPCs as human shields, then execute them with a knife, and scalp downed foes. Side quests, especially those of the Pony Express, feature belligerent Native Americans who shoot flaming arrows at the galloping protagonist. This differs from *Red Dead Redemption*, where enemies are typically gun-toting criminal outlaws who are not Native American. The missions related to message delivery are accompanied by hordes of antagonistic Apache, the protagonist can indiscriminately gun down or trample on horseback along the way, regardless of whether those tasks are completed before or after the primary quest. While not strictly necessary for the game’s completion, the use of ambient operations and the game’s insistent and repeated suggestions to take on additional jobs contribute to what Schoppmeier refers to as increased cultural resonance (2013, 33). The visual depiction of angry, aggressive, and “ignobly savage” natives incessantly assaulting the protagonist, even after a truce and alliance between his faction and the tribe have been established during the main quest, is not only a test of the players’ abilities to perform tasks under pressure. This also further affirms the notion of the war of extermination between the civilized settlers and the bloodthirsty savages.

In *GUN*, the main character, similarly to that of *Assassin’s Creed III*, is half-white, half Native American, a fact that is not apparent to the player from the onset of the narrative. While both games share a mixed-race protagonist and a shocking revelation that supposedly alters the perception of the classic white saviour trope, *GUN* does more to promote stereotypes, rather than to deconstruct them. The violence perpetrated by Colton is also attributable to his Native American heritage. He exhibits characteristics exemplary of the bloodthirsty savage trope that become apparent through the implementation of the scalping mechanic. The game allows and even encourages players to scalp downed foes using procedural prompts that appear on screen every time Colton is in close proximity to an appropriate target. Scalping is depicted as gratuitous violence — there is no reason given for its existence in the game’s possibility space, and no quest or character interaction explains or even refers to it in any way. It is brutality for its own sake, befitting a “bloodthirsty savage”. This highlights a major difference between *GUN* and *Assassin’s Creed III*, where developers had made the decision to exclude the practice from the gameplay after receiving feedback from cultural consultants (Ess 2019, 39).

Another difference between *GUN* and the other video games discussed, such as *Assassin's Creed III*, is that the former has been the subject of much more criticism, including for its “over-the-top brutality, language and alcohol use” (Smelov 2006). Columnist Elijah Smelov opined in his review that it “glorifies the experience of slaughtering Indians and attempts to make it permissible by having a main character with hidden indigenous heritage”, a view shared by the Association for American Indian Development in their boycott statement. (Smelov 2006; Reid 2012). Regarding alcohol use, both *GUN* and *Red Dead Redemption* utilize whiskey or moonshine as sources of replenishment. In *GUN*, it serves to refill the main character's health, while in *Red Dead Redemption*, it does the same to his Deadeye meter, thus exploiting a trope that could be referred to as “regeneration through alcohol” in an homage to Slotkin's 1973 book *Regeneration through violence*. Wills and Wright dissect *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s protagonist Arthur Morgan's “consumption (...) as a result of a life lived (...) on the social margins”, highlighting the everyday alcohol use as a relevant “risk factor” (2023, 103). Colton White's propensity for drinking may be rooted in social stereotypes regarding his mixed ancestry, and thus may include a racial component. As a Native American descendant, he is also subject to what Julia Boyd describes in her article “An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers” (2015) as the “modern stereotype of rampant alcoholism on Native American reservations” (2).

Colton's mixed family heritage and his upbringing as a frontiersman both contribute to him standing on the precipice of two worlds – that of acceptable society, and the one beyond it; between civilization and wilderness. As such, he is perfectly poised to take on the mantle of the white savior, uniting the factions of both the cowboys and the Indigenous against their common foe. Native Americans have been part of an ongoing conflict with the villainous Magruder without any significant degree of success, as they have a resistance group comprised of white settlers. The hero Colton then intervenes in the conflict, using his superior knowledge and abilities to combine their forces against the villain, emulating the white saviour trope perfectly. Colton is better at planning, organizing, and dispatching enemies, a trope which, in ludologic terms, has typically been achieved through a game mechanic which allows the players to slow down time, thus ensuring themselves an advantage over their foes. Players can place their shots, which allows the white hero to mow down a staggering number of enemies in a short amount of real time.

This mechanic, called Quickdraw in *GUN*, is almost identical to *Red Dead Redemption's* Deadeye.

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Native Americans working together with white settlers against the common Confederate enemy are depicted through the camaraderie between “Many Wounds” and Colton, as it is possible to see from their dialogue where the Native American states: “Your father and mine learned much from each other. Their kinship was honored by our people” (Neversoft 2005). The apparent bond between the elevated representatives of their respective racial groups is reminiscent of the tropes employed by “The Lone Ranger” analysed in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (2021):

Like the black and white buddy formula (...) The Lone Ranger attempted to draw the white man and the Indian together as a team that fought injustice. Yet Tonto, the Native American half of the team, was always clearly subservient to the Lone Ranger (...) Tonto is a good example of the Indian as noble savage stereotype, playing helpful sidekick to white men and white culture. (Benshoff and Griffin 2021, 117)

The “noble savage” Native American stereotype is also represented through the character of the Indian Hunter, who features as a quest-giver in *GUN*. He appears as a calm, dignified native who speaks of staying true to the land, but whose tasks represent yet another inaccurate and offensive representation of Native American culture. The AAID criticizes the wrongful depictions of Apache traditions in *GUN* for including the killing of sacred animals for a reward of 5-20\$ (Reid 2012; Smelov 2006). The game once again falls short of achieving both historical accuracy and a deconstruction of pervasive stereotypes.

“OTHERS” IN *GUN*

Racial representations have been problematic topics for the western genre, with video games depicting the period typically shying away from any portrayal of slavery, and with very limited portrayals of its effects. *GUN* takes this approach of avoiding such issues to the next level and does not even feature a single African American character, nor any mention thereof. African Americans have essentially been erased from existence, which leaves ample room for interpretation as to the reasoning behind it. With no data to analyse, however, this article will refrain from unfounded speculation. Nevertheless, a racial

component does appear evident in the surname of the protagonist Colton White, which can certainly be interpreted as symbolic of the core message of the western. Conversely, one of the game's antagonists is called Mayor Hoodoo Brown, who is depicted as a Caucasian male. The word “hoodoo” per Merriam Webster is defined as a form of traditional magic practiced among African Americans in the American South (“Hoodoo”, def. 1). The surname Brown’s racial undertone is self-evident, thus prompting a conclusion that the opposition between White and Brown is no mere coincidence, but another allusion to the white-centric narrative of the American frontier.

Female representations have also been a troubling topic for the western genre, with complex characters being few and far between. In *GUN*, female characters are predominantly featured in the role of sex workers. Such is the case with Sadie and Jenny, both of whom embody the kind-hearted prostitute stereotype, which, according to Glenda Riley, perpetuates the negative depiction of the profession by portraying atypical representatives as a deviation from the accepted norm (Riley 1988, 10). That is to say, by showing sex workers in a positive light, but implying they are in the minority of their social class, a negative image of the majority is perpetuated. That would be consistent with the popular direction westerns typically take, as well as with *GUN*'s line when depicting controversial topics. While both characters display honesty, charity, reliability, and a sound moral compass, they are also both cynically murdered by preacher Josiah Reed, a deviant representative of the clergy, and of the perverse morality in the West. The clergy is instrumental in the promulgation of the concept of “Manifest Destiny” as a vehicle for American Imperialism and American Exceptionalism sanctioned by God (Scott 2009). Preachers are often portrayed in westerns as religious zealots, unhinged lunatics, vigilantes or even conmen, especially in the sub-genre of the spaghetti western (Arnold 2020). In Josiah Reed, the tradition of deconstructing the perceived holiness of the priestly figure finds its worthy successor. The sadistic reverend effectively applies frontier justice to the sinful characters of the sex workers, embodying the Puritan principle of predestination. Regardless of their attempts at personal development, the female characters from the brothel must inevitably face death in the western genre.

Another case of denigration of women involves a bounty mission that features a specific special requirement for its fulfilment. It necessitates that the target be brought in dead, not alive. This happens to be the only female bounty target, whilst all but one other

such missions provide the player with a choice in the matter of whether the bounty target is to be executed or incapacitated. The sole other instance where the vintage “dead or alive” mechanic is not adhered to is when a horse needs to be returned alive for Colton to receive his reward. The notion that a horse’s life carries more value in the American frontier is implied again through the use of procedural rhetoric. The game mechanic and the inconsistency in its use bring the attention of the player to that particular aspect of moral judgment contained within the game’s persuasive relation of meaning.

Other minorities are also featured in *GUN*, albeit not prominently. Racist attitudes in the American West are depicted through a combination of casual racism in dialogue and ambient acts occurring around the player. The sheriff of Dodge succeeds in encapsulating the frontier opinions of two minority groups in a single sentence. When discussing the Apache attacks on the bridge’s structure, he attests that: “Even the Irish won’t work, only the coolies will” (Neversoft 2005). Low-wage indentured workers are treated dismissively, and Asian Americans especially are dealt a tough hand. When traversing the streets of the larger game town, players occasionally witness ambient acts, wherein a group of white townspeople accost an Asian worker in an uneven gunfight. Those shootouts inevitably end with the indentured worker being slain, which embodies the predominant societal attitude towards minorities as depicted within *GUN*’s portrayal of the Wild West.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The possibility space *GUN* has created for players to explore is a universe of brutal Social Darwinism that perpetuates the myth of the white colonial settler’s prevalence. The game paints a horrific picture of the ordeal that women and ethnic minorities are forced to encounter in the American frontier, yet it seems to lack the compassion that the subsequent titles of the genre exhibit, such as the *Red Dead Redemption* series and *Assassin’s Creed III*. *GUN* presents canonical representations associated with the West, mainly reproducing it as a brutal battleground where Native Americans are faced with “erasure and what could be considered a genocide” (O’Sullivan 2024, 25). *GUN* does not shy away from littering the ground with dead bodies. The player must, at least to some extent, partake in this all too real depiction of the harsh reality that Native Americans and other minority groups face, and thus aid in the perpetuation of the myth of the frontier.

During the course of this article, many commonalities were established between *GUN* and other westerns. Those include both standardized frontier tropes and also specific instances of story and character similarities, especially between Colton and Connor, whose names even sound similar. The increased attention to detail in subsequent releases, focusing on visually accurate and traditional depictions of specific Native American tribes, their language, and customs, is a major difference compared to the Activision title and a serious contributing factor to the differing receptions that *GUN* received when compared to later disseminated AAA features by other companies. Despite starring an ensemble cast of voice actors, including household Hollywood names such as Thomas Jane and Kris Kristofferson, as well as Native American voices, *GUN* was never able to truly stand out as a representative of the western genre (Activision 2005, 16). It had the potential to become an innovative brand in the space allocated to westerns, but ultimately did not succeed in establishing a storytelling brand that significantly exceeds the stereotypically constructed tropes and characters of traditional media. Despite that particular failure, it has nonetheless earned more attention than it has garnered heretofore through its richly inhabited Western game world. A similar case can be argued for another title of the mid-2000s, *Call of Juarez* (2006), which also never reached the heights of the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise, yet would provide ample material for research into the depiction of American myths and stereotypes in the medium of video games.

END NOTES

¹ www.boycottgun.com

² Please refer to the bibliographical entry for Dr. Reid to read the AAID's full statement.

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CIÊNCIA ID 401B-7118-DA16

HOW TO CITE

Todorov, Angel (2025). "GUN: Representations of North American Myths and Stereotypes in the Controversial 2005 Western". *VIA PANORAMICA: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, vol. 14, n.º 2, 2025, pp. 87-107. Web: <http://ojs.letras.up.pt/>. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/2182-9934/via14_2a4