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Artificial Frontiers, Simulated Indigeneity: Western Big-Budget Open World Games and the Settler Colonial Imaginary

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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Abstract

This dissertation studies Western big-budget video games of a genre often referred to as “open world.” By tracking the concept of the “frontier” as a settler colonial (and later neoliberal) signal for space that invites access, I argue these games are both expressive of and cater to settler and neoliberal cultural anxieties regarding extermination and desires for accumulative dominance. Furthermore, these games exhibit their settler colonial and neoliberal ideologies through their narratives, gameplay mechanics, and productive contexts. That exhibition of ideology comes in several formulas of settler and neoliberal cultural production identified by various fields of scholarship. This dissertation, drawing from Indigenous studies, video game studies, post-colonial and Marxist theory, studies the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption* series, *Assassin’s Creed 3* and the so-called “Ubisoft formula” generally, as well as *Horizon Zero Dawn* to argue a few central points about big-budget Western open world games: (1) they are what I call artificial frontiers, and as such are the preeminent entertainment of settler colonial cultural mores and the sustained eliminative and accumulative logics of those mores’ historical frontierism; (2) they reveal, reflect, propagate, accommodate, and assuage settler colonial anxieties and desires; (3) they exhibit (though attempt to obscure) the genocidal logic and exploitative relations of Western settler colonialism and neoliberalism; consequently, to some extent this dissertation argues the video game industry’s social function shows the compatibility of settler-influenced neoliberalism with fascist ideology.

Keywords

Video Games, Open World, Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, Frontier, Neoliberalism, Fascism

Summary for Lay Audience (350)

This dissertation argues that the big-budget, Western-made video games of the “open world” genre draw from the concept of the “frontier” for their success. By studying the *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Red Dead Redemption* series, *Assassin’s Creed III*, and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, I assert the genre’s features make them “artificial frontiers” because they cater to the same cultural anxieties and desires “the frontier” has historically produced and continues to “play” with. As the frontier is historically a space of imperial genocide, modern video game companies design these games as power fantasies. These power fantasies normalize the economic, racial, and political problems of Western culture, and seek to soothe the fears and wants that context produces. Finally, I argue that these fantasies reveal how the ideology of these extremely popular games is similar to fascist ideology.

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problematized (such as by scholars of disability studies) as well as how it could be elevated in the future, such as making a clearer distinction between some of the work I cite together, and by citing extremely relevant work such as that of Manu Karuka and Chandan Reddy. My gratitude to Donna Pennee extends beyond her role on this committee, but here I will relegate my thanks to just that. Dr. Pennee's probing of some of my dissertation's underlying but largely unexpressed assumptions (the nature of structures themselves, for example) will keep the wheels in my cranium turning for some time. Thanks as well to Manina Jones; your questions regarding genre, addiction, and competition are exactly what I would be interested in pursuing right away. Finally, thank you to Kim Verwaayen, whose insistence on the importance of more directly attending to gender in a study of this nature is well taken and will not be neglected in further work. The entire committee was wonderful, and I actually wished I had more time to "defend" this dissertation so I could discuss all of these topics with you at greater length.

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Introduction

One person's play session of the console video game *Grand Theft Auto III* (*GTAIII*) may look substantially different from another's. Every player controls an avatar and the screen's view of it in the digital world, as if operating the player's character and a spectral camera tethered to it. Set in a fully 3D environment, the player can make the avatar walk, run, jump, hit virtual denizens, shoot guns, and drive vehicles. A small "minimap" in the lower left of the screen looks like a GPS map of the detailed digital city players explore, a realized space complete with wandering citizens and traffic. When the game is paused, players can view a full map of the city. Both maps include icons that represent various things, such as points to save the game and store vehicles, as well the start points for missions which push a central narrative. One player may decide to simply play every mission as it becomes available, interested in the story about clashing criminal empires. One player may decide to eschew this narrative entirely, simply choosing to steal a passing car and run down random city denizens. Another player may hop in an ambulance and play an optional timed activity to aid injured people—an activity which, if accomplished well enough, eventually grants the avatar the ability to sprint on foot at full speed without tiring. Another player may do all of these things in whatever order and emphasis they desire. *GTAIII*, then, features "gameplay"¹ that privileges player autonomy within a large, heavily detailed world, open to players' individual desires. That gameplay and large world are the foundations of what is often referred to as the "open world" genre of video games.²

¹ "Gameplay," at a basic level, is the systems and structure of a game's interactivity. It can also refer to the "feel" of that interaction, and is thus a concept that can be both objectively or subjectively described.

² Other related terms/genres are "sandbox" or "free-roaming." Modern examples of these games share traits from common understandings of all three. I will use "open world" primarily because of how the term is

The open world genre has become wildly popular, and a great number of Western mainstream, big-budget video games employ mechanics that fit into its broad conventions. Genres, as well as their constituents and limits, are always sites of contention. This is especially true for video games. Film and television genres, for example, must contend with criteria as wide ranging as narrative, aesthetic content, the people whose vision and labour they represent, and the regions and eras in which they are produced. Video game genres must contend with these, too, but they must also add other important criteria, such as the hardware that plays them, the digital frameworks that structure them, and the forms of player interaction available in the games themselves. One could argue there are early “open world” games (such as *Adventure* in 1980, or *Elite* in 1984) that feature the freedom to explore the game’s spatial representations in ways less structured (or at least more open-ended) than their contemporaries. The expansion of open world games in large part relates to game designers’ longstanding attempts to push past a form bound to “levels,” instead encouraging player exploration of game spaces that became more detailed as technology advanced and consumer expectations rose. *Grand Theft Auto III*, released in 2001, is popularly said to be one of the earliest and most influential examples of the genre’s contemporary big-budget development and structure.³ The open world games of this tradition, following *GTA*, typically feature large, explorable game spaces that give players the “freedom” to choose where to go and when.

typically employed in development and consumer contexts, and for the conceptual weight of its particular word choice.

³ *IGN*, one of the most popular video game hobbyist websites, featured *GTAIII* in a 2007 article, “Top 10 Most Influential Games” (Geddes and Hatfield). In it, *GTAIII* is said to have “spawned entire genres, buzzwords, and cultural phenomena.” Similarly, in the years following *GTAIII*’s release, any game that featured the hallmarks of the open world genre were often called “GTA clones” among video game fans online (Reparaz).

These games generally offer primary linear “story” missions to advance the central plot, but they also allow autonomous exploration and interaction, and provide ample opportunities for optional activities meant to flesh out the world and allow the player to gain more power. Open world games are often played in a first- or third-person perspective.⁴ For the most part, the most popular open world games between 2000 and 2020 feature third-person perspective exclusively or optionally, which gives a better view of the player’s animated traversal and mastery of the game space, as well as a wider—and thus more empowered—field of vision. All the games focused on in this dissertation feature third-person perspective,⁵ are attributed to Western studios,⁶ and are big-budget open world games.

Hobbyist media measures the open world genre’s richly detailed game spaces, breathlessly comparing the sizes of digital worlds to real-world kilometer equivalents in what Cameron Kunzelman calls a “map size fetish” (“Why is GTAV So Conservative?”). These massive open world environments require large budgets to accommodate the large teams and advanced technology to make these digital spaces invitingly detailed and lifelike. The incredible expense to create these games is an apparently acceptable risk for the companies that develop and publish them, as big-budget open world games are among the most high-grossing commercial narrative products in the world. Multiple recent open world games, like *The Witcher 3* have sold tens of millions of copies worldwide, and

⁴ First-person perspective refers to a view where the player’s view is through the “eyes” of the player character (PC), whereas in third-person perspective, the view is like a camera that floats a few tethered but mobile feet behind the PC, or gives a view from behind and over the PC’s shoulder.

⁵ See chapter two for further discussion on third-person perspective.

⁶ I say “attributed” because of the international nature of big-budget open world game development. See chapter one for a delineation of the outsourcing and international development chains that Western-based companies use to develop open world games.

Grand Theft Auto V (GTAV) has, by 2020, sold more than 135 million copies.⁷ If, as some scholars have argued, games satisfy generalized, simplistic categories of desire for players, the open world genre offers a potent fulfilment of many of these desires. Nick Yee's quantitative research on the motivations of game players delineates some of these categories, borrowing from previous literature.⁸ One central category, "achievement," refers to players' desire to gain in-game power, currency, abilities, and so on. Another category, "immersion," refers to a player's investment in the story, interest in exploring the game world, and so forth. Both are considered important motivations in open world game design. Yee's findings (2002, 2012) are well-reflected generalities in Jugo Hamari and Janne Tuunanen's survey of quantitative research into player motivations.⁹ Open world games are, in many ways, the video game industry's most distilled attempt to appeal to these motivations for an increasingly expanding consumer base.

GTAV and many of the most successful contemporary mainstream open world games influenced by it have been designed by Western studios. As such, the genre is unsurprisingly quintessentially "Western," both in productive materialism and in style. With gameplay foundations of the exploration and mastery of a large game space, open world games are artificial frontiers for players. These frontiers are often populated by largely brainless denizens that are often destructible set pieces more akin to vehicles, landscape, and buildings than to the characters whose survival is linked directly to the

⁷ See CD Projekt Group for *Witcher 3* sales, and Minotti for *GTAV* sales.

⁸ Yee mostly draws from Richard Bartle's "taxonomy of player types" and scholarship inspired by it.

⁹ Yee's research is focused on Massively Multiplayer Online games [MMOS] (which are discussed further in Chapter One) rather than the single-player open world genre this dissertation focuses on. That said, the MMO genre (and indeed, most recent MMOs) follow very similar design principles as exclusively single-player open world games, and vice versa.

story missions and cutscenes.¹⁰ The point of an open world game, mechanically, is to traverse space and grow in power. Reviewers and critics often use the term “playground” for open world settings, largely because the games themselves encourage a degree of locomotive experimentation and give the illusion of player “freedom”; this freedom is the abovementioned autonomy of desired gameplay within what is necessarily still limited structure and possibility. These frontier spaces are, like many video games, playgrounds for power fantasies. Keza MacDonald’s review of *GTAV*, for example, notes the game’s advancement of open world genre characteristics as a “tremendous freedom,” perfect for “whetting your appetite for independent exploration” in an “astonishingly well-realised . . . living world.” This artificial freedom and the independence to dominate the game’s massive, detailed space fulfills both players’ sense of “achievement”—or, broadly, power—and “immersion.”

This dissertation is concerned with what power is at play in open world games and, more specifically, what its resultant immersive fantasies illustrate about popular commercial, political, and cultural mores. After all, as Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) points out, fantasy “presumes some measure of falsehood . . . too readily transformed into pathology and neurosis,” and “also presumes a kind of arrogant certainty over what is real and unreal, true and false, legitimate and delusional” (n.p.). Linking these neurotic fantasies to the continuing literal power of settler colonial cultures reveals functionalities of both the games and the settler colonial assumptions regarding settler colonial legitimacy itself. Informed by and bringing together different fields—from the social,

¹⁰ Cutscenes are, simplistically, cinematic portions of games where the player has little to no input or control.

political, and storytelling theory of Indigenous studies, to video game studies, to post-colonial and Marxist theory—I will analyze open world games’ settler colonial codes (both literal and figurative) as well as their treatment of Indigeneity. My dissertation thus argues a few central points about big-budget Western open world games: (1) they are what I call artificial frontiers, and as such are the preeminent entertainment of settler colonial cultural mores and the sustained eliminative logics of those mores’ historical frontierism; (2) they reveal, reflect, propagate, accommodate, and assuage settler colonial anxieties and desires; (3) they exhibit (and attempt to obscure) the genocidal logic and exploitative relations of Western settler colonialism and neoliberalism; consequently, to some extent this dissertation argues the video game industry’s social function shows the compatibility of settler-influenced neoliberalism with fascist ideology.

As this dissertation merges different scholarly fields, I must navigate and streamline discourses, bodies of literature, and lexicons that are common in particular disciplines but may not be obvious outside of them. As such, this introduction will explain the specific values that are central to my analysis, as well as reference starting points for further reading on other, less formative subjects. First, I discuss the concept of the “frontier” and its constitutive settler neurosis between *inside* and *outside*, both territorially and psychoanalytically. Next, I consider the structure of settler colonialism and the ways in which its reliance on a “logic of elimination” creates a contradictory appropriation of Indigeneity and disavowal of genocide. Then, I highlight how this neurosis relates to the *play* of video games. I move onto an outline of how this dissertation treats the concept of Indigeneity, and then turn to the more mechanical aspects of my methodology: the reading, playing, and critical approaches that ground my

analysis. Finally, I emphasize this dissertation's core aims: how these games function as settler cultural reproduction, and what that reproduction tells us about the modern structure of settler colonialism itself. A breakdown of how each chapter contributes to this overall goal ends this introduction.

The Inside/Outside Frontier

I have already characterized open world games as artificial frontiers, but it is important to describe (1) what "frontier" represents as a term and a concept and (2) how it fits into the wider framework of settler colonialism, simplistically understandable for now as a particular type of imperialism. Andrea Mura, in his psychoanalytic differentiation between "border" and "frontier," calls a border the "*solid and hypertrophic* line of separation between inside and outside," and a frontier the "the more permeable organisation of the limit in neurosis" (64). The neurosis he refers to is the anxiety produced by resisting or rejecting the permeability of every social and psychological "inside" and "outside." No individual or social "inside" is hermetically sealed; all that is internal is always changed and even defined by the very existence of and interactions with an "outside." As this implies a lack of control over the domain of the "self" (or "society"), a kind of threat to self-sovereignty, neurosis is the result of attempting to seal that "inside" from "outside," to turn frontiers into borders.

Mura cites Dario Gentili's work (in Italian) on the relevance of these concepts (and their concurrent neurosis) to historical expressions of imperialist expansion and culture. Gentili points out that the *finis* was a crucial concept for pre-Imperial Rome, one of finitude and confinement, associated with the "straight line" that demarcates a territory's boundary. Mura says "a better rendering in English is provided by the term

‘border’” (71-2). This characterization of the border as a “straight line” of boundary is echoed by the Charter of the United Nations and the Western model of national sovereignty, a legacy of the Westphalian treaties of 1648. As Laurence Peters puts it, the principles of these “treaty doctrines . . . undergird modern-day international relations” (70). These principles relate primarily to each nation’s sole jurisdiction over their “internal affairs” and the supposed equality of sovereign-to-sovereign relations. However, these principles only work with the finitude and confinement of borders, with hard lines that determine the distinct division between a nation’s inside and outside: the domain of their sovereignty and that which lies beyond.

Gentili’s work, Mura says, suggests that “post-republican Rome” was less interested with their borders, their *finis*, and far more concerned with *limis*, “the kind of defensive lines that were located in the peripheries of the Empire,” a term best translated to English as “frontier” (72). The frontier’s expanse was a source of imperial anxiety due to its porous nature. At the frontier, sovereignty was uncertain, and the “outside” (of “barbarian” culture and population, invasion and uprising), was at once already inside the frontier and always capable of entering it or pushing deeper. For post-republican Rome, then, the frontier was a space that demanded the construction and maintenance of a border so as to make sovereignty clear and defensible. The frontier must be definitively “won” and thus become a border. In other words, the *outside* must be made *inside*, and cleansed of the anxiety-producing alterity *of* the outside. But the frontier was not simply a source of anxiety for Rome. It was also a source of identity, income, and, of course, territory. Imperial Rome was culturally and economically defined by its expansion, and the “frontier” is a concept that carries with it the promise of more outside to make inside,

a dangerous but profitable prospect. Mura suggests there is significant overlap between the Roman imperial concept of the frontier and Frederick Turner's once enormously influential "frontier thesis."

Turner's "frontier thesis" was once the most popular American historical interpretation of American society, and remains deeply influential. The thesis suggested that American particularity was the product of frontier experiences. As one of the most famous passages from Turner's *The Frontier in American History* puts it:

American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the Susan Constant to Virginia, nor in the Mayflower to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier. Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, made the democratic type of society in America for three centuries while it occupied its empire. (294)

For Turner's America, as for post-republican Rome, it was the imperial occupation of the frontier that forged its state, culture, and imperial future; America was made by turning that perilous inside/outside space into a confined whole. But of course, the lands that were to become the United States of America are not the lands of Europe and North Africa; the European colonial powers, and states founded by their settlers that would later diverge from those powers, are not Imperial Rome. Rome's project of imperialism was reliant on the existing populations of its frontier as a source of labour (economic, martial, and otherwise); the settling-America, by contrast, "occupied its empire" with the surplus populations of colonial powers.

My use of “surplus population” is drawn from Marxist theory addressing the development of capital and the consequential management of population (and labour).¹¹ Broadly speaking, surplus populations are the under- and un-employed, the economically deprived population not using its potential labour for any number of contextual reasons. The European powers that engaged heavily in imperialism and the settlement of the so-called New World had growing surplus populations for which colonization provided a profitable and presumably less dangerously insurrectionist outlet.¹² Indeed, the vast majority of early European settlers came from deeply impoverished backgrounds, and the transfer of these populations to the Americas was the genesis of Western indentured servitude.¹³ In the settler colonial context, these surplus populations become settlers and are no longer surplus in settlement. This is a crucial part of the settler project, and one which the existing populations of Indigenous people are always-already “outside.” As Frantz Fanon articulated, the metaphorical “zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity” (37), and thus exist in a state of “reciprocal exclusivity.”

¹¹ The concept, as developed in Marxist theory, first appeared in Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels described the unemployed and underemployed in industrializing England as the “reserve army of labour,” a precursor/equivalent concept to “surplus population.” Though the concept categorizes a population under industrialized capitalism, I am using it here to refer to a more generalized category. This is not to over-simplify or detract from the specificity of the term as it is used in the scholarship, but rather to build upon it. Scholars such as Michael McIntyre (2011) exhaustively relate the concept to racial categories, and the development from colonial imperialism to modern capitalism. By mobilizing the term “surplus populations” to reference events before industrial capitalism, I highlight this related development (from imperialism to capitalism) as an undergirding settler logic regarding population and labour management.

¹² While a certain level of surplus population is desirable in (proto-)capitalist economies (to allow for constant expansion of production with a ready and wage-starved demographic), a too-high level is dangerous to a state in any form. A large population without means to sustain themselves is a population amenable to rebellion.

¹³ See Salinger (1997) for a summary on the context of early settler indentured servitude and her focus on its “exploitative nature” (338) in favour of trading interests.

Fanon argues that no true “conciliation is possible,” for the Indigenous is “superfluous” (38) in a framework that refigures another (formerly surplus) population into a newly labouring population for the economic benefit of the colonial power.

Rome’s frontiers (and later, its legions) were not overwhelmingly populated (or to be populated) by people from the Italian peninsula, but rather by those Indigenous to those frontiers. The American frontier, though, was already a settlement project of European surplus populations. By the time America’s frontier turned to borders, the varied Indigenous peoples that lived within those borders became an even more troublesome surplus to be managed.¹⁴ To put it back in psychoanalytic terms, settler states figured those populations as a fraught trace of the frontier’s “outside” that exists “inside”: a neurosis. This is not uniquely American, however: it is an integral part of settler colonialism’s particularity, which contrasts with other kinds of colonialism and imperialism. Rome’s imperial project to supposedly civilize the “outside” to be part of the Roman “inside” has more in common with European colonialism in other parts of the world, such as the Indian subcontinent, than it does with settler colonial projects. Though just as oppressively paternalistic in both theory and practice, these imperial projects did not have the same mechanics or aims as settler colonialism; indeed, neither did the bordered settler nation states they would spawn, carrying the same strain of Westphalian sovereignty.

¹⁴ This phenomena of Indigenous Peoples becoming surplus labour to be aggressively exploited as part of elimination is broadly understood in scholarship for many settler states across disciplines, if not recognized in these specific terminologies. As Glen Coulthard (Dene) writes regarding the Canadian context, “It is now generally acknowledged among historians and political economists that following the waves of colonial settlement that marked the transition between mercantile and industrial capitalism . . . Native labor became increasingly (although by no means entirely) superfluous to the political and economic development of the Canadian state. Increased European settlement combined with an imported, hyper-exploited non-European workforce meant that . . . Canadian state-formation and colonial-capitalist development required first and foremost land, and only secondarily the surplus value afforded by cheap, Indigenous labor” (12).

It is tellingly in that same vein of surplus populations that Indigenous peoples feature in Turner's frontier thesis; in Turner's vision, Indigenous peoples are there-and-not-there, a neurotic outside/inside. This is certainly apparent in the passage quoted above, in which Indigenous peoples are conspicuously absent from the "free land"—unless of course they are figured among the land's "abundance of natural resources" (294). In any event, they are apparently not a "fit people" for the land they have lived upon for thousands of years. But Turner does not wholly eschew Indigenous peoples this way throughout; they are in fact a constitutive part of that frontier, the danger it represents, and the trial and challenge that forges America. When Turner talks about early settler "trade" as the meeting between "savage" and "civilized," he characterizes the contact as the "disintegrating forces of civilization enter[ing] the wilderness" (13). When Turner notes Indigenous peoples as anything but a military challenge, he is characteristically evasive in depicting their reality, obfuscating the active role of settler populations and institutions as the disintegrating forces themselves. The agency of these changes is depersonalized and abstracted. When Turner considers "the effect of the trader on the Indian," he says the "trading post left the unarmed tribes at the mercy of those that had purchased fire-arms," while saying nothing about the armed settlers themselves, and the proxy wars their states engaged between Indigenous peoples (13). By the time Turner moves on to the "rapidity" of the trader's "advance," the "disintegrating forces of civilization" once again slips comfortably into abstraction, where settlers merely meet, and the abstract frontier does the work that undoes Indigenous peoples:

Every river valley and Indian trail became a fissure in Indian society, and so that society became honeycombed. Long before the pioneer farmer appeared on the

scene, primitive Indian life had passed away. The farmers met Indians armed with guns. The trading frontier, while steadily undermining Indian power by making the tribes ultimately dependent on the whites, yet, through its sale of guns, gave to the Indian increased power of resistance to the farming frontier. (13)

For Turner, the frontier itself is agency, and while the settler trader is dependent upon Indigenous peoples, the trader is merely a stepping stone of progress towards the settler farmer. The settler farmer needs the land the Native occupies, and he needs it as “free land.” As such, these newly empowered and resistant “Indians” become the martial obstacle between settler trader and settler farmer that is so closely associated with the pop cultural Western image of the “Indian,” pitted in ongoing conflict against the “Cowboy.” This progression is a natural one for Turner, a progression whereby the violent dispossession of Indigenous lands is not an activity of agency, but of teleology, where “primitive” life disintegrates before “civilized” life. The reality, of course, is much more complicated.

Turner’s focus on this transition from trading frontier to farming frontier does, however, gently acknowledge just how much Indigenous people (or at least, their knowledge and ways of life) were critical to the teleology of settler nationhood:

the Indian trade pioneered the way for civilization. The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader's “trace;” the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads. The same origin can be shown for the railroads of the South, the Far West, and the Dominion of Canada. (14)

What this gentle acknowledgement lacks is a crucial awareness of Indigenous peoples' critical role in sustaining that early trading frontier entirely, and how settler farming depended upon Indigenous stewardship or Indigenous dispossession, and often both. One microcosmic example: William Bradford, governor of the young Plymouth colony, noted that the colony's survival was dependent on the teachings of Tisquantum, a member of the Patuxet tribe. Bradford highlighted that Tisquantum was instrumental in the colony's survival, as he taught the settlers "how to set their corn, where to take fish, and to procure other commodities, and was also their pilot to bring them to unknown places for their profit" (81). It was Tisquantum's aid in agriculture that is most prevalent in Bradford dubbing him a "special instrument sent of God for their good" (85). Tisquantum showed settlers how to grow crops in this so-called New World, "both the manner how to set it, and after how to dress and tend it" (85), as well as how to properly prepare the exhausted soil for further cultivation. Though just one anecdote, Bradford's account is emblematic of the contemporary settler record's stark awareness of how critical Indigenous peoples were to the very possibility of settler agriculture (and thus profit). This awareness must evaporate for Turner's (and the settler cultural standard's) frame of historical development. As Thomas Wessel so pointedly phrases it, "[w]hile Indian agriculture failed to gain much notice in historical texts, the subjects of those texts were well aware of its importance" (14). Even as broad-strokes historical summary goes, Turner's thesis (and its relevance to current Western conceptions of the frontier) drastically oversimplifies and elides when convenient for its teleological progression. Turner's trading frontier and farming frontier make way for the "Indian frontier," where America

is forged by an even more simplistic contest against Indigenous peoples who are armed and increasingly resistant to the hostility of the settler project's disintegrating civilization.

Turner's explication of the "Indian frontier" is when Indigenous people return to his narrative as an agent rather than a spectral, passive presence like the "free land" itself. Here, they become the trial over which the "fit people" of American settlement must triumph:

The effect of the Indian frontier as a consolidating agent in our history is important. From the close of the seventeenth century various intercolonial congresses have been called to treat with Indians and establish common measures of defense. Particularism was strongest in colonies with no Indian frontier. This frontier stretched along the western border like a cord of union. The Indian was a common danger, demanding united action. Most celebrated of these conferences was the Albany congress of 1754, called to treat with the Six Nations, and to consider plans of union. Even a cursory reading of the plan proposed by the congress reveals the importance of the frontier. The powers of the general council and the officers were, chiefly, the determination of peace and war with the Indians, the regulation of Indian trade, the purchase of Indian lands, and the creation and government of new settlements as a security against the Indians. It is evident that the unifying tendencies of the Revolutionary period were facilitated by the previous cooperation in the regulation of the frontier. In this connection may be mentioned the importance of the frontier, from that day to this, as a military training school, keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression, and developing the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman. (15)

In this unintentionally ironic depiction of violent settler expansion from “farming frontier” *into* “Indian frontier,” settler expansion is posed as “resistance to aggression,” which powerfully illustrates the kind of forgetting necessary for this notion of national identity. Indeed, the last “Fact” against the King of England listed by the United States’ Declaration of Independence is that he “endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare” into conflict with American national sovereignty. This too, of course, is a forgetting and strategic elision of Indigenous peoples’ own choices of alliance in pursuit of sovereignty in order to position them as obedient wards of an imperial power. Many scholars, such as Jo-Ann Episknew (Métis), argue that many Indigenous groups living around what would become the US-Canada border chose to ally with the British against American independence because of the comparatively brutal American settler campaign for Indigenous territory, directly executed by or to the pointed indifference of the nascent American government (22).¹⁵ The warfare associated with the “Indian frontier” is not cleanly separable from the farming and trading so integral to Turner’s earlier stages. Indigenous trading becomes competition rather than crucial; Indigenous agriculture and territory become targets for settler invasion and occupation.

Wessel’s insistence that Indigenous agriculture was of utmost importance in the texts of settlers themselves is once again relevant:

¹⁵ This is not to suggest the settler colonial project of Canada was innocent of this essentially genocidal relationship to Indigenous peoples. Episknew goes on to highlight how the comparatively broadly violent American approach merely gave the proto-Canadian state apparatus more leverage for treaties less favourable to Indigenous peoples. These Treaties were to be largely broken by the developing Canadian nation.

Much of the conflict between Indians and whites on the frontier revolved around the agricultural year. French invasions of Iroquois lands in New York coincided with the early harvest when troops could wreak the greatest damage on Iroquois fields. In 1779, General George Washington ordered John Sullivan to march on the Iroquois and specifically noted the need to destroy their growing crops at a time when it was too late for replanting. Kentucky frontiersmen nearly made it an annual event to attack the Shawnee along the Wabash in the late summer, sure in the knowledge that if they did not destroy Indian corn-fields, the Shawnee would attack them when the harvest was in. Persistent destruction of Indian fields reduced many tribes to relying almost exclusively on the hunt and conforming to a life whites insisted the Indian savages represented. Debilitated and destitute tribes became an easy prey to the land-grabbing schemes of frontier governors who insisted that the Indians made no use of the land. Engrossment of Indian lands to make way for white farmers remained the most tragic circumstance in which agriculture linked Indian and white destinies. (14)

Wessel's summary highlights historical facts from which Turner must turn away. Though the exact progression of Wessel's scenario is not universal in the settler colonial context, it is emblematic of how the frontier manufactures the conditions of its own apparent necessity. Savagery is operationalized by settlers in the frontier (through violence, destruction, and theft of land), but figured solely as the domain of Indigenous peoples whose conditions have been changed by that frontier's settler-made parameters. This

supposed savagery then warrants settlers' civilizing measures to correct the "Indian problem."¹⁶

Just as the Declaration of Independence must make "savages" out of Indigenous resistance, and just as Turner must figure settler invasion as "resistance to aggression," the settler conception of the frontier is a topography anxiously both inside and outside. It is, simply, a terrain for a nation *inside* of borders to emerge. In the context of historicizing settler colonialism, the frontier is about the creation of a national mythology and identity. In the context of an accurate rendering of the frontier's actual conditions, it is less about creating "the settler," and more about creating "the Indian," the surplus population to be removed, the "outside." The frontier is a space of conditions meant to frame peoples who were once critical to survival as savages existentially *opposed* to that survival. So when Turner's frontier thesis moves beyond this contest between settler and "Indian," it carries with it this misunderstanding, this critical gap. The gap becomes the building neurosis of Turner's frontier thesis. This neurosis recognizes the settler project's "disintegrating forces" as the genesis for the "social ills" of the American settler nation state, but is unable to connect this process to the original conflicting reliance upon and dispossession of Indigenous life and lands. In other words, once the frontier has become the border, Turner must turn his attention to the "new frontiers" of America without confronting how its newfound sovereignty of "inside" constituted itself by trying to eliminate the "outside" of Indigenous sovereignties. This elimination was never complete, and the nation continues to exist with those "outsides" within its borders. As

¹⁶ See the following chapter for references to scholarship on a specific instance of this progression, particularly Hubbard (2014) and Smits (1994).

such, it is in the full expression of this neurosis, this unchecked contradiction, where Turner's often explicitly racist and ahistorical thesis exhibits the analysis of American society and identity that still resonates in popular culture today.

Having conquered the frontier of literal land, argues Turner, America developed a sensibility that excels in surmounting broad national obstacles. This argument carries that crude forgetting, that core neurosis regarding Indigenous aid and, more importantly, Indigenous death, displacement, and survival. Turner says that in the "to-day" of 1893, Americans look "with a shock upon a changed world" (293), where the primary goal of territorial expansion has been replaced by conservation along very particular economically-minded lines:

The national problem is no longer how to cut and burn away the vast screen of the dense and daunting forest; it is how to save and wisely use the remaining timber. It is no longer how to get the great spaces of fertile prairie land in humid zones out of the hands of the government into the hands of the pioneer; these lands have already passed into private possession. No longer is it a question of how to avoid or cross the Great Plains and the arid desert. It is a question of how to conquer those rejected lands by new method of farming and by cultivating new crops from seed collected by the government and by scientists from the cold, dry steppes of Siberia, the burning sands of Egypt, and the remote interior of China . . . The cry of scientific farming and the conservation of natural resources replaces the cry of rapid conquest of the wilderness. We have so far won our national home, wrested from it its first rich treasures, and drawn to it the unfortunate of other lands, that we are already obliged to compare ourselves with settled states of the Old World.

In place of our attitude of contemptuous indifference to the legislation of such countries as Germany and England, even Western States like Wisconsin send commissions to study their systems of taxation, workingmen's insurance, old age pensions and a great variety of other remedies for social ills. (293-4)

That America is a "settled state" has unintentional double-meaning here, one not so comparable to the "Old World" nations in question. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the consolidation of American settlement turns the settler's gaze to the progenitors of the settler project for mimicry, and to far-flung locales for scientific advancement. Siberian, Chinese, and Egyptian¹⁷ agriculture springs to the forefront for the "rejected lands" that are the "Great Plains," where Indigenous peoples successfully farmed multi-seasonal crops for deep stretches of time.¹⁸ It is interesting as well that these "rejected lands" are where many of the largest and most populous reservations within United States borders are located. Thus by the time the settler state fashions itself after the colonial powers, it must have forgotten its constitutive genocide, and the real aids, impacts, and losses of its own construction. The new frontiers, here associated with a "cry" for "science" and solutions to "social ills" of the settler economy and labour, are not fashioning American institution and identity, but the tests left for America to surmount. The original American frontier, for Turner, is where the contest aimed at Indigenous death and displacement is naturalized as a process of "civilization." The "new frontiers" of this settled civilization

¹⁷ It is also worth pointing out that the three listed locales are sites of imperialist conflict. The steppes of Siberia has its own history of Russian imperialist invasion against Indigenous peoples, such as the Yakut. 10 years before Turner delivered his thesis, England invaded Egypt to reassert control during growing anti-imperialist sentiment. 10 years after he would deliver it, the anti-imperialist Boxer Rebellion would begin in China.

¹⁸ See Paul Minnis' *People and Plants in Ancient Eastern North America* (2010) for an extensive survey of the archaeobotanical data and academic literature of Indigenous farming in the Great Plains.

are where Indigenous aid and pre-existing civilizational modes (like agriculture, trade, and statecraft) evaporate as factors (original or continuing) in that same process.

Indigenous peoples did not evaporate, but their continued existence within the American “inside” must be evaded for this frontier ideology to remain consistent. This forgetful frontier ideology is not coherent (and therein lies the neurosis), but it is consistent. The settler psychology of the frontier is a particular iteration of the same expansive, extractive relationship based on possession as it was for Imperial Rome.

Mura points out that Aldo Schiavone’s work also connects the Imperial Roman conception of the “frontier” with Turner’s. The frontier’s retrospective historical incoherence makes it more a “state of mind . . . rather than a legal, material and institutional concept” (Mura 72). It is, as Schiavone puts it, “not so much a line where one stops, but rather an area that works as an invitation to access” (5). It is via this “invitation to access” that the concept of the frontier is mostly potently and ubiquitously represented in popular media and Western consciousness. In the expansionist mode of American nationhood, or the so-called Wild West, the frontier is the invitation to lands, invitation to expansion, extraction, and “exploration.” The invitation is fraught with concurrent dangers, dangers which make the contest worthwhile—not to mention lucrative. When the lines of American borders reach from coast to coast, the “frontiers” become a new invitation to “conquer . . . rejected lands” with scientific farming (Turner 294), and so on. The Indigenous peoples displaced and destroyed by disease, warfare, and increasingly divisive policy are at once over-present and spectral. Turner recognized that the earliest stages of the frontier required “Indian” aid and trade just as the Roman frontier was “semi-permeable . . . allowing for intense exchange and integration of social

and economic activities” (Mura 72). The American frontier then progresses, and invites access that requires the disappearance of Indigenous peoples for settlement, territory, and agriculture to grow settler surplus labour. Turner fashions this as a defensive battle, where once indispensable Indigenous life becomes fodder for American contest. Finally, the frontier becomes the new venue of access (for teleological scientific and civilizational progress), and Indigenous life is helpfully absent from the equation. But the frontier is always “semi-permeable,” and its continued existence in Western cultural production necessitates the neurosis of the “outside”—an outside it never fully eliminated and still exists within the hard lines, the borders of the settler “inside.” The frontier’s graduation to a fully conceptual space is the pure expression of a universal invitation to access. Mura points out that the imperial mindset is a “single one with no outside: hence Ovid’s emphasis that ‘Roman space is both the city and the world’” (73). This remains true for the settler conception of the frontier. The settler colonial concept of the universal frontier differs from the Roman one particularly in its positioning of Indigenous lives, a neurosis-producing continuance outside the “single one.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Mura’s article wants to reclaim some of the characteristics of the frontier, uncoupled from these imperialistic anxieties (neurosis). My use of his study does not necessarily counter this entirely, but does suggest such uncoupling is impossible in the settler colonial context that Turner writes in and has defined. The concept of the frontier is one here associated with inevitable and constant permeability, which is an inescapable psychological and political reality. Mura’s psychoanalytic framing of borders highlights them as a response to the anxiety produced by the conceptual frontier’s permeability continuing after the physical frontier’s closing. Mura appears to embrace the permeability of the frontier and dispense with that permeability’s constitutive “invitation to access.” As the following section’s description should make clear, and what each chapter should in some way demonstrate, the peculiar psychology of settler culture is distinct in expansive genocide as constitutive of its frontier. Thus Mura’s frontier analysis shows the conceptual “access” shared by Turnerian and Roman imperial frontierism, but fails to recognize the substantive differences that makes settler colonialism uniquely neurotic and genocidal.

The Structure: Settler Colonialism

In this dissertation, my use of “settler colonialism” is informed by a wide range of literature from Indigenous, Settler Colonial, and Post-Colonial Studies. Patrick Wolfe’s “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” is perhaps the most academically influential in establishing the term’s continuing relevance. Wolfe’s argument is especially relevant for my purposes in two ways. Firstly, it treats settler colonialism as a dynamic and global phenomenon²⁰ that is distinct from other kinds of colonialism in its aims, character, and resulting symptoms. As such, the cultural trends I will identify are legible in that wide historical context. Secondly, Wolfe positions settler colonialism not as a completed series of historical points on a timeline, but as a continuing and reconstituting set of relations and institutions. As he famously puts it, settler colonial invasion is a “structure not an event” (388). As such, Wolfe’s conception does not envision a necessarily explicit conspiracy of interests in the different examples of settler colonialism around the world, but instead identifies a shared logic of colonial powers with similar aims. Furthermore, settler states that develop institutions and populations of ethnic colonizer origins (such as Canada and the United States) grow from this logic and dynamically retain it. In other words, as mentioned above, British colonial territoriality in India differed from the structure of its dominance in North America or Australia. In settler colonial countries, modern settler state history is born of, in Wolfe’s words, a “logic of elimination” that views Indigenous inhabitants as obstacles to territorial control, resource extraction, and authority over labour.

²⁰ Australia, the United States, and Israel are three settler states that Wolfe details in that article.

Beyond this précis, it is important to more substantively delineate how the settler colonial structure differs from other colonial projects. I have introduced the notion of surplus populations already, and the logic of elimination is the notable outcome of the settler relationship to Indigenous surplus populations. While non-settler projects use Indigenous populations as labour and long-term stewards of colonial military and economic expansion, the settler project must eliminate Indigenous populations to achieve “settlement” of the land. As David Lloyd and Wolfe put it, “colonial settlement provided an outlet for the Malthusian excess, industrial society’s surplus poor, who departed their Dickensian slums for Indigenous people’s stolen homelands” (112). Once these settler populations differentiate themselves from the European colonial power into settler states, the settler colonial structure and its logic of elimination are reshaped but nevertheless continue. The logic takes many forms, including assimilation alongside death, displacement, and containment. Despite a still-oppressive relationship structured by a logic of elimination that continues, contemporary settler states often engage a nationalistic “contradictory reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality” (Wolfe 389) in their cultural identities. This is an important modern aspect of the anxious neurosis delineated above. Since the elimination is not complete, settler states pivot to cannibalizing Indigeneity as part of their characters. The *outside* still present, the settler *inside* half-acknowledges genocide as a tragic past event, while ignoring the continuing logics of elimination (in containment, in divide-and-rule, “Indian status” legislation, etc). Just as with Turner, the frontier experience and battles with Indigenous peoples are figured as past events rather than a key component of a continuing structure.

Lorenzo Veracini has also contributed important work on settler colonialism, with some distinct differences from Wolfe's definition, in *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, his synthesis of many studies of settler colonialism. For Veracini, what differentiates settler colonialism from other colonialisms is not just that the colonizers by-and-large remain on the land they colonize and do so by importing their own governmental systems. Veracini is more interested in the host of other procedural and long-term historical structures. He draws heavily from Wolfe's assertion that settler colonialism's foundational trait is the "dispensability" of Indigenous populations on the colonized land (*Settler Colonialism* 9). The people who make up those populations are disposable, but their very existence, control, dispersal, extermination, and identities (as legitimate claimants to the land), however, are foundational to settler colonial societies. Turner believed it was the contest with Indigenous peoples that built a kind of national American character, and in a sense Veracini's argument agrees. But it is not a "character" of rugged self-sufficiency as Turner portrays, but rather economic enrichment shaped by the very institutional and economic realities for which Indigenous lives and lands were and are figured as an invitation of access, a colonial territoriality.

Veracini notes several important "approaches" to understanding settler colonialism's development:

specific positioning in world trade patterns (settler economies operate in "areas of recent settlement" and concentrate on a limited number of "staple" commodities), the development of "settler capitalism," the transformation of local biota and landscapes, and a specific demography, where indigenous peoples are swamped by invading Europeans, and other migrations. Specific patterns of land tenure,

appropriation and distribution, a predominance of individual initiative over state-centred activities, and, conversely, state promotion and organisation of the settler enterprise[,] . . . particular spatial politics of exclusion[,] . . . specific reproductive regimes (the possibility of reproducing familial patterns is one fundamental defining feature of settler colonial regimes), and . . . a structural “logic of elimination” (13).

The “logic of elimination,” as borrowed from Wolfe, manifests as settler colonialism’s active processes that “strive for the dissolution of native societies” in order to erect “a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.” Here, “elimination is an organizing principle of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence.” The aim is gaining more land, and Indigenous peoples are thus an obstacle to be removed (Wolfe 388). “Territoriality,” says Wolfe, “is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element,” and it is not always expressed as outright slaughter. As Wolfe says, “officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations” (388) are just some of the ways settler colonialism attempts to eliminate Indigenous peoples. These methods are not as obviously but no less effectively genocidal than the frontier massacres that settler colonialism’s history in North America (and elsewhere) includes. This highlights Veracini’s claim that settler colonialism’s aggressive oppression of Indigenous peoples can be “invisible” in a way, particularly to settlers. As Veracini says,

settler colonial phenomena possess a mimetic character, and . . . a recurrent need to disavow produces a circumstance where the actual operation of settler colonial practices is concealed behind other occurrences . . . The settler hides behind the metropolitan coloniser (the settler is not sovereign, it is argued; “he is not responsible for colonialism” and its excesses), behind the activity of settlers elsewhere, behind the persecuted, the migrant, even the refugee (the settler has suffered elsewhere and “is seeking refuge in a new land”). The settler hides behind his labour and hardship (the settler does not dispossess anyone; he “wrestles with the land to sustain his family”). Most importantly, the peaceful settler hides behind the ethnic cleanser (colonisation is an inherently non-violent activity; the settler enters a “new, empty land to start a new life”; indigenous people naturally and inevitably “vanish”; it is not settlers that displace them) . . . Settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production. (*Settler Colonialism* 14)

Just as the actual frontier manufactured the conditions of its own necessity *literally*—such as the destruction of Indigenous agricultures as mentioned above—continuing settler structure *conceptually* manufactures the conditions of its own necessity to justify the further elimination in methods less overtly violent. Like Turner’s strategic omissions, this forgetful and mythological historical narrative is a key component of the current settler colonial neurosis. In a pedagogical study of “frontier logics” of Canadian teachers, Dwayne Trevor Donald (Cree), potently highlights this neurosis, a cultural friction, in similar terms for educators:

Historical, social, and cultural understandings of the concepts of fort and frontier have become conflated with ways of organizing and separating people according to race, culture, and civilization; as a result, Aboriginal peoples and their ways have been reduced to an existence *outside* Euro-Western civilization. The socio-spatial separation of Canadian (insiders) and Aboriginal (outsiders) is a naturalized idiosyncrasy of Canadian society that has been passed down generation by generation in the form of an authoritative national historical narrative . . . These influences leave many educators unable to comprehend the historic and ongoing Aboriginal presence and participation within Canadian society. (23)

Settler colonialism's obscured conditions and production are why settler states so easily advance their popular cultural awareness to a double-bind of disavowal and appropriation. Anna Johnston, Alan Lawson, Veracini, and others have studied the ways in which settler societies, *despite* the oppositional relationship to Indigenous peoples generally and *because* of that obscured production of their own identities, engage in the "contradictory reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality" (Wolfe 389). As Avril Bell notes, a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the "settler appropriation of indigenous authenticity to give substance and distinctiveness to their own nationalist identity claims" (122). This is perhaps the purest expression of the neurosis of settler colonial cultural production. The *outside* must be fashioned as *inside* while the society at large still engages activities formed from a logic to expunge that *outside*. As such, the ideology present in even fictional representations still walk this

contradictory line of disavowal and appropriation, as it does in the game *Red Dead Redemption*, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Cultural Production, Games, and the Artificial Frontier

This neurosis based on obscured history and eliminatory logic, together with the aforementioned aspects of settler colonial structure and cultural production, are important frameworks for my analysis of the open world video game genre. The several settler nations around the world today share many institutional, economic, cultural, and social trends. Again, this is not (necessarily) as a result of concerted effort, but because the very structure of settler colonialism conditions particular exigencies and prescribes their most self-interested responses. As carriers of settler colonial cultural axioms, Hollywood's Western and American sensibilities have in many cases founded or inflected the languages of cinema and its global iterations; that settler states have global reach means their ideological neuroses also find a great deal of international commercial traction. Video games too are carriers of settler colonial cultural axioms that are part-and-parcel of the cultures that spawned the open world genre.

Wolfe's focus on the structures of settler colonialism is especially useful for studying video games. After all, one thing that separates video games from other fictive media is that they are more literally "structural." From theorists like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Johan Huizinga and on to early influential video game theorists like Jesper Juul, Espen Aarseth, and Frank Lantz, and works such as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, games are defined by rules as a structure wherein "play" takes place. To "play" a game is to, at some level, agree to a structure and engage a limited agency therein. Video games are perhaps even more

structural than other kinds of games. The function of game design is to structure the modes and progression of interaction available to players, and it is these seen-and-unseen programmatic and programmed systems that variously obscure or reveal themselves in order to guide “play” in the ways designers intend. Salen and Zimmerman’s concept of the “magic circle” is drawn from Huizinga’s work “as short-hand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game” (95). As Zimmerman later put it, “Time and space, and identity, and social relations acquire new meanings while [a] game is going on. This is how playing a game is ‘entering a magic circle’ – there are meanings which emerge as cause and effect of the game as it is played” (2). Yet how a video game is played is reliant on its programmed rules. Edward Castronova argues that the circles of virtual worlds are necessarily porous, specifically in the areas of “markets, politics, and law” (148), as these affect the production and play. In other words, if games create their own virtual time and space wherein play happens and meaning is made, then their rules necessarily affect how that play and meaning is understood and expressed in the real world. This is no less true for how the rules of the exterior, material world affect the interior, virtual world.

The porous nature of frontiers and the apparent rigidity of borders, then, are conceptually important characteristics to consider for analyzing the open world video game genre. The magic circle, necessarily porous between player and played, is paradoxically rigid in its programming that structures the great majority of players’ interactions. Big-budget open world games, with their focus on an apparent freedom of movement and choice, appear to embrace the “invitation of access” more directly than almost any other genre. Yet in actuality, gameplay is a highly structured affair, where

thousands of hours of human labour have been spent to direct certain styles of play and produce particular reactions and engagements from its audience. The gameplay of big-budget open world games, as mentioned above, is centred on autonomous traversal of space and power gains. To add to that formula as it has been expressed through more than a decade of multi-million dollar examples, the open world genre's gameplay is also centred on violence and extraction. For many of these games, freedom of movement, killing, resource extraction, and crafting are the aspects of gameplay that dominate the player's input. These artificial frontiers, though necessarily limited in size (albeit significantly larger than other genres), feature limitless death, extraction, and production. Violent exploration and a limited set of activities to gain power for that violence are the core principles, the "invitation of access," of the frontier. As such, the frontiers depicted by the *content* of the games I analyze here are direct inheritors and propagators of the settler colonial concept. The borders of the magic circle, the *structure* of the games' programmed design exhibit the neurosis of settler culture. These artificial frontiers are the *play* of the settler frontier's conceptual continuance, and as this dissertation will argue, are productively emblematic of the psychology and ideology that conducted, continues, and disavows the exploitation of this imperial relationship.

In this dissertation, I argue that these games can neither transgress nor transcend the settler neurosis, nor can they offer a substantial critique of settler structure—even when they overtly attempt to do so. A frontier of a video game takes place within the safety of the magic circle's borders. As Castronova argues, the magic circle has a necessarily porous relationship between players and the material realities of its production and reception. But as Zimmerman's re-articulation argues, the magic circle is

play within borders. The borders, just as national borders, are not perfect sealants against influence in either direction. This is not an anxiety-producing reality within the boundaries of play, however. Play is not statecraft; play is the temporary, apparent suspension of the rules of the material world for investment into the rules of an imagined world. The neurotic anxious dangers of the frontier in the settler conception are muted and artificial in a video game precisely because they are not real. The dangers of the frontier (the universal “invitation to access,” logic of elimination, etc.) *as a neurotic construction*, however, are inherent to the open world video game frontier. These aspects are coded into their structures, written into their narratives. Open world games are premised on the promise of the frontier, and are salves for the neurosis of settler structure.

Dynamic Indigeneity

As the open world genre has its history in these Western cultural paradigms, desires, and anxieties, their frontiers unsurprisingly deal with Indigeneity (fictionalized, real, and allegorical) with increasing frequency. Indigeneity, as a category of identity, is an integral part of the settler colonial imaginary²¹ that it plays and replays. Turner believed the frontier experience (and, primarily, its role as the venue for “Indian” wars) developed settler identity. This is half true, insofar as settler identity is constructed in opposition to *another* identity it must create: the “Indian.” I use “Indigenous” adjectivally to refer to an enormous number of different peoples, cultures, and languages, and “Indigeneity” to refer to a category of identity, whereas I use “Indian” to refer to the

²¹ Manfred Steger and Paul James refer to “imaginaries” as “deep-seated modes of understanding [that] provide largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social existence—expressed, for example, in conceptions of ‘the global,’ ‘the national,’ ‘the moral order of our time.’” (23)

fictional figure/identity concocted by the settler relationship to Indigenous peoples. Both of these terms require clearer, if not stricter definitions.

In this dissertation, I use “Indigenous people(s)” to refer to those people, nations, tribes, and cultures that were the first to live on a particular land, now marginalized by nation states (and attendant corporate apparatuses) of settler societies. Later chapters will get more specific on how these categories relate to social structure, race, and genetics, but here it is important to highlight that the relationship is dynamic. For many Indigenous scholars, Indigeneity has more to do with community relationships (and the attendant dynamic, nuanced, complicated elements that define those relationships) than DNA testing (and its blunt attempt at mathematical racialization). A more specific definition for what exactly “Indigenous” means, for a settler scholar like myself, requires careful citation and theoretical restraint. This is not a move of hesitance but of principle formed by my understanding of the work of many Indigenous scholars. For example, Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) theorize Indigeneity as a dynamic, shifting category. They argue, “[g]iven that Indigenous identities are (re)constructed at multiple levels—global, state, community, individual,” the “definitional authority” of settler (and other) institutions use specification as a means of “political-legal compartmentalization” (600). As Alfred and Corntassel put it, “demands for precision and certainty disregard the reality of the situation: that group identity varies with time and place” (600). This does not mean Indigeneity, as a category, is ethereal or spectrally resists practical value.

My understanding of Indigenous identities, broadly, is somewhat akin to the approach of Sean Teuton (Cherokee) and what he calls “realist theory”:

social identities, for example, function like theories, processing data as they appear, and, like theories, they are capable of producing normative knowledge of the world. Built on our experiences, our identities are clearly constructed, but the fact that they are theory mediated is not peculiar to identities; in fact, all inquiry—scientific and otherwise—proceeds with inherent historical and social attachments. (32)

As such, my use of the label “Indigenous” is intended to be dynamic but nevertheless structural. As Teuton further states, such a concept “can be constructed but nonetheless capable of producing stable accounts of the world. Identities can be politically and epistemically significant and still not essentialist” (32). Expanding upon the simplest notion regarding a people first occupying a land, Alfred and Corntassel provide a broader set of criteria that is also part of my understanding: a “dynamic and interconnected concept of Indigenous identity constituted in history, ceremony, language and land,” as well as “relationships (or kinship networks)” (609), social structures that are historically oppressed by settler nations around the globe. Though these histories, ceremonies, languages, lands, and kinships may share many elements across countless cultures (as they do between settler cultures, and between settler and Indigenous cultures), I assert the importance of cultural specificity as principle as well as methodology. Often when I rely upon broader uses of “Indigenous” or “Indigeneity,” I do so to elucidate how the operation of settler conceptions multiply affect a myriad of culturally and historically distinct peoples.

In analyzing the settler conceptions, I am indebted to many more Indigenous scholars, such as Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw), Philip Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux), and

Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe). Vizenor’s detailing of the American settler construction of the capital I “Indian” identity as the authenticating obstacle to Manifest Destiny (Turner’s “Indian frontier”) is central to my thinking throughout this dissertation, and I will touch upon the work of all three scholars in the following chapters. For now, it is enough to note I use “Indian” to refer to the fictional figure of simulated Indigeneity. The games closely studied in this dissertation all feature this simulation, the aggregated, simplified, and distorted simulations of Indigenous peoples.

Where This is Going and How I Do It

For this project, methodology includes more than the theoretical merging of frameworks and terminologies mentioned above. While those are the conceptual lenses I bring to my argument, my methodology for this project also involves (1) the work of both close “reading” the games under discussion as well as an ongoing survey of hobbyist media reception and video game industry standards, and (2) working through the games themselves to inform my close reading and efforts to situate aspects of them in the above merged framework. As such, a disclaimer is necessary: I have made editorial choices regarding evidence and throughline. Either out of obsessive compulsion or determined scholarship, I am a completionist for the games studied here. This makes me something of an anomaly among players of open world games, which are designed to accommodate a number of play styles, including those who play games with an outright hostility to narrative. As a result, a great deal of these games’ content is missable. I am interested in what these games’ designs prioritize in their structures (i.e., what is not missable if the player wishes to finish the main storyline, what incentives are provided to experience a part of the game that I am discussing). Nevertheless, simply because a particular part of a

game is not experienced by even the majority of people who play it does not mean it cannot enlighten us regarding broader trends. After all, every part of these games, in the big-budget examples of this particular genre, has gone through numerous hands (including massive Quality Assurance and testing teams) before it reaches a mass audience. Thus the assumptions and ignorance I try to excavate can be as telling as the more obvious evidence on the surface. I focus primarily on these games' narrative modes and symbolic languages, the context of their production and reception, and how their designs privilege particular play.

As for games' affective properties, I specifically target how these power fantasies endeavour to satisfy the gamer motivations of "immersion" and "achievement," and do so by providing simulations of dominance and salves for colonial anxiety. As such, since these games are developed with similar design principles—a proliferation of which I highlight in the following chapter, and delineate in more detail in the second chapter—my close readings are less interested in how these games *feel*, and more interested in how these games *deliver* those interchangeable feelings through their symbolic and narrative representations, as well as the *contexts* of their construction and delivery. Thus my methodology, weighted more heavily on games as audio-visual narrative products and their industrial/commercial contexts than the experiences unique to the medium, is perhaps frictional with more formalistic analysis of video games. I am comfortable with my methodological emphases, however, for a few reasons. Firstly, those shared, iterative, and increasingly repetitive design principles are clearly motivated towards satisfying those consumer desires for "immersion" and "achievement" by advancing their roles as, broadly, immersive power fantasies. Secondly, I believe detailing the settler cultural

context of these wildly popular products provides a theoretical framework useful not only for understanding the material and psychoanalytical implications of those apparently unique gameplay experiences, but also useful for further qualitative and quantitative study of gamer experience. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, contrary to the more extreme formalistic positions that suggest narrative content is at best secondary to video game analysis, I maintain that this particular genre's popularity, and its most popular specific examples, remain in public consciousness *with* and *through* their narrative trappings. These products, as cultural events part of a cultural framework, *are* stories of settler colonial culture, and the stories that are written as part of them are necessarily indicative of a wider cultural history, present, and future. As Jodi Byrd argues, settlers tell themselves stories "in order to create these lands in their image, and their politics continually return to the scene of the narrative in order to recast themselves as part of the story. And not just in a supporting role, but rather as the central first-person narrator in the story of America that depends upon vanishing the Indian as part of its denouement" ("Tribal 2.0" 55). These games are just such playable narratives.

Using different games and their contexts, I assert that contemporary Western big-budget open world games reveal ugly settler colonial cultural mores are unquestioned and in fact constitutive logics of their narrative and design. This suggests these games play to and cultivate the gaming "communities" of consumers, reviewers, and designers (insofar as such things are legible categories) as systematically fertile ground for settler colonialism's modern expressions in neoliberalism and fascism (with their shared emphasis on private property, particular economic relations, and violent dispossession). It is not my position that these video games *cause* settler attitudes; rather, it appears rather

obvious to me that settler cultures owe more to centuries of history (remembered, misremembered, forgotten, and mythologized) than to the relatively recent advancement of video games into the popular and monied industry it is today. It also appears just as obvious to me that the narrative and technical formulas of these games would exhibit symptoms of the settler neurosis both as product of those cultural trends as well as a propagation thereof. As such, I am not interested in establishing an evidentiary, quantitative basis for claiming these games program young players into accepting settler colonial standards; after all, it appears unlikely such a thing could be proven as more or less impactful in that sense than any other media, education, or social environment.

However, though I may reject the notion these games *create* settler attitudes, I am certainly proposing they continue to *propagate* them and alleviate their constitutive neuroses. This perhaps inspires an obvious counter-argument: video games are not conclusively causally linked to changing certain aspects of real world behaviours. Studies investigating this link have, until recently, focused on the effects of video game violence—and these open world games *are* incredibly violent. These studies on video game violence and its correlation to real world violence and aggression are largely inconclusive.²² Some recent work even suggests that violent video games reduce crime on a short-term basis, possibly providing an outlet—or merely a distraction—from real-world violent impulses and pursuits.²³ In any case, if there is a relationship between fictive played violence and real violence, the relationship is unlikely one of inspiration.

²² See Szycik, et al., and Ferguson, for just two recent examples that refer to the state of the scientific literature at large.

²³ See Cunningham, et al., and Markey, et al., which caution against the “outlet” hypothesis being read as conclusive.

However, that a great portion of the highest-grossing video games (aside, debatably, from other genres like sports games) are still overwhelmingly violent in content at least suggests that the reproduction of played violence is a self-sustaining trend.²⁴ In a sense, I am suggesting this genre and medium of popular culture does the same work as many other settler media or institutions in representing hegemonic cultural trends, and is similarly self-perpetuating. These games are part of a tapestry that covers the holes in settler history's wall, maintaining trends with their rehearsal and production: their *play*. This play provides an outlet for the building neurosis of an increasingly faltering settler societal status quo.

Video game violence may not produce real world violence, but it continues to normalize video game violence. Similarly, and particularly since this issue is one of broad cultural acceptance and awareness, rather than personal action or behaviour, settler colonial structure in games normalizes settler colonial structure and comforts settler anxiety in the real world. Further, the nominal critique of settler colonialism in some of the high-minded games I will analyze is a gesture even more superfluous than the symbolically and materially empty critique of violence that also turns up in ubiquitously violent games. Even if violent games reduce violent tendencies,²⁵ they likely do so by providing a harmless venue for violent expression. For the network of epistemologies, institutions, and politics that make up the *structure* of settler colonialism, *events* of behavioural and bodily violence are merely a function rather than the full character. The

²⁴ For further discussion on these games' ubiquitous violence, see the following chapter's first section on *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

²⁵ As per previous footnote, the most recent studies that provide some evidence to such an interpretation, Cunningham, et al., and Markey, et al., suggest such a position would—at best—require further study.

modern day elimination of Indigenous peoples, as per Wolfe and others,²⁶ is conducted as much by the double-bind of legislating “Indians” into settler society at the same time as legislating them out of that society’s metrics of success. These video games, and their occasional critiques, are a similar double-bind: structures that functionally erase the Indigenous Real, while assuming and cannibalizing Indian Unreal. It is the violence as structure—the violence as cultural mindset—that gets reproduced, even though it is most likely not causally relatable to *individual* racist violence; this violence, like settler colonialism itself, is a self-perpetuating structure, not simply events of physical violence in the real world.

So instead of merely establishing these games as a kind of settler propaganda, I hope to mobilize the settler cultural traits that are apparent in these video games at a narrative and structural level. In so doing, these close readings and analyses of production and reception should reveal a few central points. Firstly, they will demonstrate how settler culture has evolved from its origins in the relations of capital and colonialism, and how this contemporary popular medium aids the cultural proliferation of that culture. Secondly, these analyses explain the settler cultural anxieties and desires these gaming expressions demonstrate and cater to, and how the expressions themselves exemplify the settler colonial connection to neoliberalism and burgeoning modern fascism. Consequently, they should offer some indication regarding how these largely unchallenged norms perpetuate, distribute, and rehearse the settler neurosis that have made “gamer” communities, the video game industry, and settler society broadly, fertile

²⁶ See Barker (2005), Palmater (2014), and Vine Deloria Jr. (*Custer Died for Your Sins*) for just a small selection of perspectives on the eliminatory aims and results of US and Canadian assimilative policy.

ground for fascist ideology in a current neoliberal form. These artificial frontiers and their inside/outside settler neurosis make the patterns of the genre predictable but elucidating in their expression. I will refer to this neurosis in the following chapters by its particular expressions as an “anxiety” or a “desire” for some cultural lack. I am arguing open world games are materially and representationally emblematic of settler colonial structure, anxieties, and desires, and also highlight settler cultures’ own propensities for and comfort with fascist principles. My project is meant to delineate this particular mode of settler colonial cultural myth-making, displaying the cultural machinery of settler colonialism with these machine-based fictions as microcosms of the settler structure and imaginary.

Each chapter’s first section ends with a small breakdown of their respective contents, but I will end this introduction with a quick outline of all three. Chapter 1, by far the largest chapter, builds upon the theoretical foundations this introduction has set up. Focusing on two open world series developed by Rockstar Games, this chapter connects settler colonial structure to what I identify as neoliberal ideology, and highlights how that structure and ideology is reflected in those games’ production, gameplay, narratives, and reception. The first half of this chapter uses the *Grand Theft Auto* series to expand upon Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter’s *Games of Empire*, analyzing Rockstar Games’ work beyond the publication of that book. I argue Rockstar’s continued development of the open world genre specifically validates the book’s arguments about that company’s oeuvre as well as demonstrates the inextricability of capital and colonialism; thus the games reveal settler colonial neoliberalism’s racializing logics exactly as it attempts to obscure them. The second half of the chapter turns to the *Red*

Dead Redemption series, its representation of Indigenous peoples, and how its settler formulas of representation are indebted to the neoliberal-colonial connection and historical development, as well as their role in assuaging the cultural anxieties produced by both, normalizing their continuance. It ends with a discussion of the siege mentality reproduced in the settler imaginary, which foregrounds my argument about settler-neoliberal compatibility with fascist ideology.

Chapter 2 studies Ubisoft Games and a specific title from their flagship *Assassin's Creed* series which explicitly features Indigenous peoples more heavily than any other game of that series before or since. The game features a half-Kanien'kehá:ka protagonist, and this chapter investigates how a big budget open world game that attempts a respectful treatment of real Indigenous people still replays the very omissions and appropriations that settler colonial culture has consistently reproduced since the "closing" of the actual historical "frontier." This chapter's latter sections also argue the mechanical formulas of gameplay for this genre can be understood as a modern expression of both settler identity and the historical impulse of settlers to "play Indian."

Chapter Three turns to *Horizon Zero Dawn*, and uses that game to show how the previous chapters' findings are reproduced in another award-winning game. I argue this game eliminates real Indigenous cultures from its digital space to make room for artificial Indigeneity that can be adopted by its consumers. Furthermore, I suggest this game demonstrates how the genre is a power fantasy formula I term hypertopian, an expression of the settler colonial imaginary's sense of superiority, never truly excised from a culture that obscures its logic of elimination rather than confronts it. Finally, with Walter Benjamin's analysis of technological spectacle, and Carl Schmitt's *nomos*, I argue big

budget open world game production and design not only suggests these games fulfill similar social functions as spectacle did for Nazi fascism, but also that they reveal settler colonial imaginary's continuing genocidal logics encoded therein.

Chapter One: Rockstar Games and the Settler Fantasies of the Neoliberal Frontier

Grand Theft Auto III, mentioned in the introduction as the game popularly believed to have been one of the most influential in the conventions of the open world genre today, was developed by New York-based video game publisher Rockstar Games. Since *GTAIII*'s release in 2001, Rockstar Games has released at least six other games featuring the same broad characteristics of the genre—such as *GTA: San Andreas*, *GTAIV*, *GTAV*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, to name a few—that *GTAIII* popularized. As such, Rockstar Games is influential not only as one of the originators of the modern big-budget open world game, but also as the creator of some of the genre's biggest-budgeted and highest-selling examples for nearly two decades. As such, the company's work deserves close analysis for the productive, ludological, and narrative aspects of the genre that this dissertation critiques. In this chapter, I contextualize Rockstar's influential open world games as rehearsals and propagators of historical settler frontier logics and contemporary neoliberal advancements of those same logics. In doing so, I highlight how those frontier logics and neoliberal ideology are inextricably related, and how Rockstar's open world games—produced in particular ways—specifically substantiate these connections as entertainment products that cater to settler and neoliberal infatuations and anxieties.

First, I begin by establishing some important analysis of ideological principles by building upon Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's use of "Empire" and "neoliberalism" with video games from their co-authored *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. I continue by sketching out Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's appraisal of entries of the *GTA* series. Then, I address *GTAV* and its online

component, *GTAOnline*, simultaneously expanding on *Games of Empire*'s analysis while arguing that one of Rockstar's important ideological narrative maneuvers is the extrication of racism from the relation of capital. Then, I trace the insights that scholars of settler colonialism can bring to this analysis through study of another suite of Rockstar games, the *Red Dead Redemption* games. Looking at the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise, I argue that these games exemplify settler culture's enmeshment with neoliberal ideology and continued reliance on well-worn representational tropes of Indigenous peoples. These tropes, as I noted in the Introduction, pose Indigeneity as a useful metaphorical association for modern settler anxieties (a "reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality" à la Wolfe [389]), and, relatedly, as a tragic vanishing category of masculinity (a disintegration before civilization, à la Turner). Together, the *Red Dead Redemption* games' reliance on tropes of neoliberal economics, settler identity, and representational clichés of Indigenous peoples are emblematic of the open world genre's conventions. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief look at the Indian-as-zombie trope in *Red Dead Redemption's Undead Nightmare* as identified by Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw), and expand this argument by noting the open world games influenced by this trope. The "state of siege" mentality of settler colonial frontierism these depictions reveal is important to my arguments about fascism at the end of Chapter 3.

These readings essentially argue that the productive context and artistic sensibilities of Rockstar, one of the genre's most influential developers, evidence the constitutive partnership of settler and neoliberal economic and cultural development; indeed, while Rockstar's influential design principles are expressions of this partnership,

the developer's market-leading position highlights that this partnership is intrinsic to the open-world genre. What is especially noteworthy is the way these games narratively extract racism from the relation of capital, and similarly extract settler frontierism and private property from the relation of colonialism, primarily by obfuscating both relations' worst inequities behind an excess of individuation and normalization of systemic contexts. As Glen Coulthard (Dene) notes, capital and colonialism are "relations" most effectively analyzed as "the sum effect of the diversity of interlocking oppressive social relations that constitute it" (15); thus these games' extractions serve to sanitize capital and colonialism even as they are critiqued, and as such *replay* the historical and continuing logics of the settler frontier, Indigenous dispossession, and neoliberal economics. Outlining the productive, narrative, and gameplay formulas of an industry-leader like Rockstar helps substantiate a few of this dissertation's core arguments: big-budget Western open world games are expressions, propagators, and demonstrations of settler frontierism and neoliberal ideology. It also helps foreground one of this dissertation's core points to be more thoroughly detailed in Chapter 3: open world games, as settler and neoliberal expressions, exemplify a coherence of fascist ideology with settler neoliberal culture, and thus demonstrate the fascist seeds that rest in the soil of settler and neoliberal worldviews.

The *Grand Theft Auto* Series: Neoliberal Production of Cynical Empire

The violent criminal fantasies of the *GTA* franchise before *III* had some similar concepts to later games: a game world that could be explored, missions that can be started at player discretion, and various optional activities that are secondary to the main story. These early iterations of the franchise had a top-down view centred on the player

character; *III*, however, moved the series into third-person perspective, bringing players closer to the games' increasingly detailed worlds. As the franchise progressed, subsequent games featured greatly expanded worlds, stories, and optional activities, but the general formula remained rather consistent. Similarly, despite massive changes in the technology, shifting production practices, and the increasing narrative focus, the gameplays structure, as well as the caricatural style of the franchise's characters and setting, retain some notable consistency. Even many of the optional activities that appear in the first *GTA* are in the franchise's most recent installment, *GTAV*, released in 2013. The visuals and interactive possibilities are drastically different between the two, but Rockstar Games' oeuvre does not eschew the broadly gaming-formulaic simplistic appeal of jumping cars over great distances and killing as many people as possible within a given time limit. After all, though the franchise's reception and production focused more on storyline, dialogue, and characters with each successive entry, Rockstar Games' big-budget open world design principles must provide ample incentive and opportunity for players only interested in mayhem in a vast, richly detailed digital world. To put it bluntly, these games must appeal to a broad set of gaming interests to attract a wide audience and justify their massive budgets.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter contextualize these design (and production) principles with an analytical framework of "Empire," partially drawn from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book of that name. Hardt and Negri use "Empire" to characterize the modern international power apparatus, the primary function of which is capital accumulation. Mostly centred on the economic, political, and social power of corporations and the cooperation (or non-interference) of states, government bodies, and

other institutions, Empire transcends the hard lines of borders to more effectively extract and profit on resources and labour that would otherwise be traditionally thought of as part of a national sovereignty. Hardt and Negri even use “frontiers” to describe this international mode of capitalist accumulation:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow.” (xii-xiii)

Where Ovid figures the Imperial Roman view of “Roman space as both the city and the world,” here too we have the frontier’s universal invitation to access writ large, but writ without the aims of a *specific* or *national* imperial project. Instead, Empire is the shared interest of large capital seeking greater capital. Empire is “*detritorializing*” not because these interests are disinterested in land-centric concerns; it is quite the opposite. The resources and labour power attached to land is the primary concern of empire. Empire detritorializes (in the logics of privatization) precisely because it makes the world a frontier, an invitation to access. All land, globally, is within the purview of Empire. There is no “territory” to global capitalist interest; Empire transcends the borders of nation states and makes the world a frontier. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter characterize this figuration of Empire as “a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military, and communicative components combine to create a system of power ‘with no

outside” (xii). All frontier, “Empire is governance by global capitalism . . . Its decentered, multilayered institutional agencies include nation-states but extend to include multinational corporations, like Microsoft and Sony, world economic bodies . . . international organizations . . . and even nongovernmental organizations” (xx). This decentralized, deterritorialized, deregulated, and privatized approach to global power is broadly represented by the ideology of neoliberalism. As all modern settler nation states are heavily invested in principles of neoliberalism, it is little wonder that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter refine and define their use of Empire this way: “By Empire, *we* mean the global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states” (xxiii).

Neoliberalism can be thought of as the ideological framework of Empire as Hardt, Negri, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter use it. The particular metrics of this ideology are important. As the term’s broadening use in popular discourse may have muddled rather than clarified its parameters, I feel a definition and expansion here is useful. In this project, I draw primarily from David Harvey’s definition in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices . . . It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to

guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. (2)

A Brief History of Neoliberalism gets to some of the inherent contradictions of this ideology in theory and its failures in practice, but for my purposes it is enough for now to simply state that neoliberalism's core tenets of private property and market value as insurmountably hegemonic ethical standards have entrenched themselves in a number of settler political, economic, and social norms. Certainly, they run counter to other forms of community governance, and their metrics have impacted Indigenous communities around the world. These impacts are visible in past and current moments of settler structure, visible in broken treaties, massacres, resource extraction, sequestration and reservations, and in the assimilative but still eliminative processes that enforce principles of private property, and so on. The less obviously genocidal methods (settler federally designated "Indian status," residential schools, and the reservation system itself, for just a few examples) are still fundamentally aimed at eliminating Indigenous kinships and sovereignty, as well as simply numerically reducing Indigenous populations that are identified as such, in the hopes of freeing the land for privatization. As such, neoliberalism is the ideological descendent of colonial capitalist economics. I will return to this connection later in the chapter; for now, I gesture to Dene scholar Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* to emphasize that the *principles* of neoliberalism are a product of the economics and "social relations" of colonialism. Coulthard points out that settler states like Canada have enacted

and continue to enact a “long-term goal of indoctrinating the Indigenous population to the principles of private property, possessive individualism, and menial wage” (12), and that “disciplining Indigenous life to the cold rationality of market principles will remain on state and industry’s agenda for some time to follow” (14). He partially demonstrates this point by quoting the 1890 Canadian commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1890 on the Indigenous peoples under his authority: “The work of sub-dividing reserves has begun in earnest. The policy of destroying the tribal or communist system is assailed in every possible way and every effort [has been] made to implant a spirit of individual responsibility instead” (qtd. in Coulthard 13).

Recognizing these principles of neoliberalism (and their connection to settler/colonial history) is important for studying open world video games. After all, Rockstar designs games that appeal to a broad set of gaming interests by catering to many of these deeply entrenched, almost invisibilized aspects of neoliberal ideology. As neoliberalism pervades the real cultural contexts generative to producing and purchasing these games, it makes sense that the power fantasies they seek to indulge would parrot neoliberalism’s central tenets. At the simplest level, the foundation of these fantasies is mastery of a space. Naturally, the rugged heroic (or anti-heroic) individualist entrepreneurialism of the player’s character is also a repeated characteristic. Dyer-Witford and de Peuter write that “the military and the market” are the “two pillars” of Empire (xiv), and their critique of the *GTA* series partially focuses on the violent accumulation of capital that constitutes the structure those pillars hold up. Critical to this analysis, however, is a recognition of the neoliberal ideology in these games’ productive contexts, rather than simply their narrative or ludological content.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter call “video games . . . a paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism” (xv), and “a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital” (xix). Again, the ideological biases on display *in* the games only adds to this characterization, though they are not wholly constitutive of it. For the economics of big budget open world game production to be viable, production relies on the global frontier of corporate reach. After noting that video games have become a globally successful hobby, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter write that “the internationalization of digital games” is apparent in the “transcontinental value chains” (xvii) that make the big budget examples possible. The game consoles are made all over the world, and the mineral materials inside them “come from sources such as the mines of the Congo and end up in the electronic waste dumps of Nigeria and India” (xviii). The internationalization of production along disparate demand and reward has only intensified in the decade since *Games of Empire* was published. Michael Thomsen, in his article “The Universe Has Been Outsourced,” interviewed employees at Virtuos Ltd., a Chinese company to which many large Western game developers and publishers outsource 3D asset production. This outsourcing is ubiquitous in big-budget game development—indeed, it is practically a requirement for developing the big-budget open world games that demand an incredible amount of human labour. Virtuos contributed to the development of the game I discuss in Chapter 3, *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Thomsen writes that “sixty-five of Virtuos’s employees spent over two years building 11 of *Horizon*’s 32 enemy robot types; modeling many of the bandit settlements spread across the game world.” They were also “only one of 18 different outsourcing companies that worked on the game” (n.p.).

This outsourcing in big budget game production plays multiple cost-saving roles in the economics of game development. Thomsen notes that an entry-level animator at Virtuos will make approximately 11k USD a year, whereas a comparable position in the US will pull around 50k USD a year. This outsourcing also has the added bottom-line benefit of obscuring the labour and labourers from consumers and other studios. A common term for these outsourcing studios in Western game development vernacular is “asset farms,” a term taken as pejorative by many, including the founder of Virtuos, Gilles Langourieux. In Thomsen’s piece, Langourieux says the terms “asset farm” and “outsourcing’ [evoke] something which is commoditized, trivial to do, easy to do, so you find locals to do it cheap and fast.” Langourieux’s point is not incorrect; the terms certainly seem to connote trivial, replaceable labour in the industry parlance—labour that is necessary but not specialized and thus not worthy of remuneration on par with those directly employed by game developers. This is a perception that justifies literally undervaluing that overseas labour, both monetarily in terms of workers’ salaries and conceptually in terms of their value or necessity to the final project. Sometimes, large video game corporations set up branches that do the work typically associated with these “asset farms” alone; while this somewhat reduces the labour offloaded to contractors, it still takes advantage of cheaper international labour, allowing corporations to tighten their belts on already massive budgets. Ubisoft, a company that makes multiple big budget open world franchises and is discussed in Chapter 2, founded a branch in Shanghai in 1996. The bulk of Ubisoft Shanghai’s work is creating assets for multiple other projects at once, leaving the apparent creative vision to their studios in Western/Central Europe and North America. The managing director of Ubisoft Shanghai

rebuffed the label “asset farm” in an interview in 2017 (qtd. in Kumar). The larger issue, however, is not with the nomenclature, but rather with the labour practices the apparent epithets obscure or take for granted. The problem is not that these words denigrate the labour, but that the term reflects the standard perspective in the industry. It is a corporate practice that elides accountability and transparency while undervaluing the labour of hundreds of people required to make these artificial frontiers. Just as settler colonial frontierism materially and conceptually forgets and obscures its manufactured conditions, thus necessitating further frontierism, open world games obscure the immense labour behind their characteristic free movement and choice, thereby manufacturing (through marketing and availability) its mass uptake by consumers as part of the massive capital investment necessary to produce it. This in turn justifies the escalating desire by consumers and developers alike for more (obscured) labour to produce larger artificial frontiers; the “internationalization of games” echoes the borderlessness of empire itself, and the escalation of open world design and production echoes the self-perpetuation of the frontier literally and conceptually.

That the labour is undervalued and obscured, predictably, benefits the leading (mostly white, mostly cis-male) figures heading Western development studios and game publishers. These leading figures are also typically hostile to unions, and the vast majority of workers in the industry have no organized representation or advocacy.²⁷ Neoliberal ideology is consistent with anti-union sentiment; the abstractly philosophical individualistic, hyper-privatized, and de-regulated paradise that neoliberalism envisions

²⁷ See Garst (2018) on some recent attempts at unionization in the industry, as well as Shanley (2020) on the growing pro-union sentiment among workers, and the steadfast rejection by some industry leaders.

as the utopia for all human endeavour is naturally opposed to organized communal advocacy and the regulations they historically demand to improve worker compensation and labour conditions. Working conditions at the large companies making big budget open world games are notoriously demanding. So-called “crunch culture” involves employees working excessive hours for long stretches of time, damaging worker health and creating the conditions for burnout. Indeed, Rockstar Games, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft have all had public reckonings with their working conditions. In 2009, Rockstar covertly settled a 2.75 million USD class-action lawsuit launched by workers from their San Diego branch for unpaid overtime wages (Gilbert). Barely a year later in 2010, months before the first *Red Dead Redemption* was released, an open letter claimed the San Diego branch of Rockstar developing *RDR* had been in crunch mode for nine months with another three months still to go.²⁸ In the internationalized neoliberal market, there is always surplus population for any kind of labour already in global circulation. Rockstar’s crunch culture, as it is with most game studios, has been enforced less by strict demands than by social pressure, and most importantly, by the awareness that not rising to the expectation of crunch could lead to nearly immediate layoff. True to neoliberal form, Rockstar’s lack of regulations regarding crunch led to an atmosphere that necessitated and compelled it.²⁹ Nearly every worker can be viewed as redundant; every position can be quickly filled from the surplus population, or even by currently employed workers desperate for the prestige accompanying a position with the globally successful company—even if that prestige is overvalued in the industry’s obfuscated labour. In other

²⁸ See Sinclair (2020) for the original open letter and Rockstar’s non-response, defense, and eventual admissions and nominal attempts to change.

²⁹ See Schreier “Inside Rockstar Games' Culture Of Crunch.”

words, the “redundancy culture” of the neoliberalized international value chain produces “crunch culture.”

Lacking the protections of an organized workforce or (inter)national regulatory bodies that labour organization typically produces, the video game industry is also notorious for failing to credit people who contributed to a game’s development. Game director Alex Hutchinson (who formerly worked for Ubisoft and Electronic Arts) and game programmer Katharine Neil both claim the practice is part of the industry’s “redundancy culture” (qtd. in Robinson, “Game Credits”), whereby “primary” Western studios and outsourcers alike will often hire many workers to make a deadline, then fire them after the deadline has been met. Many studios also see huge layoffs immediately after a game ships, even when a game is significantly profitable.³⁰ Not crediting all these workers is part of the neoliberal economic ecology that keeps workers unable to insist upon their market value. As Hutchinson says,

Whenever someone becomes known, they become potentially more expensive, and worse, they become someone who could wrest some of the control over a game or franchise away from the publisher . . . Games are still essentially in the Hollywood studio system from the 1930s, where studios want complete control of the product and they want to be perceived as the creators rather than the teams. (qtd. in Robinson “Game Credits”)

Katharine Neil echoes that sentiment: “like film and TV—it’s about getting hired for the next job and not looking like a liar on your CV . . . There are still no industry standards

³⁰ See Schreier, “Why Game Developers Keep Getting Laid Off” for a rundown of some of these industry-wide practices.

that developers can count on their employers adhering to” (qtd. in Robinson “Game Credits”). The 1930s Hollywood system’s exploitation of “creatives” (actors, writers, directors, etc.) was a catalyst for worker organization and the resulting regulations and protections the industry has since developed (including standards for crediting, even for non-union workers on union sets).³¹ This exploitation continues unabated in big budget game development; this means credit goes to a select few, whose opportunities and media spotlight are the result of work produced by those who may get no credit at all. This structural failure dovetails with video game hobbyist media’s tendency to subscribe to an *auteur* theory of art production, whereby works made by the labour of thousands are credited to a handful of apparently brilliant figures.

This popular perception of *auteur* game production is perhaps best demonstrated by the treatment of Dan and Sam Houser, the founders of Rockstar Games. Even after multiple scandals regarding Rockstar’s labour practices and toxic workplace culture, profiles repeatedly centre on Dan’s writing “craft” and Sam’s business prowess. This is even despite the Housers’ tendency to eschew the spotlight, a notorious characteristic mentioned in every effusive, deferential piece in which the writer is given access to interviews—including an entire book on the Housers’ success.³² Dan takes centre stage in popular media as the reclusive genius whose narrative craft has been an integral element to the success of their franchises. Shortly before the highly anticipated sequel *Red Dead Redemption 2* was released in 2018, *Vulture*, a subsidiary of *New York* magazine, published a glowing profile of the Rockstar’s New York studio that featured interviews

³¹ See Nielsen (1988).

³² See Vella (2008), Stuart (2012), Kharif (2020) for a cross-section of these profiles, and Kushner (2012) for the book.

with Dan Houser. In the profile, he is quoted mentioning 100-hour work weeks in the game's final months of crunch (Goldberg), a claim Houser would personally walk back to gaming outlet *Kotaku* by claiming he was referring only to the demands on his personal work schedule and that of his tight-knit writing team (Schreier "We Were Working"). Though public perception may have gently moved towards concern for worker equity, the perception of and exploitation made possible by the *auteur* persists, settled comfortably on a foundational gargantuan neoliberal business model.

Dan Houser's narratives are often replete with ham-fisted critique of many trends in Western capitalist culture; that the games themselves are produced in some of the industry's most notably extravagant exploitation does not efface that apparent thematic bent alone. The effacement of that apparent Houserian critique is also accomplished by its fatalist content, and literally played out in mechanics ideologically consistent with the neoliberalism in the guts of its creative outlook and production. With that background, I now return to Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's analysis of some of the *GTA* games and their neoliberal narrative sensibilities and gameplay logics. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's critique focuses on what they identify as a *GTA*'s cynical worldview of an apparently ubiquitous and inescapable criminality of the human condition, most clearly expressed by the capitalism it lampoons. Using Dan Houser's self-stated aim of central narrative "punch lines" for focusing his writing, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter write that the *GTA* series offers a "contradictory blend of insight into, and complicity with, urban corruption . . . [T]he category of cynical ideology explains why the "punch line" that Rockstar's virtual cities deliver is, ultimately, that of Empire's brutalism" (34).

The *GTA* entries Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's book focuses on are *GTA: Vice City* (2002), *GTA: San Andreas* (2004), and *GTAIV* (2008). Analyzing these games' increasingly detailed depictions of urban spaces, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter assert the series "is informed by, and reinscribes, dominant relations of power. . . . *GTA* constitutes space in ways that are not just generically urban, but characteristically imperial" (157). *Games of Empire* lays out much of the historical and social context each game must elide or ignore for its caricatures and critiques. In this sense, precisely what the games represent in caricature and what they forget are ideologically weighted emphases and omissions. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter describe the neoliberal tone of *Vice City*'s 1980s setting and its distinctly crafted "uneven socioeconomic landscape." Protagonist Tommy Vercetti's aim, and thus the player's goal, is to dominate the game's Miami-like setting, "to occupy it, activate it, and network it into a setting for optimal capital accumulation . . . [the game] puts market imperatives and their rewards into playable forms" (162). Contrary to claims that the *GTA* series' narrative is little more than set dressing for enjoyable gameplay mechanics, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter argue that the incentivized gameplay is "precisely the point on which the game's narrative and the algorithm intermesh perfectly: the play logic *and* the plot line of *Vice City* are thoroughly neoliberal" (163). Playing through Tommy Vercetti's rising-mafioso storyline also entails buying up properties around the city. These businesses give the player passive in-game income to spend on more properties, weaponry, vehicles, and so on. This passive income mechanic is emblematic of this narrative-ludological-ideological enmeshment, of what makes *Vice City* "properly neoliberal . . . as your financial tally rises, there is not a hint of labor, just the abstracted, increasing magnitude of accumulated capital" (163). The player

no longer need even play at labour; the game itself incentivizes its neoliberal logics of accumulation, collecting the fruits of an invisible labour on the private property purchased.

Focusing on the depiction of race in the neoliberal matrix of *San Andreas*, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter look beyond some of the simplistic stereotypes that Rockstar's worlds are often replete with and instead read the game's power fantasy happy ending on its ideological principles. *San Andreas* ends with a revision of the 1992 Los Angeles riots; the game elides the structural racism at the core of the city's boiling race relations, instead focusing on a single fictionalized crooked cop—who is Black—and a drug dealer—who is also Black—as the primary antagonists and broadly representative of corruption. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter connect this elision to the gameplay mechanics of gang warfare and property ownership that lead to the game's ending, clearly representative of the apparently post-racial progressiveness of neoliberal ideology. Beating “the system,” as in the game's dialogue, is the murder of “a crack dealer from [the protagonist's] own [B]lack community with a cross-ethnic and mixed-gender coalition of criminal capitalists” (169). Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter argue this climax is “[f]ar from suggesting that ending urban collapse requires repudiation of neoliberal policies,” but rather that “the game's one semiutopian moment is the product of a path of hybridized free enterprise” (169). This is a “fatalism” (169) for the dominant modes of “pervasive oppression” (170), where the immediate power fantasy of murderous revenge is part of the played freedom, and the very principles that have legislated Black death and poverty are here framed as the only possible resistance.

GTAIV demonstrated a large expansion of the franchise’s graphical technology; less cartoonish and more hyper-realistic, Rockstar Games from *GTAIV* and beyond all use this labour-intensive, heavily detailed approach to translating its caricatural writing style to more realistic looking places and people. Rather than the cartoonish style of *Vice City* that makes visual and narrative *references* to classic crime films like *Scarface* and *Goodfellas*, with *GTAIV* onwards, Rockstar’s intentions were clearly more to *compete* with the narrative merit and artistic aspirations of these classic films. The new hyper-realistic visuals and slightly more restrained game world reflect these intentions. Indeed, even the changing priorities for voice and motion capture³³ actors demonstrate this shift. Ray Liotta, who plays the lead role in *Goodfellas*, a film heavily referenced in *GTAIII* and *Vice City*, actually voiced *Vice City* protagonist Tommy Vercetti. From *GTAIV* onward, however, the series stopped featuring known celebrity voice actors in character roles. In Dan Houser’s words, “we don’t bring in name actors anymore because of their egos and, most important of all, because we believe we get a better sense of immersion using talented actors whose voices you don’t recognize” (qtd. in Goldberg). Without egos to compete with the creative genius of Houser and company, Rockstar can create the impression of a real, living world, one that can be believed and inhabited more than even filmic counterparts.

Terming a game “immersive” is so common in marketing for and reviews of open world games that it has become cliché—though its ubiquity has only cemented “immersion” as a necessary quality for “good” open world design. As noted in this dissertation’s introduction, “immersion” is taken up in quantitative scholarship as a

³³ Motion capture (or “mocap”) is a process where actors’ bodily performances are captured and modelled into graphics. This is a very common practice in big budget game and cinema production.

common motivation for players' engagement with particular games, but it is also a natural consequence of the technological arms race that is the escalating "production value"³⁴ of gaming's visuals. It is also a natural consequence of video gaming's substantial difference from other forms of media; player interactivity can take new intensities of affective power if players are better able to suspend their disbelief and feel "immersed" in the world. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter cite Rowland Atkinson and Paul Willis's "Charting the Ludodrome," which studied and interviewed several players of *GTAIII*, a representative before Rockstar's intensification of their game's immersive qualities with *GTAIV*. Atkinson and Willis suggest that, for many players of these detailed open worlds, there is a "bleeding of the game world—its gameplay syntax, narrative structures and apparent representation of real places—into the real world for the players" (835). Atkinson and Willis's "ludodrome" is akin to Castronova's refined version of the magic circle: there is a porous relationship between player, the game world inside the circle, and the world outside. Based on their interviews with players, Atkinson and Willis conclude that "[i]n this modulating set of connections within a ludodrome space, the sense of what is real or stable in either the concrete urban or virtual city has further shifted, blurred and subtly been inflected with certain strands of this kind of gameplay" (842). The obviously consequence-free activities players can engage in (death and arrest merely take seconds out of the gameplay flow or necessitate a mission restart,

³⁴ This term is often used rather casually in gaming hobbyist media; what precisely it indicates is hardly ever clearly defined, but it appears gamers know it when they see it. Since it is typically used in reference to big-budget games' visual aspects, however, the term can be taken rather literally. As referenced above, for these games to have incredibly detailed assets covering asset-rich worlds to "immerse" players, hundreds of people around the globe spend considerable hours of labour crafting every visual element with myriad tiny details—some of which will never be seen and many more never noted even by the players that complete the games. As such, "production value" is at times little more than shorthand for the incredible expenditure needed to pay armies of people to create the visuals of the game—an expenditure that these companies control for by outsourcing the labour to the so-called asset farms.

for example) are parts of this Rockstar magic circle that allow an empowered and dominant relationship to the game world into which it wants greater and greater immersion and investment. What Atkinson and Willis's study appears to show, then, is that while some elements of gameplay are not taken literally by players as to their viability in the "real world," some of those gameplay elements, and certainly the representation of the world itself, do alter perceptions of the world outside the magic circle. Another important conclusion we may take from Atkinson and Willis's study of the "ludodrome" is that ideology is what is most conversant in this meeting of the real and the digital. The subtle ideological implications of the game world, explored and interacted with through gameplay mechanics made to be fun and fulfilling, can have very real impacts on the perception of the real world. It is perhaps almost banal to point out, but this essentially says that fictional representations can transmit and reinforce ideology and subtly alter worldviews. What the concept of the ludodrome adds is that gamified fictional representations are perhaps even more effective and subtle in this relationship than other media. This is especially true for open world games like Rockstar's, where the porous inside/outside frontier, a magic circle whose primary design is in its immersive invitation to access, incentivizes particular played epistemologies, rehearses and replays particular ideological formulas.

For an example, I turn to the ludodrome of *GTAV* and *IV*, "Liberty City," an obvious New York City stand-in. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's analysis of *GTAV*'s depiction of NYC (as "Liberty City") emphasizes exactly the "contradictory blend of insight into, and complicity with, urban corruption" (34) that is Rockstar's hallmark. The New York City Rockstar branch that the glowing

Vulture profile details as a “highly secure enclave” (Goldberg) is itself deeply invested in exactly the neoliberal ideology and urban space it satirizes, valorizes, and rehearses. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter point to the extreme irony of a Rockstar representative’s statement around the game’s release that describes *GTAIV*’s Liberty City as a “gritty urban environment . . . that hasn’t benefited from economic boom and it hasn’t got Mayor Guiliani” (174). *Games of Empire* explains how this pre-2008 crash “boom” and Rudy Guiliani’s neoliberal policies are in fact representative of *GTAIV*’s depiction of ugly corruption, rife criminality, and exploitation. The book cites David Harvey’s detailed historical record of neoliberal policies of “corporate welfare” broadly and “an entrepreneurial turn in city governance” in New York City particularly. Harvey found the resulting widened rich-poor gap and gutting of social services and protections actually led to an increase in crime, which consequently led to figures like Guiliani investing more heavily in an increasingly militarized police to criminalize entire impoverished and marginalized communities (172). Rockstar and its parent company, Take-Two Interactive Software Inc., moved into NYC as beneficiaries of the “new frontier of real estate development” (173) in the city’s aggressive neoliberal policies that saw many parts of NYC undergo hyper-gentrification. The building Rockstar would eventually inhabit saw studio rents explode to over 10,000 USD a month (173); aggressive policing urged by Guliani’s focus on reducing crime to attract corporate high-tech businesses went into effect alongside “Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)—in essence, corporate-controlled mini-municipal governments” which transformed entire

neighbourhoods. In this time, crackdowns on “the homeless . . . licensing sidewalk artists, attacking street musicians, harassing news vendors, and silencing street protests” became a combined effort by the NYPD and high-tech-corporation-controlled BIDs (173). In the context of municipal, state, and federal legislation that increasingly favored privatization and was anti-welfare (aside from the corporate variety), New York City’s violent corruption and exploitation is in fact typified by the “boom” and the policies of Guiliani and his ilk. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter strongly articulate it:

Rockstar . . . was the beneficiary of an urban class war that erased, marginalized, and moved on those very aspects of metropolitan life the developer would fictionalize and celebrate in its games . . . Rockstar could only capitalize on that grit [of its fictionalized city] because of the boom, the gentrification, and Mayor Giuliani’s draconian law-and-order regime. The grittiness of Liberty City is, then, the digitized capture of class inequalities (173-174).

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter go on to describe the great number of financial malfeasances for which Take-Two faced multiple investigations and legal ramifications: insider stock trading, falsified revenues, and top level executives receiving millions more than their already massive taxable incomes are just a few of the offences they detail. *Games of Empire* includes a telling quote from Dan Houser in 2008 when many of these cases were leading to charges: “It’s what I associate with being in America: corporate drama” (175). Houser’s dismissive attitude towards legitimate concerns with malfeasance and mistreatment has likely remained in Rockstar’s continuing legal troubles after *Games of Empire* was published. Leslie Benzies, lead developer of every *GTA* game from

GTAV to *GTAV*, launched a lawsuit in 2016 against Rockstar, Take-Two, and both Housers, claiming (among other things) a fractious atmosphere of the Housers' egos and demanding \$150 million USD in unpaid royalties. This particular corporate drama came to an end in a "confidential settlement" (Supreme Court of the State of New York), likely of untold millions, to get the three-year suit out of public rotation in a year where articles on Rockstar's exploitative labour culture were circulating once again. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter persuasively connect this dismissive attitude regarding "corporate drama" to the ethos of the *GTA* series' worldview; they argue that the franchise's sense of humour and narrative arcs manifest a "generalized indifference" for the neoliberal forces the games depict, and for the neoliberal ideology whose very practices are foundational and endemic to Rockstar's production (178). *GTA:VC*'s inclusion of passive-income properties is a trend that is expanded in the series' most recent entry, *GTAV*, and in a way that yet again rehearses Rockstar's real-world ideological investments. In order to make enough money to buy all the many passive-income properties and experience the totality of *GTAV*'s content, players must invest in (and manipulate) a detailed stock market system. This marries *GTA*'s narrative ideological investments with Rockstar's history of capitalist malfeasance: the invitation of access of the artificial frontier is here rendered as the ability to access the same labour-obscuring, stock-manipulating modus operandi of Rockstar.

It is important to note that *GTA*, like many games of its size, features entire teams of writers—some of whom will or will not be involved with every element of the project, let alone be there for substantial parts of the project's development or be in the position to make substantial creative decisions. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter point out that "many

politically left gamers like *GTA*,” recognizing that its caricatural style both intentionally and inadvertently makes the games “by [their] very extremity a comedic exposé of U.S. politics” while featuring comedy that is “a scathing parody of neoliberal sensibilities” (179). Given Rockstar’s secretive practices, it is difficult to estimate whether or not some of the games’ more incisive writing is done by Houser or by other members of the team. Determining this is likely impossible, but more importantly it is immaterial: in the end, we are left with a system designed to most acutely enrich its *auteur* and the boards of his parent companies. Dan Houser is an engine of the games’ ideology; he can shrug off the millions of dollars changing hands for his own personal and employer-involved “corporate dramas.” It is this comedic dismissiveness that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter demonstrate as deeply symbolic for a game series that represents neoliberal ideology; while only occasionally making fun of it, the games always *make it fun*.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue that the digital urban space of the *GTA* series “performs a normalization of corporate criminality. Its game world asserts that crime is the way the universe is—the way money changes hands, business is done, society organized; it is the nature of reality” (178). For all of its vaunted freedom of player agency, the core principles of its design and writing are cynical:

What is excluded from its virtuality is *any* alternative to the rottenness . . . The game presents a no-exit situation. *GTA* contains occasional allusions to the fierce genealogy of radical politics in North American communities of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and other immigrant and minority communities—but only to negate their potential . . . the ideological consistency of the games’ demonic satire [is] that

brutalization, racism, and greed be ubiquitous . . . There may be other options; but you can't play them. (180)

This no-exit cynicism is in fact part-and-parcel of this tapestry of neoliberal ideology. There is a line that can be drawn from this no-hope, no-alternative framing of the human condition in a game functionally structured on criminal violence, to the justifications of crunch culture as individual employee choice, to the conservative policies of policing as a response to “the systemic patterns of inequality and marginalization inherent to global capital, of which violence and crime are often only symptomatic” (156). Neoliberalism’s obsession with the individual over the systemic (which ironically serves to maintain a systemic order of “global capital”) translates well to the power fantasies of open world video games. As Cameron Kunzelman asserts in his article on crunch culture: “Reducing a systemic issue into an individual one masks the exploitation at work, though, in the same way that talking about local weather doesn't give you a diagnosis of global warming.” Flattening broad issues into matters of individual choice, heroism, and villainy is a simplistic framework for consequence-free gameplay with the illusion of agency and freedom. The Rockstar “punch line” is not simply the brutality of the human experience, the comedic cynicism for the inevitability of neoliberal ideology; it is also how much money is made by exploiting labour and providing consumers an empowered fantasy within a digitized hellscape of neoliberalism. These games operate as salve for the anxiety of crumbling social order with the advancement of neoliberalism—and Rockstar sells that salve at a premium. The “joke,” then, is the normalization of the ideology in an empowering fantasy, in a game genre of barely restricted movement, of repeatable

activities designed to inspire feelings of satisfaction and excitement. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter sum it up:

GTA is a cynical game that simultaneously satirizes, indulges, and normalizes individual hyperpossessiveness, racialized stereotypes, and neoliberal violence in a self-cancellation that allows these elements to remain intact, a structure that is, in a very precise way, conservative . . . At one level *GTA* exposes some basic operations of, and hypocrisies about, imperial economics, politics, and culture. Yet at the same time the rendering of these truths in the form of excess, mockery, equivocation, and ridicule functions to keep those same truths at safe distance—the distance necessary for their endless repetition in a world where all streets leading to an alternative have been blocked. (181)

As the following section will argue, this neoliberal cynicism of the *GTA* franchise has reached an even more cultivated and revealing form since *Games of Empire's* publication.

***GTAV's* Asshole Theory of Capitalism and the Neoliberal Treatment of Race**

GTAV's neoliberal bent can be analyzed (and operationalized in this chapter's forthcoming expanded theoretical framework) for its attempt to pose the anti-heroism of greedy violence—the rewarding activities of its video game capitalism *par excellence*—as capable of being earnestly racially egalitarian. This attempt is unsurprising, as modern neoliberalism has fashioned its own particular brand of nominal post-racialism in the West to facilitate its continued exploitation. Rockstar's games indulge racist stereotypes at the same time as it lampoons racism itself, just as they satirize capitalism while valorizing its central compunctions in gameplay, narrative, and, most importantly, the

exploitative labour contexts in which they are produced. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter have pointed out, though the comedy may occasionally strike true, the characteristic veneer of self-aware irony is merely equivocation that serves to distance the work from the implications of its own punch lines. *Games of Empire*'s summary of *San Andreas*' ending as a "semiutopian moment" brought by the player's "hybridized free enterprise" alongside a cast of "cross-ethnic and mixed-gender coalition of criminal capitalists" (169) is emblematic of this modern sensibility. *GTA*'s worlds, and neoliberal ideology, tells us that if you wish to succeed, you simply need capital by any means—and capital no longer has a "whites only" sign attached.

The reality is that neoliberalism and the free-market, privatizing, and entrepreneurial policies it engenders are verifiably and progressively disastrous for most non-white people in the West.³⁵ These neoliberal policies are also deeply invested in the global supply chains that exploit the labour and conditions of non-Western peoples. As such, neoliberal ideological expressions perpetuate structural racism while professing the egalitarianism of their approach. Neoliberal global capital's supposed multicultural post-racialism, then, merely validates treating the world's different peoples as open to its access—the psychology of the frontier. As David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe put it, though neoliberalism advanced its strategies of public relations, it maintains the structural inequities of previous forms:

the fundamental act of demarcation, the distributions of legality and ruthless force
 . . . continues in new forms, constituting new frontiers appropriate to the emergent

³⁵ For a few starting points on this reality of neoliberalism's continued racist outcomes, see J. N. Robinson on poverty; Lipman and Giroux for education; Nkansah-Amankra, Agbanu, and Miller for incarceration and public health; and Duggan for a broad look at the culture and outcomes of neoliberalism in the 1990s to early 2000s.

mode of accumulation on a global scale . . . Now, at a moment when the globe has been appropriated ‘as a unity’, the current crisis of capital may find no geographical ‘outside’ any more, but is no less productive of forms of racialization. (114)

So the forays into race that *GTAV* engages, even more than *San Andreas*, thus makes *GTAV*’s singleplayer story a distancing cynical satire. *GTAV* explicitly names and shames capitalism more than any game in the series previous, so its attempts to decouple racism from the relation of capital with which the game and Rockstar are so thoroughly enmeshed actually rehearses the very obfuscation of neoliberal ideology itself. *GTAV*’s treatment of race in particular belies the series’ continuing no-escape neoliberal cynicism, and anecdotally reveals precisely how neoliberalism’s supposed post-racialism is essentially a dismissal of the continuing racist status-quo that neoliberalism is itself; naturally, it also allows the games to be more palatably marketed to the massive demographics of non-white, non-Western gamers.

GTAV features three playable protagonists: two white men, Michael and Trevor, and one Black man, Franklin. The game, after a certain point, allows players to switch between these characters at will, but missions are often tied to particular characters. Michael is a former bank robber who made a deal with the FBI for a clean slate and a high life in the *GTA*-equivalent of Hollywood Hills. Michael, a depressed family man, explicitly says that he is trapped by his own 80s nostalgia. Trevor is one of Michael’s former criminal buddies. When we first see (and play) Trevor, he is a rural-living meth dealer often described by other characters (and himself) as “creepy” and “crazy.” Still living a chaotic, violent, and criminal lifestyle, Trevor says he has dreamed of being an

international drug and arms dealer since childhood. He is unpredictable, intelligent, vulnerable, scary, and sad. Many critics and reviewers have latched on to Trevor as the most interesting character, and indeed, many have pointed out that Trevor is himself a kind of embodiment of the *GTA* series. As Tom Bissell puts it, “Trevor—the funny but ultimately terrifying lunatic—is the embodiment of what the game actually is: an experience uncomfortably pinned between grand narrative ambition and open-world incontinent madness” (n.p.). Franklin, on the other hand, is a young Black man from South Central Los Santos (*GTA*’s Los Angeles equivalent first represented in *GTA: San Andreas*), a former gangbanger who links up with Michael and Trevor to learn the tricks of their high-stakes-heist criminal trade when the storyline begins in earnest. He is often represented as a kind of moderate centre between the chaotic mayhem but fundamentally only-wants-to-be-loved nature of Trevor, and the selfish, nostalgic, but comparatively rational nature of Michael. Trevor and Michael, through most of the game’s story, have an uneasy alliance where neither man is capable of trusting the other, and Franklin must frequently mediate—until the final choice of the game’s main story, where the player must decide for Franklin whether he will kill Michael, Trevor, or neither, and instead reconcile them.

A word that comes up again and again in the game itself and criticism thereof is “asshole.” The game is about assholes as much as it is about capitalism, and assholes are, first and foremost, self-interested individuals. Bissell calls *GTAV* “basically the most elaborate asshole simulation system ever devised,” perhaps a reference to disgraced lawyer and activist Jack Thompson’s attempts to ban an earlier *GTA* game by calling it a “murder simulator.” Cameron Kunzelman, one of many critics who say *GTAV* positions

itself as “above any real commitment to an ideology,” (“Why is GTAV So Conservative”) highlights an example of in-game advertisements for a Republican running for governor with the slogan “I may be an asshole, but I’m *your* asshole.” The word “asshole” is tightly coded in *GTAV*. It is a specific epithet that turns up frequently, but usually only once in a particular scene or dialogue (not counting the ambient pedestrian dialogue in the open world). Trevor tells Michael’s white, disaffected, lazy, and Black-culture-appropriating son that Michael’s life is “just one long manifestation of asshole-ness.” Michael’s reconciliation with his wife near the end of the story is based upon his acknowledgment that she deserved a better husband, because he is “an asshole.” After Trevor calls Michael a “shell” of a human for his selfishness, self-loathing, and aspirations to upper-class leisure, Michael asks “Are you some kind of pure, morally justifiable asshole? What, because you’re totally psychotic, somehow it’s okay?” Trevor returns with “I’m honest, alright? You’re the hypocrite.” Michael then sarcastically calls Trevor a “hero” that’s “so far above it all.”³⁶ Kunzelman’s claim that *GTA* positions itself “above any real commitment to an ideology” is here validated, precisely through the self-aware comedic distance that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter emphasize. Trevor’s comedic absurdity most embodies *GTA*’s at times incoherent mix of invested narrative and power-fantasy play. Michael *is* a hypocrite, and in the game’s logic Trevor *is*, in a sense, justifiable, insofar as this “hero” is the one through which the narrative tensions and open-world mayhem gameplay make sense. The game itself highlights its violence, its cruelty, and its cynicism as points of contention, even through the personal character traits of the protagonists players inhabit. If this is an asshole simulator, the game

³⁶ Cuts scene from the mission “Paleto Score Setup”

repeatedly reminds the player that you, too, are an asshole—despite the fact that the game, like the *GTAs* Dyer-Witford and de Peuter studied, provides no alternative in procedural play or narrative vision.

Importantly, however, the two main assholes—Michael and Trevor—fit into a larger framework of assholes: cultural capitalism. “Capitalism” comes up in an uncountable number of scenarios: Trevor’s arms-dealing associate says capitalism is “ten percent business, ninety percent putting other people out of business,” and the game’s social and political critiques are most blatant when capitalism is directly named.³⁷ When Lester, the virulently anti-government and anti-corporation brains behind Michael’s heists calls “government contracts” a “license to steal,” Michael notes that he and his bank-robbing associates “are in the wrong business.” Lester responds that they’ve just “taken the wrong contracts,”³⁸ explicitly connecting the criminality of armed robbery to the practices and inequities of government and corporate conduct. This comparison is made many more times. Even honest Trevor decries his lack of funds by alluding to dreams of a rich future in the following terms: “Where’s my consultant’s fee and my big fat dividend? I want a franchise network. I want reward cards, merchandise. I wanna make gun violence and drug dependency accessible to every man and beast.”³⁹ Thus the criminality of Michael, Trevor, and Franklin is put on the same scale as the selfish assholes running corporations and governments—the characters are simply less successful. Whiteness is never given an acknowledged role in determining the capitalist scale of assholes, here—in *GTAV*, anyone can learn to be a rich white asshole. One of the

³⁷ From the “Arms Trafficking Air” side mission.

³⁸ From the mission “Cleaning Out the Bureau.”

³⁹ Also from the “Arms Trafficking Air” side mission.

game's primary antagonists is Devin Westin, a multi-company-owning billionaire who is shown to have influence over government agents, agencies, and politicians. In what could be called the game's "happy" ending of three possible endings, Devin Westin is the final death that brings Michael, Trevor, and Franklin together—an act that answers a much earlier scene with Trevor, where he says he wants Devin to understand “that all the money in the world can't save him from a nasty guy who thinks he's an asshole.”⁴⁰ The player is given the power to decide the ending *as* Franklin, the moral center of *GTAV*'s competing impulses, now that he has learned from his white mentors.

In *GTAV*'s depiction of capitalism, everyone is stuck in a system of assholes, and racism is simply one more tool, like government contracts, for assholes to control and exploit. Even Franklin criticizes the gangs of South Central Los Santos by saying “kids do all the work to pay for some old bastards to live like kings . . . it's like the government.” Racism is mentioned, but it is fundamentally separable from the primary exploitation that is, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter say, the “nature of reality” in Rockstar's ideology. Gangs—like the one Franklin leaves to join the apparently smarter assholes that are Michael and Trevor—are here not social responses to, or even symptoms of, societal positioning or the racially categorical poverty that neoliberalism has deepened. Instead, gangs are cast as simply another order of assholes trying and failing to reach the upper-class leisure Michael has achieved and seeks to secure, which is itself orders below assholes like the government and Devin Westin. Trevor is a Canadian posing as American “trailer trash,” a term that Michael uses to describe his own early life as well. Michael, on more than one occasion, mentions his lack of “opportunity” as

⁴⁰ From the mission “Pack Man.”

young “trailer trash,” and that robbery was his way of *making* opportunity. Trailer trash whiteness is here made an equally embattled position, one that can be surpassed through the correct performance of individualized, property-rich assholiness. The only thing keeping Franklin from a mansion like Michael’s is not his race, but his deficiencies as an asshole, still tied to a community that is narrativized as little more than exploitation. When Franklin learns to be an asshole from his white mentors, he gains his mansion through independent contract killing with Lester; it is his individuality and new white-taught abilities that advance his prosperity, get him his mansion, and places the player’s agency for the ending in *his* hands. Thus in the asshole capitalism of *GTAV*, racism is just one more obstacle for individual assholes to overcome for greater personal prosperity. It pre-emptively inoculates race and racism from being constitutively generated by modern American cultural capitalism, class, and opportunity in the game’s grand, totalizing outlook. Racism in *GTAV* is not an inherent product of the very economics of American history and present, but merely another cynical entry in a terrain of exploitation. There are no races, only assholes, *GTAV* says, and people of every colour can learn to be better, self-interested assholes against the world of assholes.

Thus *GTAV* encounters racism, but elides it for its toothless central cultural capitalist critique. Devin Weston, his billionaire ilk, and the federal government are the true targets of the game’s critique. *GTAV*’s asshole theory of capitalism is indebted to neoliberal ideology: individuals and individual action, rather than systemic norms and structures, decide the social realities that shape individual action and possibility. While this is theoretically ironic for an open world video game, where the very structure of available actions overdetermine players’ immersion and sense of freedom in what is

actually a rather limited agency, it is not ironic in light of Rockstar's deep commitment to neoliberal ideology. Just as Rockstar's world of assholes is a world where the systemic is made individual (which, we may recall, was the company's early defense against criticism of its crunch culture), neoliberalism divides and exploits its surplus populations along these very lines. This individuation is the cultural validation for how neoliberalism is still "productive of forms of racialization" (Lloyd and Wolfe 114). As Dána-Ain Davis writes,

Neoliberal practices pull into its orbit a market of ideas about a lot of things including the family, gender, and racial ideology. It is, as Lisa Duggan (2003) notes, "saturated with race," (xvi) using capitalism to hide racial (and other) inequalities by relocating racially coded economic disadvantage and reassigning identity-based biases to the private and personal spheres. (349)

GTAV's asshole capitalism essentially captures this division, but naturalizes it the same way it makes capitalism itself the inescapable "nature of reality." In this way, racism is figured fundamentally as a particular, separable kind of exploitation from inescapable capitalist reality; it is an activity that is a "personal," "identity-based" expression, and thus not an integral part of *GTA*'s systemic theory of reality. *GTA*'s ethos is, at its most positive, that the world is full of assholes, but there is good to be had and loyalties and families worth holding onto in a world defined by exploitation; these positive aspects are the product of personal choices, of individual morality in the exploitative context to which all life is subject. Racism is bad, says *GTAV*, but it is not an integral part of how the "nature of reality" is organized by capital. In other words, we can choose not to be racist, but we cannot choose not to be capitalist.

Nowhere is this individuation clearer in *GTAV*'s ethos than in the representation of Franklin and his friendship with Lamar, a still committed member of the gang Franklin leaves behind. *GTAV* has a number of "doubled" characters: Lester, Michael's cane-using anti-government anti-corporate intel-gatherer is doubled by Ron, Trevor's perpetually limping, knee-brace wearing intel-gatherer, obsessed with government conspiracies of the "trackers implanted in our teeth by dentists" variety. Trevor's double is Lamar—also consistently referred to as "crazy,"—the irrational but passionate friend of the more calm, selfish Franklin, who is the Michael of the relationship. Franklin's story takes him further and further from his South Central Los Santos neighbourhood. As this unfolds, Lamar consistently questions Franklin's dissociation from his community, but the game presents Lamar's criticism as narrow-minded and foolish. Franklin, after all, is learning how to be a smarter asshole, how to not do all the work while older heads of the gang "live like kings." Because *GTAV* decouples race from its capitalist critique, Lamar's insistence on remaining in the gang lifestyle and his community is, essentially, cast as evidence of his own stupidity. As the player-controlled white version of Lamar, Trevor's contradictions and gestures to self-awareness and self-loathing are fundamentally more correct—and certainly more intelligent—than Lamar's are in the game's logic. Trevor's successes and failures apparently have little to do with his race, and everything to do with his mindset as a character; as a player character, this matches the game's structure and narrative, where Trevor's aforementioned "madness" is both his strength, weakness, and what made reviewers latch onto him as most consistent with *GTA*'s mechanical frictions with narrative ambitions. The difference between Lamar and Trevor, in *GTAV*'s world of caricature, is not whiteness. Rather, the difference is that one has the self-awareness to

know he is a posturing contradiction; Trevor knows he is an asshole and is content with that fact. Lamar, the Black man who stays in his community and fights for his beliefs, flawed though they may be, is presented as the stupid version of Trevor, just as Ron is presented as the stupid version of Lester. That Lamar is a humorous side character, and Trevor is playable alone makes this distinction clear: Trevor is an independent asshole with agency, while Lamar is an asshole too caught up in that which ties him down: his Black community.

GTAV critiques capitalism, but, in so doing, centers the ability and knowledge of white characters as the signifier for that critique; these characters are the lens through which critique is possible. Blackness and Black life are never serious touchstones for examining capitalism and identity in a game that repeatedly deals with capitalism and identity, and features a Black protagonist; Lamar's critiques of America are toothless because Lamar is, largely, rendered a blinders-wearing fool circling the loop of his own beliefs, much like he circles the South Central Los Santos neighbourhood from which Franklin drifts. This refusal to engage Blackness and Black life as central to the workings of capital is again understandable as a neoliberal set of emphases; as Davis argues,

Under neoliberal racism the relevance of the raced subject, racial identity and racism is subsumed under the auspices of meritocracy. For in a neoliberal society, individuals are supposedly freed from identity and operate under the limiting assumptions that hard work will be rewarded if the game is played according to the rules. Consequently, any impediments to success are attributed to personal flaws. This attribution affirms notions of neutrality and silences claims of racializing and racism. (350)

GTAV's depiction of alternatives (like Lamar's insistence on staying and working in his community contrasted with Franklin's individualized success) are not only blocked off, they are mentioned precisely to be belittled as the personal choices of the misguided, of those too stupid to be more active assholes and thus able to resist the systemic symptoms of neoliberalism and its structural racism. The player power fantasy of *GTAV*, and open world games broadly, is a fantasy rewarding individual autonomy—like neoliberal societies, the undergirding irony is that these individual choices of players take place within a deceptively restricted system.

This extrication of race from capital through individualization, and the normalization of neoliberal ideology, makes up subtext that inflects the ways players interact with these open worlds and their real worlds, as with Atkinson and Willis's ludodrome. To be fair, the power-fantasy activities that feature no long-term consequences in the game are not instructive or imitable in the real world. Yet the ideological sanitation is at least as effective as any cultural production, particularly when Rockstar's games, starting with *GTAIV*, are widely praised as examples of potent, big-budget storytelling and player freedom in the medium. Surely, *GTAV* does not expect the depicted activities of its anti-heroes to be encouraged, but in the context of a game genre where players' primary interaction is ubiquitous violence, these attempts to depict levels of moral scale in its worldview are revealing. Casual homicide and driving at ludicrous speeds, and so forth, where the consequences are little more than sixty seconds of delay for another attempt after death, clearly exist *inside* the magic circle. What slips through the porous boundary of the circle, of the ludodrome, are the narrative structures that house those *inside* activities as enjoyable, rewarding interactions that incentivize living in

accordance with the structure’s ideological implications. When these narrative structures are heavy with neoliberal ideology, it can normalize simply by entertaining. *GTAV*’s effective and direct approach of neoliberal obfuscation comes in the same package that most obviously represents Rockstar’s enrichment on exactly the principles of capitalist corporate greed it mocks and equivocates—though has absolved of its constitutive racism.

GTAV’s asshole simulation equivocates the relation of capital to matters of scale, rather than kind; systemic and historic reality falls away for the primacy of individual choice, naturalizing both capital as the law of human existence, and shielding capitalism itself from being an inherently racist mode. Rockstar’s flattening individuation implicates players’ played asshole power fantasies into the spectrum of ideology represented by the capitalist modes its games critique and its business operates upon. In the aforementioned happy ending, Michael talks to billionaire Devin Westin before killing him alongside Franklin and Trevor. He tells him that “there’s two great evils that bedevil American capitalism of the type you practice,” the first being “outsourcing”—which he uses as metaphor for private mercenaries he “underpaid” to kill the three protagonists—and “offshoring your profits”—which he uses as metaphor for the cliffside ocean view at which the protagonists drown Westin in the trunk of a car. As shown, Rockstar’s open worlds simply cannot be produced as they do without substantial outsourced global supply chains, and Rockstar is infamous for offshoring its profits to escape national taxations.⁴¹ This asshole simulation, where assholes triumphantly kill a bigger asshole,

⁴¹ A report by Tax Watch UK called “Gaming the System” details this offshoring, and even points out that Rockstar lists its games, including *GTAV*, as “culturally British” to gain millions in tax credits provided by the UK government for independent game development.

provides a presumable sense of liberation for gamers. Westin, the stand-in for “the kind of capitalism” that is bad, is one person whose choices stand in for systematic activities that Rockstar has engaged for years. Players get to kill Westin and they pay Rockstar for the privilege. The particular individuating narrative ideological expressions, which make racism more a personal choice than a concealed component of that very ideology, also serve to normalize player- and Rockstar-as-asshole. As the next section will further detail, Rockstar sells the artificial frontier’s invitation of access, all the while epitomizing the exploitation of the global neoliberal frontier upon which its business model functions.

The Non-Physical Casino Games of High Finance and *GTA Online*

GTAV features an online component called *GTA Online*. In *GTA Online*, the game’s more absurd elements of player empowerment and mastery of space take center stage, with the stories and characters taking a more secondary role in the multiplayer section. The central gameplay loops are primarily invested in (1) making in-game money and (2) all of the expensive digital items and property this money can purchase. Some of these items, like clothing, are purely cosmetic. Others provide benefits; mansions and apartments can store more vehicles or function as a social space to host other online players, and illicit businesses provide even more opportunities for making money. Then there is, of course, an incredibly large assortment of vehicles (from humble sedans to flying motorcycles equipped with rocket launchers) and weaponry (from baseball bats to death ray laser guns) available for purchase. Completely eschewing even the veneer of gritty realism that restrains the player’s dominance of the game’s map, which *GTAIV* began and carried to a less-invested extent in the singleplayer portion of *GTAV*, *GTA Online* is pure fantasy for those with enough money to purchase it. Servers of *GTA*

Online can become warzones of jets and tanks of competing in-game millionaires and their hired player associates in the streets of a fictionalized Los Angeles and its surrounding southern California countryside.

Many Western big budget open world games, including *GTA Online*, share and cross-innovate design principles with Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games.⁴² Most of these innovations are, naturally, aimed at extending the profitable life of a particular game. For some MMOs this leads to a subscription model, whereby players typically pay a monthly fee to play the game, which features periodic content updates and thus new reasons to engage the core gameplay loops of the base game. Another increasingly common phenomenon is a special in-game currency that can be purchased with real cash—a so-called “microtransaction”; usually, this special currency is limited only to purchasable cosmetic items for players. In a study on “Virtual Consumerism,” Vili Lehdonvirta et al. argue that the “microtransactions” of real-world currency for digital items or in-game currency have made “simulated shopping and commodity consumption” (1059) a centrally important factor in MMO design principles. As Hamari and Lehdonvirta point out, this virtual consumerism has become almost inextricable from multiplayer design because these microtransactions have become the main source of revenue for many game companies (15), another trend that has intensified in the years since their 2010 article “Game Design as Marketing: How Game Mechanics Create Demand for Virtual Goods.” That article sought to delineate and advise how the

⁴² Most MMO games are now, by and large, open world games with worlds that are shared among multiple players simultaneously, with various kinds of player cooperation and opposition encouraged. Because the world is shared, these games manage the mobility and autonomy of players more than singleplayer games; they are similarly confined in progression until so-called “endgame,” where high-level players run gameplay loops that are often more self-contained: “dungeons,” and player-versus-player arena-style match-ups.

“*persuasive technology*” of games could be used for “linking game design . . . and marketing” for the purpose of “selling products or services” (27). Drawing from literature that connects “games as domains of artificial outcomes” to life in the real-world society, which is “full of games” of this nature, the proposed marketing strategy hinges on the similar observations of Atkinson and Willis’s “ludodrome.” As “the distinction between computer games and these other ‘games’ in the society is blurring” (27), Western open world games that do not even have multiplayer components have become marketplaces for digital items.⁴³ Though the subscription model is still in use, some of the most profitable games today (such as *Fortnite*) gain their entire revenue from microtransactions, forgoing even an initial purchasing fee for the game itself.

GTA Online is updated periodically to add new vehicles, weapons, new modes for player-versus-player violence, as well as missions with self-contained versions of the characteristically absurd and cynical Rockstar stories. However, as *GTA Online* is packaged as part of a game ostensibly billed as heavily focused on its single-player content, it does not have a subscription fee. Instead, the revenue necessary for Rockstar to both maintain the servers that host online play and produce new content to attract new consumers comes from the ability to purchase in-game multiplayer funds with real cash. For those players who wish to access the expensive items without labouring in the game’s mechanics, Rockstar offers “Shark Cards,” which are simply pre-determined amounts of in-game cash purchased for real dollars. The in-game cash can be used for anything in the

⁴³Many games from Ubisoft’s catalogue (which I will focus on in the following chapter) are single-player only but still feature an extra marketplace for buying in-game items like clothing or weapons. Some of these purchasable packages are literally titled “Time Savers” and provide resources that let players spend real money to reduce the time spent on in-game labour collecting resources in the massive, checklist-style activity-heavy open worlds.

game, including the armaments that give the digitally wealthy players dominance over other players. This structure is often colloquially referred to as “pay-to-win” in gaming media, as those with the real money to spend on the game can gain an immediate tactical advantage over other players who do not put in real money. *GTAV* (and the later free addition of *GTA Online*) was released before some of the more heavily publicized Western consumer rejections of the practice. For example, two big-budget games (one an open world) released in 2017 drew so much ire from gaming communities and media that Electronic Arts and Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment suffered headline-garnering temporary losses to their stock prices (Huang).⁴⁴ *GTA Online*’s pay-to-win structure cultivates *GTAV*’s asshole capitalist ideology not just through the immersion of its world and narrative, but by emphasizing individual players’ prerogative to literally game the system with capital, which translates to the equivalent of otherwise hard-won assets that provide player advantage.

Eustance Huang argued in 2018 that players in the Western game market are less amenable to the pay-to-win structure than players in the Chinese market, primarily because of their respective histories with video games as a medium. Until recently, a significant proportion of gaming in China was done in internet cafes and other venues that required “paying recurring costs to game” (Huang, n.p.). Huang draws the perspectives of multiple games market analysts who agreed that the differences between these markets would likely fade over time, and the likelihood is that Western markets would come to accept the microtransaction-based models that are overwhelmingly

⁴⁴ Perhaps ironically, the Warner Bros. game, *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*, is a single-player-only open world game, and still fell under the scrutiny of microtransaction antipathy for its pay-to-win structure. This despite the fact that Ubisoft has run a similar model without economic repercussions of any kind: see previous footnote.

popular in the Chinese market. The incredible financial success of *Fortnite* in Western markets, which uses a microtransaction model for cosmetic enhancements (including appropriated dance moves for a player's avatar⁴⁵), appears to validate those predictions. After all, globalized neoliberal supply chains and markets⁴⁶ are demonstrably effective at creating market parameters and then funneling consumption and labour into them. Those parameters are, by and large, the logics of capitalism as expressed by the de-regulated, hyper-individualized domain of international corporations: whatever extracts more surplus value from labour and raises consumption (and the price thereof) is ideal. Temporary stock dips brought on by a displeased consumer base is a brief temporal hiccup. If microtransactions are better for the bottom line of big budget game development, then heavy investment will ensure they *become* popular. The brazenly pay-to-win structure of *GTA Online*'s microtransactions came before the sound-and-fury of 2017, but the game continued with resounding success in that same year. One analyst firm suggested that, from *GTAV*'s release in 2013 to 2017, more than a billion USD revenue came from *GTA Online* microtransactions (Strickland).

This extremely profitable revenue stream meets Rockstar's characteristic cynicism and normalization of the neoliberal ideology (which its cynicism *and* revenue are predicated upon), and results in its clearest expression in *GTA Online*'s latest major update. In July 2019, *GTA Online* added a fully functional in-game casino. This update is emblematic of the utter weightlessness of Rockstar's satire, revealing it is, at its core, no

⁴⁵ See Cole (2019).

⁴⁶ The Chinese market is, of course, included in these globalized neoliberal supply chains, despite specific characteristics of its centrally planned economic structure. From game production with firms like Virtuos to game consumption with the lifting of the ban on game consoles in 2015, Chinese labour and consumption are part and parcel of the metrics shaped by the neoliberal ideology that currently dominates world market logics. How precisely these ideological and material contexts differ is a different study entirely.

more than self-interested normalization. Indeed, Rockstar's satire of capital is a perverse scheme whereby a corporate entity provides artificial freedom and power fantasies, where the apparent targets of ridicule and antagonism are functionally indistinguishable from the very entity that develops and delivers them. With *GTA Online*'s casino update, players can buy and decorate a penthouse in the Diamond Casino and Resort. Months after the update launched, a further update in December 2019 included a connected short storyline in which players are pitted against rapaciously greedy oil barons who have engaged a hostile takeover of the casino; like much of *GTA Online*'s stories, it is connected to Lester, *GTAV*'s socially awkward hacker who hates corporate greed. To disrupt the casino's corporatization by representatives of an industry more easily villainized in the era of climate collapse, players are tasked with robbing the casino's vault. Here too, then, the plot provides a very particular flavour of liberation: an individual prerogative for lawlessness prevailing in the face of a thinly veiled allegory of corporate exploitation. This is the narrative mechanism by which Rockstar disguises its own corporate greed, selling a power fantasy of individual greed out-playing corporate greed.

The storyline of working alongside Lester is the narrative dressing on a new gameplay loop for repeatedly planning and executing the heist on the casino's vault. All of *that* merely provides the possible in-game labour to make the usual in-game currency that can then be turned into casino chips, *another* in-game currency that can be gambled on functional slot machines, horse races, and games of poker, blackjack, and roulette. Chips can also be spent on cosmetic items for the player's avatar or penthouse, or they can simply be turned back into in-game dollars. Of course, since those chips are

purchased with in-game cash, and in-game cash can be purchased with real-world currency, *GTA Online* is essentially a fully functional online casino. The ability to purchase casino chips—and thus gamble with a currency two clicks away from real money—is removed from *GTA Online* in over 50 countries, including China, because the activity is recognized as legally indistinct from real gambling (Thier). Players in these countries can enter the casino and play the heist (multiple times over), but they cannot gamble. This setback was apparently not significant, however, even with China as the leading consumer of microtransactions in games. Strauss Zelnick, CEO of Rockstar’s publisher Take-Two, noted the financial impact of this update on a 2019 earnings call: “Recurrent consumer spending on *Grand Theft Auto Online* grew 23% to a new record, driven by the July release of the Diamond Casino & Resort update, delivering record player engagement across daily, weekly, and monthly active users in July, and then again in August” (qtd. in Brightman).

When I first took a virtual walk through the Diamond Casino in *GTA Online*, I was unsurprised by the update’s ever-present cynical style: NPCs⁴⁷ have various on-the-nose comedic conversations about the casino’s status as a heartless money-sink. I admit I was mildly surprised, however, by the nameless, mute NPC seated on the floor by the casino’s exit. Head in hands, this figure had the obviously dejected posture of a customer who has just lost a significant amount of money. I would later see this position reused elsewhere in the casino with a slightly different character model. Though it is only one small detail in a lavishly over-detailed space, I often consider the numerous processes

⁴⁷ Non-player characters (NPCs), as the name suggests, are any game characters that are not controlled by a player, whose scripted actions and situational responses are prescribed by the game’s programming.

involving countless people that were necessary to add it: to model the various versions of the NPC and his clothing, to animate his pathetic position, to select and authorize his possible locations, to program the random chance he would or would not appear at any given time. All of that productive labour to put a tiny reminder of the artificial human cost of a digital casino in this power-fantasy frontier grotesquely depicting modern capitalism. Here, it fleshes out a very real casino operation that exploits and profits off of the real human cost of gambling. It is, in effect, a microcosm for the *GTA* series' increasingly labour-intensive visual verisimilitude, a small part of a set-piece to depict a world worthy of hostility for the intentions of the greedy on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a set-piece to run a literal casino with the same intentions. Put in the context of Rockstar's excessive style generally and in the casino particularly, it is likely the figure is actually meant to be a target for ridicule; a fool you see on your exit, a fool that cannot *play* the game as the *player* can. This is the same ridicule which "functions to keep . . . truths at safe distance," the truths of neoliberal ideology, and that distance is "necessary" for the "endless repetition" of the activities that incentivize the played expression of that ideology with no alternative (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 181).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Another personal anecdote worth sharing: my time with *GTA Online* would have been extremely limited were it not for the game's structure being broken for me early on. The "grind" to get enough money and levels to actually do much in the game world is significant (as it always is in Western big budget open world games), and I was unwilling to engage these systems for long when I first tried them. This was shortly after *GTA Online*'s release, where many features were yet to be added—or removed. One feature that was removed was the ability for players to share their in-game currency with one another. However, before that removal, another player wordlessly gifted me several million in-game dollars. This player was likely one of the many "hackers" that broke the game's programming in the early days of *GTA Online*. Naturally, I immediately spent these ill-gotten gains on the armaments and property I would need to actually start engaging the money-making schemes wealthier players have access to *without* labouring in its "grind" for countless hours. So not only does *GTA Online* broadly represent the "comedic exposé" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 179) of American capitalism, it also provided me a comedic parable for the practical necessity to break the supposed rules of a supposedly non-exploitative system to succeed, or how one must *begin* with capital to *make* capital. That Rockstar removed the ability to share money to make this kind of hacked community-enrichment impossible *and* to make *GTA Online* a more distinctly neoliberal and individuated competitive economy (where the rich can purchase victory) is itself a telling move.

Rockstar as a clear expression of neoliberal production, design, and ideological verve through a literal casino is a natural development. Susan Strange famously expounded upon the intense de-regulation of Western democracies' financial systems in her 1986 book *Casino Capitalism*. Though Strange did not use the word "neoliberal" in her work, the economic realities she analyzed and presciently predicted are the same developments Harvey and others identify with the neoliberal turn in Western policy that started in the 1970s. Importantly, the ethos that undergirded this turn, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, is closely connected to the ideological developments that were a symptom and origin of colonial relations. Strange's purview was far less historical than it was contemporaneously statistically analytical and predictive, but she nevertheless delineated the outcomes of the neoliberal economic order in ways that dovetail neatly with the work of Harvey and others. Strange chose the analogy of a casino for the unregulated financial markets because of the increasing volatility and speculation-driven nature of capitalist markets in advancing neoliberal policy, where "games are played . . . that involve sums of money so large that they cannot be imagined" (1). For Strange, the most important difference between casinos and casino capitalism is that "in the latter all of us are involuntarily engaged in the day's play. A currency change can halve the value of a farmer's crop before he harvests it . . . A takeover dictated by financial considerations can rob the factory worker of his job. From school-leavers to pensioners, what goes on in the casino in the office blocks of the big financial centres is apt to have sudden, unpredictable, and unavoidable consequences for individual lives," and fortune and misfortune for those not playing the game with on-paper liquid assets "is a matter of luck" (2). If *GTAV*'s story thematically critiques corporate greed as a rigged casino game

where the house always wins, the satire is inevitably the distance from which Rockstar and Take-Two can make itself the house and ensure every game is played in its favour.

Strange's identification of casino capitalism is the ballooning de-regulated finance industry and the policies influenced by a fortifying corporate power. As Lloyd and Wolfe put it, the "crisis of profitability that confronted capitalism in the early 1970s led to economic restructuring on a vast scale, from the off-shoring of manufacture, enabled by post-Fordist modes of 'flexible' production and by containerization, to the sustained assault on the welfare state" (109-110). With corporations turning to globalized neoliberal supply chains to exploit cheaper labour elsewhere, Western wealth became progressively located in the finance industry. Greta R. Krippner and others have termed this particular shift in corporate capital "financialization." Krippner's exhaustively empirical study of American financialization refers to "finance" as "activities relating to the provision (or transfer) of liquid capital in expectation of future interest, dividends, or capital gains," and financialization itself as "a pattern of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production" (174-5). Krippner's study also points out that with overlap in boards, major shareholders, channels for capital exchange, and so on, "the distinction between forces operating 'inside' and 'outside' non-financial corporations is becoming increasingly arbitrary. Non-financial corporations are beginning to resemble financial corporations—in some cases, *closely*" (202).

Take-Two and Rockstar, with all their "corporate drama" that Houser can dismiss alongside his own undisclosed settlements over millions, are profiteers in an industry that is benefitting from neoliberal policy and quickly moving away from physical products. In

short, they are corporations whose capital and production chains cannot be distinguished as “outside” financialization. This is how Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter can call video games “exemplary media of Empire . . . games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism” (xxix). The ironic genius of Rockstar’s oeuvre specifically, it seems, is in providing hypercapitalist frontiers, ludodromes of their own ideological inside/outside indistinguishability, where the disaffected and the fortunate alike can be comforted by a fantasy in which the individual prevails and gains a piece of that dominance for themselves. The roll of the die may decide the fortunes of people more and more marginalized by global capital outside the circle, but Rockstar provides a playground inside of it where the dice (outside of its literal casino games) are loaded for the player. The porous magic circles of *GTA* are not so much ambivalent as much as they are totalizing. They provide, for corporate profit, the comforting play and the endless repetition of fantasies of dominance that rehearse the very principles of neoliberal global capitalist exploitation that these companies engage to produce the works themselves. Within the digital frontier, the player is invited to access everything; the inside of the game is a reward system. On the outside, Rockstar is always the house, and its dice are always loaded—its consumers are inside of the house only as part of fantasies that normalize the exploitation.

Indeed, the psychology of the frontier—the dangerous, anxiety-producing but profit-rich invitation to access, the indistinguishability of the “inside” and “outside” of sovereign domain—is broadly comparable to accumulation of capital in the era of neoliberalism. Consequently, just as Turner must make the frontier abstract and universal to see a positive arc to his American teleology, where the economic, social, and political

enrichment of the frontier merely changes form, capitalism's basic structure transitions to the abstract and universal to maintain its required infinite growth. Capitalist accumulation by its very nature requires the constant accumulation of more capital in order to sustain itself (even if that sustainability is in the casino-style peaks and valleys associated with market volatility). Governments and corporations alike proceed on the conventional wisdom that growth of capital is an absolute good to be maintained at any cost; this is especially a necessity currently to maintain financialization's reliance upon the speculation and confidences of the gamblers of capitalism's casino. A recent trend for corporations has been rebranding Chief Marketing Officers as Chief Growth Officers, or indeed, making the latter an entirely new role—naturally for considerable pay (Sternberg). Even traditional capitalist economists have recently been attempting to pivot the notions of capitalist growth away from “increasing use of the Earth's natural resources” and “separating economic growth from physical growth” (Johnston) due to the increasing awareness of current and impending ecological collapses. Of course, this attempted domestication of capital's accumulative logics does not attend to the actual issues that Strange and others have identified: Capitalist growth has already been, for several decades now, increasingly focused on non-physical growth, on the great sums of financial transfer for shifting the venues and styles of labour exploitation around the globe. Importantly, this occurs more and more through digital networks for digital production and digital commodities. This does not mean corporate entities have suddenly gained a conscience that is wholly alien to the logics of capital accumulation in and of itself. Indeed, this shift to non-physical growth cannot even be argued to have fundamentally changed the relationship global capital has to resource extraction, physical

growth, or the exploitation of labour; at most, it means these aspects have to be more carefully managed and redistributed for maintaining or expanding revenue streams. Globalized capital is able, as Strange highlighted, to re-prioritize growth in a world less and less ecologically able to sustain traditional modes of growth heretofore; thus, corporations entrench themselves in the numbers games of the high-finance casino, orienting that venue as more centrally important to maintain growth, investor confidence, and so forth.

The shift of emphasis for capital accumulation from the physical to the abstract may have merely accelerated the volatility and unsustainability of the enterprise as a mode of social organization. This volatility of non-physical origin is not without its benefits, of course. Surplus populations must be maintained at a level of precarity that makes capitalist exploitation function. Harvey clearly identified the animus of non-physical growth of financialized neoliberalism and its obsession with digital technologies—of which modern big budget game production (with microtransactions and their constant collection of analytics on player behaviour⁴⁹) are a part:

[Neoliberalism] holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace. Hence neoliberalism's intense interest in and pursuit of information technologies . . . These technologies have

⁴⁹ See Weber (2018) and Emily Greer's 2018 session at the Game Developer's Conference for introductions into the kinds of game analytics, as well as their uses and abuses.

compressed the rising density of market transactions in both space and time.

(Brief History of Neoliberalism 3-4)

Certainly, the effects of this shift are recognizably detrimental even to the heretofore privileged populations of settler nation states, once the primary beneficiaries of capital's dominance. Strange saw the casino and was prescient of finance's gambling's fallouts, and her work is just one small piece that can be added to entire bodies of literature studying these effects, particularly how this move from physical to abstract reveals key elements of capital's relation to people, land, and place. Saskia Sassen's work in sociology and economics has summarized just some of these effects on different populations:

the growing numbers of the abjectly poor, of the displaced in poor countries who are warehoused in formal and informal refugee camps, of the minoritized and persecuted in rich countries who are warehoused in prisons, of workers whose bodies are destroyed on the job and rendered useless at far too young an age, of able-bodied "surplus populations" warehoused in ghettos and slums . . . [these phenomena are] signaling a deeper systemic transformation, one documented in bits and pieces in multiple specialized studies but not quite narrated as an overarching dynamic that is taking us into a new phase of global capitalism. ("Expelled" 198)

Sassen and others⁵⁰ have studied corporate real estate practices, including how even (or perhaps, especially) in the era of ever-increasing precarity and housing crises, the forces of speculation-driven accumulation of capital evicts tenants in swiftly gentrifying

⁵⁰ See Sassen's "The City: A Collective Good?" (2017)

neighbourhoods and sits on empty housing for indefinite periods, waiting for greater return. As Veracini says, “Capital is thus literally settling on space that is made empty through financialization” (“Containment” 119).

This settled empty land is poetically analogous to the process and psychology that makes big-budget open world video games such an appetizing corporate investment for return *as well as* an attractive fantasy for gamers: the digital frontier is always already empty, primed for settlement by a player unalienated from their played labour and reward. In the real world, people can be removed from land and buildings upon it in order to extract greater value; space can be emptied literally and conceptually. In digital worlds, developers start with an empty world and fill it with invitations for the player. In this vein, it makes sense that Rockstar would lean further into a microtransaction business model as it encourages its players to settle in their digital worlds. This is again the promise of the frontier myth: “free land” for “fit people,” a universal invitation for capital to access. Gamers simply get to play the fantasy of being invited. Who or what entities receive the invitation in the material world of global capital, however, is not universal; it is the fact that those who receive the invitation are given *access that is universal* that shapes Empire’s sovereignty. The frontiers of corporate capitalism in the era of the neoliberal casino reveal that even the sovereignty of the states that settled the so-called New World are only secondary to the very processes and logics of capital accumulation. Coulthard asserts that “[l]ike capital, colonialism, as a structure of domination predicated on dispossession, is not ‘a thing,’ but rather the sum effect of the diversity of interlocking oppressive social relations that constitute it” (15). The co-development of capitalism and colonialism, then, and their attendant symptomatic social relations, are deeply important

to identify for my analysis moving forward. Though Sassen calls the current crises a “new phase,” it is a phase nevertheless reminiscent of and understandable as a consequential development from the colonial origins of capital.

Sovereignty, Racial Capitalism, and *GTAV*'s Brush with Indigeneity

Strange's later work would advance her theories surrounding the growing internationalized, financialized corporate influence in the world in just such a gesture to its historical bases. In an article published posthumously in 1999, she specifically stresses the changing nature of political sovereignty for Western nations. Recall my introduction's quick summation of Western sovereignty in international politics as historically indebted to precepts laid down in the Westphalian treaties of 1648; in this conception, sovereignty is located in the nation state's controls of domestic affairs within its borders. Strange's article coins a cheeky portmanteau to illustrate how corporate power and international financialized markets (or the forces of “global capital,” as per Dyer-Witford, de Peuter, and others) have superseded this apparent arrangement of sovereignty: the article is titled “The Westfailure System.” Strange identifies the Westphalian model of sovereignty as buckling under the weight of international corporations that wield ever more power and influence over labour and production in national and international contexts. Strange groups the model's failures into three categories: financial, environmental, and social. Her conclusion is that these failures are a symptom of the fact that it “cannot be realistically isolated from—indeed is inseparable from—the market economy which the states of Europe, from the mid-17th century onwards, both nurtured and promoted” (345). Essentially, Strange suggests that the Westphalian model is failing because it no longer has the ability (that she is doubtful it will ever regain) to de-fang the consequences of the

capitalist system's logics that are inherent in the Westphalian historical and continuing sovereignties.⁵¹ This is the understandable latest development, then, of what Dyer-Witford and de Peuter call Empire; the forces that most purely express empire's exploitation have gained the sovereignty that was once wielded by imperial powers, then by settler and colonizing nation states. Corporate power has surpassed national power, but not in a fashion utterly distinct from the mixed private-and-state enterprise that European imperialism and settler colonialism has always been, and to which those mid-17th century Westphalian market economies are indebted. The current form of unrestrained pursuit of capital accumulation has merely shifted the balance of multiple united state and non-state actors. Corporations and interrelated state apparatuses hold the power to shift state policy in the ways Harvey, Dyer-Witford, and de Peuter note took place in New York specifically. Veracini calls this "the 'sovereign effects' of financial capital, which has now acquired an unprecedented capacity to dictate policies 'from above'" ("Containment" 123). Sovereignty for modern neoliberal capitalism is now less about national domains of domestic power and the monopoly on state violence; it now rests in the hands of global capital.

Strange's conclusion is in line with what many Indigenous scholars, and scholars of (settler) colonialism and Marxism (like Veracini above) have argued for some time. The casino of financialization becomes even more relevant to this chapter's study of Rockstar when we look at precisely how those scholars direct their analyses of the same forces Strange and Krippner identify. Strange's assertions are echoed in studies of settler

⁵¹ It is worth pointing out that Strange did not consider herself a Marxist. A great deal of her work mostly seemed interested in how market logics were not (and possibly could be) sufficiently regulated internationally; this posthumous article, however, seems to indicate that her findings eventually drew her much closer to contemporary Marxist analysis.

colonialism, a project “predicated upon an objective to take possession of new territories and to transport the sovereignty of empire to them” (Dwyer and Nettleback 4). The development of Westphalian sovereignty into the imperial sovereignties of empires is concurrent with, and in many ways indistinguishable from, the development of market capitalism. Many scholars of settler colonialism and critical race theory suggest that this is how the modern orders of racialization (and thus modern Western racist ideologies) were formed and later codified. Strange saw capitalism’s ever-widening “socioeconomic polarisation,” where the corporate forces benefitting the most from and directing this polarisation are largely unrestrained by accountability in the Westphalian model of international politics (“Westfailure” 352), a direct result of that model’s historical indebtedness to capitalist logics. Other scholars can expand this analysis with insights into the nature of those connections and their expressions.

Cedric Robinson famously coined the term “racial capitalism” in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Robinson argued the development of the Western conception of “race” (which differed from previous historical conceptions of ethnicity/peoplehood) was due to its requirement for fostering in-group and out-group inequalities. This reading is in line with the concept of surplus populations: race is part of capital’s necessity to manage its surplus populations with disposability and division. Capitalist and proto-capitalist colonial management of surplus populations has used racial division for precisely what that phrase denotes: division. W. E. B. Du Bois suggested that the societal privileges whites have in the Western world (which included capital and the access to it) over non-whites is little more than enough to ensure the failures of Western economic enrichment can be politically operationalized against non-white out-groups,

thus maintaining the structure (709). Indeed, these inequalities and their naturalized codification in “race” are necessary to theoretically justify and practically enact the dispossessions of capitalism’s first engine of European enrichment: colonialism, and its violently extractive sovereignty exported abroad. While tracking the colonial causes of the First World War, Du Bois noted that as the European imperial powers fought over expanding their colonial holdings, they created the conditions for “precisely that state of helplessness which invites aggression and exploitation,” which validates the developing syntax of racist ideology (708). The very concept of race progressed as the stolen wealth accrued, and as the peoples and cultures pillaged were forced into conditional practices the pillaging created: “Thus the world began to invest in color prejudice. The ‘Color Line’ began to pay dividends” (708). This arc is echoed by the settler frontier’s self-perpetuating conditions of savagery and civilization discussed in the introduction.

This inextricability of race hierarchy and colonial capitalism is precisely why the supposed post-racial nature of neoliberalism is little more than cover for continuing exploitation. This post-racial fantasy is part of how *GTAV* rehabilitates its own exploitation. Without facing how the “relation” of capital is itself co-constructed with colonial racism and the logics of surplus populations, the divisions they engender, and the material disparities between groups they historically and continue to produce, the validation of good intentions and the extrication of race from capital plays the part of progress when the reality looks much worse. *GTAV* poses racism as only attendant to capitalist exploitation (which is quite simply the way of the world) rather than constitutive, and thus rehearses the central racism of that logic. True to the weightlessness of its satire, by depicting racism as useful but dispensable to the economic

exploitation it both revels in and ridicules, is produced by and reproduces, *GTA* evades historical reality and evinces its own ideological rehabilitation of that exploitation. Before moving on to this chapter's analysis of Rockstar's Wild West fantasies of the *Red Dead Redemption* series, however, it is important to paint a clearer picture of the colonial relation in this matrix of racialization and capitalism.

Scores of scholars, theorists, and writers have pointed out that racial capitalism—not always in name but in metrics and formal framework—continues unabated in modern democratic neoliberal governance, culture, and economics, despite neoliberalism's professed post-racial multi-culturalism. Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaq) and Enakshi Dua's influential article "Decolonizing Antiracism" potently demonstrates that even anti-racist activism and scholarship can validate colonialism by ignoring the historical bases of and connections between racism and the economic modes of developing and developed settler states. Beenash Jafri points out that Lawrence, Dua, Sherene Razack, and others situated "settler states," before Wolfe, as principally referencing "the patterns of capitalist development that are particular to the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand: White settlement of these lands required the erasure and displacement of Indigenous peoples and claims to land, and the exploitation of labor of people of color to develop that land" (Jafri). As such, the nominally meritocratic individualization of neoliberalism is the torch-bearer of settler colonial economic structure and racist ideology along the histories I have established. These scholars and Harvey all recognize privatization of land is a central element of settler "progress," and is the reason and metric by which Indigenous peoples need be eliminated as the most troublesome sets of surplus population. We may again recall that Turner's thesis must make the frontier abstract once Indigenous lands

have been stolen for private settler ownership; it is a sign of teleological process for Turner that “the great spaces of fertile prairie land . . . have already passed into private possession” (293) of a “fit people” (294). Precisely who counts as “fit people” in the privatized land-grab of the frontier is racially explicit for Turner’s Indigenous exclusion, and implicit in the neoliberal context that individualizes systemic problems for racialized groups. This is why capitalism *and* overt and covert forms of racism are baked into the settler colonial imaginary, of which Western big budget open world games broadly and Rockstar’s games specifically are a part. Capitalism and racism are constitutive of both the very sovereignty settlers brought with them, and the Empire that has overtaken national settler state sovereignty.

Coulthard’s important clarification and realignment of Marxist analysis through Indigenous political thought in *Red Skin White Masks* is again useful for summarizing the relations tracked here. Coulthard writes about settlers’ dispossessions of Indigenous peoples as such:

these formative acts of violent dispossession set the stage for the emergence of capitalist accumulation and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production by tearing Indigenous societies, peasants, and other small-scale, self-sufficient agricultural producers from the source of their livelihood—the land. It was this horrific process that established the two necessary preconditions underwriting the capital relation itself: it forcefully opened up what were once collectively held territories and resources to privatization (dispossession and enclosure), which, over time, came to produce a “class” of workers compelled to enter the exploitative realm of the labor market for their survival (7).

Similarly, Harvey's *The New Imperialism* argues that modern neoliberalism's primary mode of capital expansion is "accumulation by dispossession." Harvey puts these modern dispossessions into categories, including privatization and financialization. Lloyd and Wolfe connect modern neoliberal dispossession and the settler colonial historical origins as such:

the fundamental continuity between the historical development of European settler colonialism and the present-day development of the neoliberal world order resides in the exigencies of managing surplus populations. So far as settlers have been concerned, the salient surplus has, of course, been the Native population, whose refractory presence has prompted a range of techniques of elimination—from outright homicide to various forms of removal and/or confinement, and, once their numbers have been appropriately reduced in the post-frontier era, to Natives' assimilation into settler society—techniques that have met with mixed success in the face of Native modes of resistance which have varied as creatively as the settlers' own repertoire of strategies. In this overall historical process, the key shift is the ending of the frontier, which generally coincides with the consolidation of the settler state, and which is typically marked by intensified programs of Native assimilation, so many mopping-up exercises for civilization.

(111)

This is how the history of settlement and the contemporary continuance of neoliberalism merge and develop what Coulthard calls the "settler colonial relationship," which features "interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power . . . structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social

relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (6-7). This “colonial relation of dispossession” (14) has figured and continues to figure Indigenous lives as outside of capital’s expansion; it is only through the dispossession of Indigenous land and sovereignty thereof that capital may expand, and only by assimilation into neoliberal practice can Indigenous life be made inside that expansion. The frontier may have mostly closed physically, but it continues conceptually.

It is important, however, to ensure this framework does not place Indigenous peoples as only another racialization as invented by, or constitutively a response to, the colonial relation of dispossession. As J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (Kānaka Maoli) puts it, Indigeneity is “a category of analysis that is distinct from race, ethnicity, and nationality—even as it entails elements of all three of these”(“A Structure, Not an Event,” n.p.). It is crucial to note that not only did settlers bring and impose a sovereignty on stolen lands, doing so displaced and destroyed countless pre-existing sovereignties among the Indigenous peoples with relationships to the land that were wholly outside the very conception of sovereignty that was transported across the Atlantic. Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) tracks the concept of “sovereignty” through global historical circumstances in “Self-Determination and the Concept of Sovereignty.” From theological origins to the “divinely ordained” Kings of Europe, Deloria suggests sovereignty, even before the Westphalian codification and the attendant colonial adjustments and validations, was about locating “immense absolute powers” in individuals. This explains why early colonial Europeans assumed the “spokesmen of other nations” of varied Indigenous peoples were thought “to represent the nationhood of the people they

represented” (22). Deftly demonstrating how European treatments of “Indian” sovereignty was amorphous enough to accommodate expansion and dispossession, Deloria points out that “Indian communities were acknowledged to have a European version of sovereignty as long as they held sufficient territory and military strength to be an important factor in determining the outcome of the colonial conflicts,” and as soon as “England became predominant on the continent the idea of Indian sovereignty became less popular” (22). The American Revolution saw “Indian sovereignty” returned to importance, yet again for the political and martial impact on colonial warfare; the nascent American state respected sovereignties that would fight the English both out of necessity and to demonstrate “their ability to act in traditional political terms” to “allay the fears of other nations” and “legitimize their activities” (23). When the American Revolution ended and American sovereignty consolidated, so too ended the apparent settler respect for “Indian sovereignty” and the treaties made during and after the war. For Deloria, this is merely a continuation for the fraught, conditional nature of European sovereignty itself, even prior to colonial contact: “Few nations were powerful enough to insist upon total independence from other nations and legal fictions replaced a frank discussion of the actual state of affairs. Treaties between equal “sovereigns” often disguised the fact of interdependence of European nations” (“Self-Determination” 22). The legal fictions of this sovereignty take on new dangerous power with accumulation by dispossession.

Joanne Barker (Lenape) also tracks the development of “sovereignty” in the European colonial context, and in noting its “historically contingent” status, tracks how Indigenous groups have since used the word to translate, “defining their relationships with one another, their political agendas, and their strategies for decolonization and social

justice” across the varied “social conditions that produce its meanings” (26). It is in this way I use the word “sovereignty” not only to describe the power relations imposed by settlers, but also to describe the varied political and social beliefs of Indigenous groups, and their relation, à la Barker, to “concepts of self-determination and self-government . . . recognition of inherent rights to the respect for political affiliations that are historical and located and for the unique cultural identities that continue to find meaning in those histories and relations” (26). That these sovereignties are “located” is critical; that Indigeneity is inherently related to *place* is why Coulthard refers to the “place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice” as “*grounded normativity*,” which is the “modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure [Indigenous] ethical engagements with the world” (13). This is how the privatization of land once “collectively held” (7) is itself an expression of capital’s sovereignty assaulting alternatives for its own survival and expansion, and presages how settler nation states themselves would have their conditional sovereignty so thoroughly outmatched by the relation of capital encoded into it.

The early history of settler colonialism in practice is a mixed private-state enterprise, then, and the neoliberalism of today fits neatly together in frameworks that reveal the lie of settler “legal fictions” of sovereignty. Settler sovereignty has always been porous. The interdependence of nations and the necessity of constant expansion and accumulation, both historically and contemporarily, makes the settler psyche inherently anxious. Motivated by belief in absolute jurisdiction over and security of the *inside*, but constantly reaching *outside* for extraction, advancement, and expansion, the settler imaginary is beset by the desire for an interiority of unassailable integrity with an

attendant and inextricable need for access to that which lay in exteriority. The frontier remains an enduring concept (represented repeatedly in various guises) in the settler imaginary precisely because it represents the hope, promise, danger, and validation of Empire, from the exploitation of post-Republican Rome to settler nations built on genocide and slavery. The frontier in fiction acts as a calming salve for the anxiety of the inherent porousness of European, market-logic, colonial sovereignty itself: the *inside* and the *outside* were always comingled. In the interactive fiction of videogames, this salve takes on a procedural power lacking in other media. Many aspects of sovereignty transported by settlers, now little more than the nominal interest for bordered states and more realistically held by the borderless empire of global capital, are disintegrating. Political norms and material prosperities largely decline across the board aside from an increasingly small population with massive capital. In the withstanding reality of its economic practices, neoliberal Empire's frontier is the complete invalidation of borders against itself. The calming, hypnotic power fantasies of Western open world games, then, use the frontier as setting and psychology of design for players as subjects of Empire, desperate to feel the access promised by the culture produced by neoliberal capitalism, with all its strategic historical omissions, exploitations, and valorization of frontierism.

GTAV, I should note, does feature small references to Indigeneity—naturally shorn of any alternative sovereignty—most of which are in missable optional activities. Lamar, Franklin's stupid Trevor to his Michael, at times claims he is part Apache. The claim is presented along the lines of *GTAV*'s general use of race described above. Trevor the Canadian pretends to be American to get rich; Lamar uses Indigeneity to pretend his gangster activities are, as Franklin critiques it, the "protest . . . of some kind of noble

anarchist.” Indigeneity, here, is thus merely another cynical equivocation: even were it principled resistance, under the status quo of criminality that is the nature of GTA’s reality, it is in effect self-deluded savagery. This kind of savagery makes good gameplay (as Lamar’s violent tendencies actually instigate many of the game’s missions), but means little else narratively. But this is not Rockstar’s only treatment of Indigeneity, nor is the *GTA* series the most obvious representative of the frontierism of open world games in its oeuvre. The *Red Dead Redemption* series not only lets players live out Wild West fantasies, but also does so in a setting it repeatedly reminds players is just after the very “ending of the frontier” Lloyd and Wolfe argue marks the primary transition of settler colonialism’s mechanics to what would eventually become nominally post-racial neoliberalism (111).

Red Dead Redemption, Open World Occlusion, and the Neoliberal Cowboy

Rockstar released *Red Dead Redemption (RDR)* in 2010, after *GTAIV* and before *GTA V*. Thoroughly praised in mainstream outlets as a more mature approach to narrative than the *GTA* series, *RDR* literalizes Rockstar’s open world frontier design into the imagery most closely associated with the American frontier by decades of Wild West fictionalization. The introduction of *RDR*, as Jodi Byrd points out, shows player-character John Marston on a train where he overhears “[t]wo older white women . . . reflect on how, although the Natives have lost their lands, they have gained heaven, that although the Indians might live like animals, they are happy in that life” (“Red Dead Conventions” 345). Thus the game begins with a self-aware presentation of a colonial attitude, a mild critique that appears throughout the game. This critique only acts as set-dressing for much of the game’s plot and gameplay, as the player re-enacts the tropes of

the Western genre, from ranch-handing to capturing bandits, from hunting animals for their sellable parts, to games of saloon poker, and so on. The introductory train sequence is emblematic for how *RDR* features Indigenous peoples generally; they are mostly used *in absentia* for commentary, a tragically near-extinct identity that is used only secondarily to advance more central narrative concerns. Indigenous peoples only actually appear in *RDR* in the last section of the game, where they are still secondary and then made utterly extinct in the game's framework with the player's participation.

Byrd calls *RDR* "a study in contradictions" for its apparent "critique of the Western genre" in a product that "fetishizes genre at the site of the Indian absent presence" (344). The older white women's sneering superiority is a classic example of Rockstar's caricature of odious American ideology as in the *GTA* series: critique your cake, devour it, and bake anew too. Just as *GTA* uses "scathing critique of neoliberal sensibilities" (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 179), cynicism, and equivocation to validate a core neoliberal ideology, Byrd similarly suggests that *RDR* poses Indigeneity as there-and-not-there, an "absent presence" that exists both *inside* and *outside* its artificial frontier in the service of fetishizing the very Wild West genre tropes that also validated genocide and Indigenous dispossession in the first place. *RDR*'s title itself is a tellingly vague encounter with this tension; Byrd notes the "genocidal racism of the conjoined first two words is tempered by a lingering ambivalence of redemption that emerges from the game's tension with the generic conventions it charts" ("Red Dead" 345). Byrd probes the game's titular and contextual generic ambivalence, wondering "Is it Indians who must be redeemed by dying and having their lands put to productive use within the US fee simple empire, or is it the settlers themselves who must seek redemption for the genocide

and colonization of Indigenous peoples, a redemption that is forever out of their grasp?” (345) As this chapter’s discussion of *RDR* will assert, true to Rockstar’s open world principles, it appears the answer is that the redemption in the game’s design and the context of Rockstar’s production implies the redemption of Indigenous disappearance. Narratively, the redemption is perhaps even less well-intentioned than redemption for settlers: redemption for genocide is not only an impossibility; the impossibility of settler masculinity’s survival is itself worthy of tragic elegy over the Indigenous genocide of its historical foundation.

These questions over the direction of “redemption” and their relation to the game’s phantasmic Indigeneity are all the more salient in the context of *Red Dead Redemption* technically being a sequel to an earlier Rockstar game, *Red Dead Revolver*, which features a half-Indigenous protagonist—and whose ludological genre is a much more confined, linear shooter. The series abandoned the storylines and characters of *Revolver*, but *Redemption 1* and *2* share each other’s world and many of the same characters. That the series abandoned Indigeneity as an aspect of the main character (the titular “Red,” no less) is likely the result of the marketing logics that direct design for costly open world games; these logics suggest that white males are the predominant market for open world games, and that for the all-important “immersion” of open world games to be most effective in that market, the protagonists should be white males. Using a non-normative protagonist for a masculine frontier adventure in the open world genre (far more expensive to create than more linear alternatives) is simply too risky a proposition for a company certain that straight white male gamers would reject such a choice—a logic with conflicting evidence on the one hand, and a self-perpetuating

character on the other.⁵² Abandoning a linear style of gameplay for open world gameplay, in a sense, is the move that precipitates replacing an even part-Indigenous protagonist with a white one. It seems even virtual settlement on artificial frontiers requires a Turnerian “fit people.” The cost of creating the artificial frontiers of open worlds has already been discussed, but Joshua Miner argues that the very algorithmic structure of how these frontiers are displayed for players can be read as a distinct “settler digitality.”

Miner’s delineation of settler digitality is tied to the “revival,” in the mid-2000s, of “western games” which draw from the tropes of Wild West film and “incorporate open-world environments and game structures in a setting tailor-made for them” (58). Miner notes that Rockstar “rewrote the Rockstar Advanced Game Engine (also used for the *Grand Theft Auto* series) for *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) during an industry-wide proliferation of open-world video games thanks to major advancements in 3D rendering” (58).⁵³ Even without explicitly “western” settings, though, Miner asserts settler digitality is encoded in open world games by how they render those worlds in the first place. The relevant advances in rendering that led to heavy investment into big budget open world games have to do with how these worlds are essentially made in the player’s view, and unmade outside of it. These advances

had opened the possibility of highly complex, photorealistic geometries in open-world settings, and the established algorithmic shortcuts for efficiently generating

⁵² This point will be expanded upon in the following chapter and its discussion of Joshua Jackson’s “capitalist socius” in game design.

⁵³ Rendering, in the parlance of digital production, is simply the process of generating digital images for display.

3D worlds shifted. An immersive POV⁵⁴ further consolidated a set of rendering techniques designed to divert computational resources toward the subjective experience of the player, a framework that includes level of detail/draw distance, mesh simplification (reducing the polygonal complexity of models drawn at differing distance or conditions) and frustum and occlusion culling (not rendering figures and objects that fall outside the player’s unobstructed field of view). The expansive, untamed environments of the western genre dispose games to these algorithms for handling geometry and improving the overall look (“Surveying the Frontier” 118).

As these rendering techniques essentially “draw only those objects in the player’s view, in discrete stages that draw, texture, and then light world geometry,” for the programming of open world games, “relative to environments rendered in real time, vision is not merely vision; vision is literal creation” (“Biased Render” 52). For Miner, these techniques are not *only* clever ways to render artificial frontiers on limited hardware, frontiers free for the exploration and domination by the fit people gamers may imagine themselves to be. They also represent and encode settler relationships to land and the bodies that populate them.

Connecting graphical occlusion and settler colonial occlusion of Indigenous cultures and bodies, Miner suggests “such computational shortcuts reflect an ideological orientation that privileges player subjectivity and visual fidelity over the Other, a distilled object on surveyed land” (“Surveying the Frontier” 118). Settler digitality, then, “is emergent in the algorithmic grammar of mainstream video games, where rendering (1)

⁵⁴ Point-of-view, akin to the camera lens through which the player sees the game world.

relies on a spatial-hierarchical system of visual definition; and (2) maps these to particular digital bodies” (118). Part of “a range of algorithmic techniques, [which] organizes gamic vision and therefore player subjectivity” (118), this algorithmic grammar necessarily ties this subjectivity to particular points-of-view: “In non-Indigenous games featuring Native characters, the subjective camera is a digital proxy for the settler-colonial gaze . . . Cultural shortcuts translated into digital technology contribute a degree of design bias toward settler perspectives” (“Biased Render” 52). Miner suggests digital Indigenous bodies are visually occluded with western games’ programmed grammar, because their techniques of rendering assets prioritize certain kinds of fidelity for subjective views of *land*. This, Miner argues, inherently relates to the ways Indigenous cultures and cultural viewpoints are themselves narratively occluded in these digital frontiers. When Rockstar’s design moves from the tight, linear mission stages with half-Indigenous Red of *Red Dead Revolver* to the open world frontiers with white John Marston, the programming to make such a leap possible “operate[s] on a rendering paradigm that tends to shift Indigenous figures and stories into occluded space” (126). *Red Dead Redemption*’s opening train sequence is symbolic of exactly this occlusion. Critique of moralistic colonial attitude comes from the “absent presence” of Indigenous peoples; the dispossession is mentioned by white bodies, and this itself merely serves as interstitial dressing to the sweeping, sumptuous shots of terrain, the train barreling through a massive game world players will soon get to inhabit and dominate.

Similar to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s analysis of *GTA*’s cynicism and figuration of neoliberalism as inexorable, Sara Humphreys reads *RDR*’s critique of the American colonial project as one of “eternal inequality,” where the “hierarchy of national

identities . . . racial, gendered, and economic . . . remain entrenched” in the game’s “frontier ideologies” (201) as they are played and narratively delivered. Similar to the concept of the ludodrome, Humphreys argues that the “participatory nature of video games offer[s] epistemic and ontological stability” (206). This is a similar understanding of how the repeated actions of a player’s input in gameplay *naturalizes the ideological bases* of the simulated activities rather than the represented activities *as they are simulated* (209). In blunt terms, *RDR* is not likely to inspire a player to shoot people outside the magic circle, but they certainly interact with a player’s understanding of when shooting someone might be justifiable outside that circle. Humphreys’s argument is that *RDR*’s bodily engagement is less in service to “a nostalgic dream of American identity through the “was” of the West,” and more in service to the game’s nature as a Foucauldian “cultural placeholder of ‘authenticity and attribution’” (206). That is to say, the gameplay of cowboys from the Western genre’s formulas does not validate or encourage cowboy activities as much as it validates the ideology these fictive cowboys hold in common with the neoliberal ideology that dominates the cultural space of its developers and players. Noting the game’s release during “pressures brought to bear on US citizenry by the continued repercussions of the 2008 collapse” (206), Humphreys calls the gameplay and its ideological validation a “safety valve” that “relieves the pressure of a failed neoliberal economy,” as players guide Marston to “violently defend the edicts of neoliberalism” with the “authority invested in him through his status as a white, heteronormative, rugged individual: the cowboy” (206).

Among the first interactions the player has in the game is aiding patriarch Drew and daughter Bonnie MacFarlane and their ranch. Drew and Bonnie offer missions where

Marston protects their large homestead and herds cattle, missions that themselves foreshadow Marston's eventual return to his own ranching and cattle-herding at the end of the game. The other set of early missions sees Marston help a local marshal kill cattle rustlers. Both sets of story missions introduce the optional activities of bounty-hunting and homestead law enforcement, activities that send the player out to far-flung locales with the former, and simply around the increasingly familiar MacFarlane ranch for the latter. Humphreys notes that Bonnie says "businessmen are the new cowboys"⁵⁵ in reference to the changing social texture of the American experience, where federal government and the interests of big business are replacing mythical rugged individualist cowboy masculinity. Humphreys points to an early compulsory mission introducing Drew MacFarlane—a non-violent ride and horse-wrangling affair where the ranch-owner commiserates with Marston about modernism's evils surpassing outlawry. The conversation is ended with Bonnie's call to "enjoy the ride," an example of what Humphreys calls a "manifest domesticity, to use Amy Kaplan's phrase" that "depoliticizes the conversation, thereby subordinating dissent to propriety" (208).

I argue that what Humphreys calls depoliticization is another symptom of Rockstar's validation of the morality of the worldview it critiques—yet still nevertheless embodies in production and play. *RDR*'s confused matrix of political reality and cowboy masculine identity figured in its "eternal inequality" is similar to the *GTA* series' depoliticization of its critiques of asshole capitalism. *RDR*'s tragic teleology of modernism à la Turner's "disintegrating civilization," and *GTAV*'s asshole capitalism's individuation of systemic issues are the indelible superstructures to each respective

⁵⁵ From the mission "This is Armadillo, USA"

game's narrative events and play. The depoliticization, then, is more accurately another individuation of systemic context and constraints. In this way, capitalism and colonialism are themselves subordinated for *RDR*'s elegiac treatment of cowboy masculinity, framed by settler digitality. This nostalgic representation of vanishing cowboy individualism thus de-couples the cowboy activities the player engages from the very forces *RDR* poses as responsible for that cowboy individualism's disappearance. Like *GTA*, *RDR*'s narrative focuses on the individuals struggling within an underdeveloped context in an overdeveloped open world—systemic realities are replaced by detailed assets. This allows players to feel powerful in a game world that tells players the powerlessness experienced outside the magic circle in the real neoliberal world is an inescapable natural consequence of history. The “release valve” for “neoliberal pressure” is revealed in precisely the gameplay that rehearses the activities of the Western genre.

RDR, like *GTA*, is always just aware enough of the ideology it indulges and critiques to intentionally and inadvertently gesture to the fissures of its own representation, but ultimately always rests upon the decoupling of its central principles from the aspects of American culture and history it represents as beyond the titular redemption. To do otherwise would be to cast its central gameplay behaviours as equally problematic as the villains it does not even bother to give nuance or complexity. The second appearance of Marshal Johnson (who Marston helps kill cattle rustlers and bandits in the desert) sees him struggling to contact the railway company that employs him. “Suddenly, the world is full of ‘theys,’” the marshal opines regarding the federal and big business interests that are apparently the root cause of the region's issues. These are the very same forces that are coercing Marston into the game's plot in the first place: it is

eventually revealed that federal agents have kidnapped Marston's family from his ranch and forced him to hunt, kill, or capture the surviving members of his former gang for his family's return. The marshal makes passing reference to his salary-paying railway company and their demands that he "turn a blind eye to them burning settlements," which as Humphreys points out, is another reference to the political and monied forces "responsible for the economic turmoil and physical violence in" the region (211). But the mission that follows, and indeed the player's activities necessary to complete the story, are focused on a displacement of those concerns "by Marston's role as a bounty hunter and lawman. That is, property crimes are enacted by rustlers and outlaws who must come to justice" (211); Marston's violence to protect property is cast as his helpful, heroic role as a cowboy. A reward system that incentivizes precisely these kinds of activities with bonuses and freer exploration of the open world makes this apparent if the depiction of Marston's personality in cutscenes and missions do not. Humphreys suggests the game thus emphasizes the bandits, "upon whose shoulders the fault for ruptures in ownership and property rest," which renders "the 'interference' by government and corporate interests . . . part of the discursive landscape, along with the cacti, and does not produce political resistance and action. The status quo—no matter how reviled—remains" (212). This is the Wild West flavour of *GTA*'s no-escape neoliberalism à la Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter. As Humphreys points out, Marston's first missions "are designed to repair the fractures to private property" (211). Indeed, players will likely purchase multiple properties through the game that allow them to save their progress or change Marston's outfit, providing particular bonuses. Purchasing these properties, that is, provides the ability to make progression *possible*, giving players access to literal gameplay cohesion

for a game that takes, at least, tens of hours to complete. More importantly, as Humphreys highlights, Marston's true goal is to get his family back and return to his own ranch and replicate the life he sees on MacFarlane's ranch; this is the happy ending held at arm's length from gamers playing through the story, and it is one obviously associated with the propertied productivity in line with neoliberal ideology.

It is important to note that the *Red Dead Redemption* series has a much more generally serious and dramatic tone than the *GTA* series. Both series include attempts at earnest drama performed by talented actors and lengthy treatments of character motivations, and both include absurd and crude humour and characterizations. However, the *RDR* series much more heavily emphasizes the former where *GTA* has a ratio that more heavily favours the latter. The reward system mentioned above, which incentivizes classic heroic Western genre actions, is called the "Honor"⁵⁶ system and is completely absent from *GTA*'s mechanics. This systematic difference alone suggests that *RDR* has aspirations to moralizing thematic content that *GTA* eschews. In *RDR*, positive Honor is doled out primarily for catching bounties and wiping out bandit strongholds, gameplay that typifies the game's simplistic Western genre motifs. Humphreys claims *RDR*'s played ideologies "require the correct performance of rugged individuality" in gameplay heavy on Wild West tropes, and asserts that "neoliberalism and the frontier mythos cannot be separated," and "the power of the frontier" is here used as "means to narrativize the discourse of neoliberalism" (210).⁵⁷ Even to generously read *RDR*'s

⁵⁶ I use the American spelling of "honor" and "honorable" throughout this dissertation to cohere with this system's spelling.

⁵⁷ *RDR* and *RDR2*, unlike *GTAV*, is more like *GTAVIII*, in that it locks access to regions of its massive open world until players progress the main storyline. As such, these systems do require the correct "performance" to allow complete access, even for players who are uninterested in that story.

critique of federal and corporate encroachment as sustained and nuanced would highlight where it fundamentally disavows how genocide and Indigenous dispossession is inextricable from the modern-neoliberal-acceptable mythic figure of the Western-motif cowboy individualist that players inhabit. *RDR*'s primary ideological disavowal is similar to *GTA*'s decoupling of race and capitalism. *RDR*'s equivalent is how it decouples settlers from the violence necessary for settlement, instead blaming the “theys” the marshal mentions, absolving the cowboy masculinity that is acceptable to the contemporary mythology of individualistic neoliberal spirit.

In the mission⁵⁸ introduced by the cutscene in which the marshal mentions the “they” of federal and corporate encroachment, this neoliberal logic qua cowboy masculinity comes alongside the occlusion of Indigeneity, an occlusion necessary for its very coherence. The marshal complains about city businessmen and “government men” that traffic in “this Manifest Destiny hogwash. Tamin’ a wild land; bringin’ modernization and betterments to the West. It’s only made the rich richer and the poor poorer, and it’s killed a way of life.” Marston agrees, responding “Just look at what they did to the Natives for God knows how many years.” Marston’s line about the mistreatment of “the Natives” by the ambiguous “they” of federal and corporate interest is part of dialogue that takes place in transit from a mission’s beginning to the site of its inevitable gunfight. It is telling that this dialogue can be easily missed: this mission is so early in the game that the ride acts as a tutorial for how to easily ride a horse alongside a group of other friendly riders—and thus simplifies horse-riding game mechanics for players to more comfortably listen to dialogue while making it to where combat likely

⁵⁸ From the mission “Justice in Pike’s Basin.”

takes place. The player is provided with a tooltip⁵⁹ to hold a button to merely follow the marshal's speed. Only by not doing this and choosing to ride at a slower speed will players ever get a chance to hear Marston utter the line. Though more serious than *GTA*, the *RDR* series is still designed to be entertaining experiences for a range of players, from those that take their time, completing optional activities and experiencing every conversation, to those that wish to rush through the plot and get to the killing. This missable dialogue about these spectral Natives is emblematic of the occlusion of Indigenous lives *RDR* maintains.

Red Dead Redemption, Where Cowboys are Indians, But Still Settlers

Another early but unmissable example of *RDR*'s ideological tension with Indigenous peoples is featured as part of the early missions with the MacFarlanes—missions that hint at the propertied man-of-the-family life Marston has lost and wishes to regain by story's end. Drew MacFarlane is said to have brought in European tutors to ensure his children did not become “savages”⁶⁰ in the wild land he personally dominated. Marston also agrees with MacFarlane, as he does with the marshal, about his feelings of being outpaced in a developing America. These three grizzled white men are presented as victims of distant federalist corporatism (the ambiguous “they”) as the heretofore spectral Indigenous people in all their absent presence. In an early cutscene, Marston listens reverently as Drew MacFarlane waxes on his 30-year-long list of difficulties being a ranch-owning settler. MacFarlane says that when he arrived the “land had never been

⁵⁹ Tooltips are small windows of text, typically at the bottom centre, or upper corners of the screen that inform the player of controls that are contextually important to their current action. The tooltip mentioned here acts as a tutorial on how to ride alongside a group of other riders.

⁶⁰ This line is spoken by Bonnie MacFarlane in the mission “This is Armadillo, USA.”

settled.” He immediately follows this statement with “for 10 years we fought the Indians. Tough men.”⁶¹ For MacFarlane, the Indians he fought for 10 years were not “settled” in the area for which they fought. This is perhaps a representation of the doctrine of discovery, and the John Lockian fallacy that supposes Indigenous peoples have no claim to land on which their *living* did not count as proper civilizational modes.⁶² Certainly their lives and cultures were not settlement, for Indigenous peoples *are not settlers*, at least not like the white masculine productive figures represented by Marston, the marshal, and MacFarlane. The cutscene dialogue of MacFarlane talking about those 20-years-gone “tough men” is given a pregnant pause and close-up of his aged, rugged appearance, reflecting on a fight worthy of bygone masculinities in contest.

This moment is perfectly aligned with Turner’s frontier thesis, where combat with “Indians” forges the positive, typically masculine aspects of American culture. The only adjustment for *RDR* is that the federal government and corporations have interfered with the development of the individuals who apparently fought and won that contest. It is aligned because this martial contest uses Indigenous life as a resource to be exhausted in the service of constructing settler identity. This is why settler literature retrospectively on this frontier contest is almost always deeply interested in limited forms of Indian masculinity. As Brian Klopotek (Choctaw) argues,

For at least the last century, hypermasculinity has been one of the foremost attributes of the Indian world that whites have imagined. With [Indigenous women] . . . usually playing secondary roles, Indian tribes are populated

⁶¹ From the mission “Wild Horses, Tamed Passions.”

⁶² See Barker on the doctrine of discovery and Locke’s philosophical impact.

predominantly by noble or ignoble savages, wise old chiefs, and cunning warriors.

These imagined Indian nations comprise an impossibly masculine race. (251)

Indeed, there is not a single Indigenous woman in the first *RDR*, even as a nameless NPC, and what few Indigenous men are represented all fall cleanly into these hypermasculine warrior categories. In this way, *RDR* merely makes itself a cynical version of Turner's frontier thesis, where the teleology of manifest destiny is seemingly overwritten by the absolutely exploitative nature of human experience and development. The "tough men" that are the Indians are gone, replaced by the "tough men" that are cowboys and ranchers like MacFarlane, who are themselves being replaced by the "tough men" that are the federal agents and railway company owners that overtake their way of life. Apparently, cowboys are the new Indians, and just as Bonnie MacFarlane says, "businessmen are the new cowboys." The game certainly sustains "hierarchies of identity that privilege rugged and white masculinity" (Humphreys 211), but does so in terms that here cannibalize an Indigenous absent presence. It is a gesture that equivocates the tragic disappearance of white cowboy masculinity with the genocide of Natives who are repeatedly said to be victims of the ambiguous "they" that also kill the cowboy "way of life" the marshal mourns.

This equivocation is emblematic of the "contradictory reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality" (Wolfe 389) that settler states inevitably come to in the assimilative turn of settler colonialism after the "ending of the frontier" (Lloyd and Wolfe 111): the Indians were not settled on the land where they lived, but the settlers who stole it are imbued with their masculinity and apparently moral claim to the land. This fraught equivocation of masculinities is itself a well-worn trope for white settlers.

Philip J. Deloria's (Standing Rock Sioux) *Playing Indian* provides detailed accounts of how settler organizations through history, from Tammany Hall to the Boy Scouts of America, draw from a jumble of real, literary, and apocryphal Indigenous cultural expressions to fashion new masculine self-empowerment. By appropriating aspects of Indigenous cultures and histories that are *outside* of the American bordered sovereignty of *inside*, settlers simultaneously validate themselves through Indigeneity while disavowing the Indigenous sovereignties the American project still works to eliminate. As Deloria says, "By the early twentieth century . . . many Americans had become fascinated with a positive *exterior* Indian Other, one who represented authentic reality in the face of urban disorder and alienating mass society" (74). For gamers of the Western world under neoliberalism, where the "increasing reliance on automation in production as well as the extortion of higher rates of productivity from workers faced with precarious employment in deindustrializing economies," *RDR* serves as elegy for masculinities of populations made "redundant" (Lloyd and Wolfe 110). *RDR*'s power trip under an ostensible umbrella of cynical themes may be especially enticing to settlers now experiencing increasing dispossession in the face of escalating financialization. The play of cowboy masculinity and its associations with mythic Indian masculinity may be added to Humphreys's view of the game as a "safety valve" meant to relieve the pressures of increasingly alienating settler society.⁶³

⁶³ It is important to note, as Lloyd and Wolfe do, that neoliberalism's management of surplus populations does not mean that all surplus populations are treated equally, nor are the situations the same even when the treatments are cosmetically identical. Even when corporations and neoliberal state governments use the same techniques against resistant surplus populations, surplus populations under the settler umbrella (a category that shifts in ways similar to how assimilation into "whiteness" varies for different ethnicities in time and place) are never positioned the same as Indigenous peoples. Indigenous populations are by definition *outside* the settler *inside*; Indigeneity necessarily carries with it the sovereignties of respective nations, tribes, etc. Thus the encroachment of empire into Indigenous land and rights infringes upon *external* sovereignties.

This equivocation of masculinities is partially how *RDR* rehearses the core Indigenous disavowal upon which Turner's thesis is predicated. However, rather than settling for the obviously genocidal notion that settler character is fashioned by total war against Indigenous peoples, *RDR* uses the common maneuver of neoliberal settler culture: appropriating Indigeneity for its settlers—itsself a disavowal of what Indigeneity and its alternate sovereignties would otherwise represent. This becomes most apparent when *RDR* actually brings Indigenous people into its world as *present* rather than *absent*. The concluding section of Marston's coerced goal (though not the end of the game itself) has players hunting and killing his former gang leader Dutch van der Linde. Marston describes Dutch as a keen manipulator, able to bring outcasts and the marginalized under his thrall—as such, he has apparently rallied the local Indigenous peoples into a gang of resistance against the encroachment of corporate and federal power. It is as a violent gang led by Dutch that Indigenous figures finally half-emerge in *RDR* from occlusion into digital corporeality.

The only Indigenous character that appears in the story not working for Dutch is Nastas. Byrd notes that Nastas, “the American Indian supporting character with the most lines,” helps Marston track Dutch, and “is resigned but suitably disdainful about how the land is being mistreated . . . and is finally shot in the face by another Indian gang member who declares him a traitor” (346). Nastas narratively operates much like the marshal and Drew MacFarlane do; they are all masculine characters, proven in combat, who are partnered with Marston for a few missions that introduce players to a particular region of the open world; these characters themselves embody their respective area's relevant narrative beats in the storyline. MacFarlane's missions introduce the plains of

“Hennigan’s Stead,” and MacFarlane embodies the difficult position of settler ranching that has transitioned from stealing land from Indigenous people to the unwinnable battle against the onslaught of modernity. The marshal’s missions introduce the deserts of “New Austin” and the Wild West saloon-centric town of Armadillo. He embodies the settler battle to maintain settler property rights in a West yet to be fully transitioned from “Wild,” as well as how those battling settlers are pawns on the chessboard of the federal and corporate power that is modernity’s onslaught itself. Nastas’s missions introduce the plains and forests of “West Elizabeth,” and Nastas embodies the vanishing Indigenous people and the oppression they face that would drive them to desperate, violent insurrection under Dutch’s direction. Like the marshal and MacFarlane, Nastas is one of the few characters that Marston appears to earnestly respect and with whose principles he explicitly agrees. Unlike the marshal and MacFarlane, Nastas’s thematic anxiety over being a figure quickly occluded by teleological modernity is the only one given the narrative finality of being murdered. Pointedly, the “West Elizabeth” area that Nastas’s missions introduce is where Marston’s ranch is located; thus Nastas acts as an important guide for *players* learning about the region that is locked until this penultimate section of the game, and consequently provides a sense of Indigenous authenticity to the region that turns out to be Marston’s home. Nastas’s Indigeneity is mobilized as another masculine identity, weathered and vanishing, that gives Marston an air of that authenticity and locational warrant. Marston agrees with Nastas while they ride through its dense forests and quite literally past the ranch to which Marston will return. After Nastas is dead, the Indigenous peoples return to occlusion, emerging only during missions to be shot to death

by the player as Marston, accompanied by US Army troops and the federal agents that coerced him into the hunt for Dutch.

Dutch, as Marston's former gang leader and now white leader to a gang of Indigenous people, clearly represents and explicitly articulates the Western-flavoured Rockstar thematic cynicism, and how Indigeneity is used as an occluded, atavistic form of the masculinities soon to vanish. In the mission⁶⁴ that sees Dutch dead and the Native resistance/gang crushed (and never mentioned again), Dutch articulates several things borne out by the game's narrative. Cornered at gunpoint, Dutch tells Marston that "We can't always fight nature . . . We can't fight change. We can't fight gravity. We can't fight nothing. My whole life all I ever did was fight . . . But I can't give up, neither. I can't fight my own nature. That's the paradox." Marston, a former outlaw attempting to go straight as a rancher, rejects this fatalism. But Dutch's fatalism is proven correct; it is the very "eternal inequality" that Humphreys highlights as the game's ethos, the Rockstar cynicism of empire that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter detail. The fighting masculinities of cowboys and Indians are made congruent—cowboys featured, Indians occluded—and devoured and excreted by the "they" of mechanistic modernism. Dutch even warns Marston that after his death "they'll just find another monster. They have to, because they have to justify their wages." He is correct, of course, as the federal agents return and kill Marston after only a few missions of relatively peaceful ranching with his family. Dutch's narrative equivocation is made all the more salient in its material productive context: in this game that features well over a hundred voice actors, Dutch is voiced by white actor Benjamin Davis, who also voices Nastas. Two performances by one actor

⁶⁴ "And the Truth Will Set You Free."

which echo white settler masculinity devouring the symbolic power of the vanishing native.

Red Dead Redemption, Settlement, Occluded Genocide, and Colonial Anxiety

After players, as Marston, have killed off the remaining Indigenous peoples in the game, they play several missions on his ranch in West Elizabeth. These missions are comparatively peaceful, as Marston attempts to readjust to his “good” life with his family and apparently morally unquestionable ranching. One mission features Marston and his son returning to MacFarlane’s ranch, purchasing cattle, and herding them back to his own ranch with the mechanics first learned in the early MacFarlane mission set. This idyllic bit of narrative and gameplay is, as mentioned, cut short when Marston is murdered by the very federal forces with which he helped exterminate the game’s remaining Indigenous people. Meant to equivocate the destruction of Wild West settlers’ freedom-loving entrepreneurial spirit with the genocide of Indigenous peoples, this utopian vision highlights Rockstar’s ideological friction as much as its characteristic cynicism does in snatching that idyll away. Emblematic of this friction and its appropriation of Indigeneity is the location of Marston’s ranch. Though, as mentioned, the missions previous to the ranch-living take place quite close to Marston’s ranch, it is not identified as such until he returns to it in the story. A seemingly small oversight, but one that avoids an earlier recognition that Marston’s ranch is on land that Dutch’s gang of Indigenous people would presumably view with great hostility. Marston’s ranch, after all, is one of the closest in-game locations to Cochinay, the mountain village where Dutch leads the Native resistance. Cochinay is where the penultimate story battle of the game takes place;

it is the last place players will see—and kill—Indigenous people in the game. After this battle, the encampment disappears.

Red Dead Redemption 2 takes place before *Red Dead Redemption*, so fans of the series know that Marston merely purchased his land with a bank loan. With or without that knowledge from a sequel released eight years later, players nevertheless experience this familial utopia at Marston's ranch location, fraught with *RDR*'s thematic and ideological connections. Marston *as a character* did not kill Indigenous people for his ranch's land in the first place, but players *as Marston* quite literally eliminate Indigenous people to gain meaningful access to it—and it is the fantasy of universal access that the frontier mythology and the settler digitality of open world games are built upon. Thus mechanically in *RDR*, players eliminate Indigenous people to give Marston his redemption: ranching as a moral masculine man like MacFarlane does. It is an eliminative redemption, where Indigenous corporality is brought out of occlusion only long enough to provide its settlers with their “authentic” connection to the land, and then be murdered back into occlusion. That *RDR* ends with Marston's death is Rockstar's cynical worldview translated into the tragic drama of *RDR*'s relative seriousness: redemption is not truly possible; settlement is righteous, but righteousness is short-lived. Marston's and MacFarlane's *individual, private investments* in ranching are disconnected from the settler colonial project's Turnerian “disintegrating civilization,” even while embodying (in MacFarlane's narrative and Marston's gameplay) its foundational violence against Indigenous people.

RDR's disconnection of settlement's individual experiences from settler colonial violence and dispossession broadly is unsurprising. By equivocating genocidal

colonialism with settler society's shifting distributions of its surplus population, *RDR* rehearses neoliberal formula and mythologizes frontier violence and economics in a development of Turner's explicitly racist frontier thesis. As noted in the previous sections, the neoliberal tendency to individualize systemic contexts obfuscates history, present, and possible alternative futures. Even Turner characterized the ending of the literal frontier, the concluding chapter of manifest destiny, as one where the teleology of civilizational development sees "fertile prairie land" moved from "out of the hands of the government" and "passed into private possession" (294). As Barker, Coulthard, Vine Deloria Jr., and countless other Indigenous scholars have pointed out, private property⁶⁵ and privatization are more than just frameworks for accumulation of capital and the rights of individuals; private property and privatization are the core ideological and legal mechanisms by which settler colonialism dispossessed Indigenous peoples from their land. As Nick Ester (Lower Brule Sioux) writes, "settlers and private property have always been the vanguards of invasion, and the sanctity of private property never applied to Indigenous peoples" (27). Many Indigenous groups faced with settler invasion had and continue to engage forms of property relations that could be broadly called, as Jeffrey Means (Oglala Lakota Sioux) does, "communalism" (18). As Estes, Coulthard, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga) have pointed out, these notions of community ownership eschew the very possibility of private ownership of land. Indigenous territories and Indigenous rights of "title" are typically formulated as

⁶⁵ There are, of course, several competing definitions of private property, including the typical Marxist distinction between *private* property and *personal* property, where the former is related to the generation of capital even in the absence of the owner's personal labour, and the latter relating to possessions that are not constitutively part of the capital *relation*. Precisely how these distinctions break down are matters of debate. For our purposes here, however, private property and privatization specifically refer to the individual or corporate ownership of *land*, and not *necessarily*, for example, the domiciles built on it.

communal, and the personal relation to land is not one of individual *right*, but individual *responsibility*. Settler enforcement of private property relations, then, is in and of itself the sovereignty of Empire fracturing and disrupting Indigenous sovereignties which hold different relations. That conflict is literalized by the processes of settlers, like MacFarlane as fictionalized representative, simply murdering for land and claiming ownership; even settlers who do not do the murdering nevertheless benefit from this violence that is both literal and structural. As Estes writes,

to carry out land cessions, the US government needed settlers to hold private property in perpetuity. Private ownership (or “fee simple”) is seen, under US law, as the highest possible form of ownership, while Indigenous occupancy is seen as temporary; thus, collective Indigenous ownership and use could be dissolved for private ownership, but not the other way around. But because private property is exclusive, the two systems of land tenure fundamentally could not overlap. (108)

Estes tracks how these original privatizations are echoed in US and corporate infringements of Indigenous territories and rights, particularly through resource extraction and transportation projects and real estate development. So *RDR*'s equivocation of Indigenous dispossession and settler impoverishment necessarily occludes private propertied settler ranching's integral part in genocide and the oppression of pre-existing sovereignties on the land so luxuriously fictionally depicted with advanced open world graphical regimes.

Rockstar's neoliberal ideology highlights that ideology's material and epistemological origins in racial capitalism and settler colonialism, and it does so with the occlusion, equivocation, and individualization necessary to its worldview. We can here

recall that Veracini argues settler colonialism “obscures the conditions of its own production” precisely by flattening the systemic into the individual (where the “settler hides behind his labour and hardship”) and disconnecting the fundamental coherence of that labour’s part in the access and ownership of land which required Indigenous peoples to “naturally and inevitably vanish” (*Settler Colonialism* 14). Rockstar’s cynicism takes the form of elegy for white settler masculinity, where the idyll of settler family private land ownership is merely another casualty of teleological capitalism, rather than an expression of its foundational violence. This is how something so cynical in worldview can be so persuasive and attractive as neoliberal “safety valve” entertainment as articulated by Humphreys. These occlusions and disconnections, these individuations that allow the rancher to be separate from genocide, also allow players to be separate from the implications of their play. As Richard N. Price writes, “making empire was full of anxiety, fear and doubt,” and the ways modern “liberal society coped with and explained the violence that was integral to its engagement with empire” was by occluding and naturalizing it. The anxiety and fear that Price studied in historical documents “reveals the fragilities that were part of the empire project,” and this continued anxiety and its resulting continued disavowal of colonial violence is “a problem that is with us still” (44). If the frontier was an anxiety-producing concept for Imperial Rome, of a perilous vulnerability in exposing the *inside* to access the *outside*, settler colonial culture reveals this continued anxiety when the frontier of its own sovereignty is global. Through occlusion and obfuscation, *RDR* normalizes and naturalizes the processes that led to this global frontier, and does so in the joyful mimicry of violence in an artificial rendering of the final chapter of the physical historical frontier.

By individualizing and conflating the terrains of American empire's oppression of settlers and Indigenous peoples alike, and by indulging a fatalism about the inexorability of those oppressions, redemption is impossible for the characters inside the magic circle. The redemption of play, however, can relieve players' tensions in an increasingly ideologically self-destructive reality outside the circle. Anxiety about failing neoliberal economic structure, and anxiety about the originating genocides of which that modern structure is the latest development, are both soothed and salved in play. This play is narrativized in such a way that it sterilizes the violence and culpabilities of genocidal settler structure, and assuages and valorizes its mythological frontier settler representatives. The historical death of settlers and Natives, mirrored by the deaths of the characters of *RDR*'s narrative, are all the redemption needed. Indigenous people are both not-there and there, both not-settled on the land and as violently defensive of it as the cowboy masculinity the player inhabits and kills as; thus Indigenous title to the land is passed on to fictional settlers, who pass it on to players. Dutch "can't change gravity," just as the player cannot change the fundamental outcome of the story. They can, however, enjoy the rehearsal of cowboy masculinity that echoes modern neoliberal privileging of private propertied productivity. The anxiety of colonial violence may be with us still, but it is a problem Rockstar can profit from by selling entertaining treatment, a redemption of play.

Of course, Rockstar's open world design necessarily caters to the whims of its autonomous players, and though its "Honor" system, its dialogue, and Marston's pre-written personality may incentivize fulfilling this settler-appropriative role, it recognizes that many players will want, for example, to simply kill the people and animals in the

autonomous gameplay outside of the missions that would be failed for such wanton violence. After all, the autonomy of this influential open world game is little more than the ability to choose the order of certain missions, to explore its massive space, to play minigames like poker or horseshoes, to kill animals and people, and to sell their parts or belongings. That is to say, largely violent mobility in and mastery of the game's environment is the freedom its systems provide. So, though the game may incentivize its neoliberal cowboy heroism, it also encourages that simplistic violence. One such incentivisation is the game's achievement⁶⁶ called "Manifest Destiny." In the final area of the game, a herd of buffalo roams near Marston's ranch. Like every other animal in the game, it can be killed, skinned, and its parts sold for money. Unlike every other animal in the game, the buffalo do not respawn.⁶⁷ Killing all of the buffalo, then, removes them entirely from a game that otherwise infinitely replenishes its people, fauna, and flora. Doing so also unlocks the "Manifest Destiny" achievement. This is possibly an attempted cynical satire of the settler programme of eliminating buffalo to eliminate Sioux, Kiowa, and Comanche peoples by destroying an important source of livelihood and culture;⁶⁸

⁶⁶ An "achievement," also known as a "trophy," and by various other names, is a meta-goal provided by the platforms games are delivered on. For example, an Xbox game features "achievements" for games that contribute to a "Gamer Score," a sum of that gamer profile's achievement values. Playstation games feature "trophies" and the PC Steam platform also features "achievements." As such, achievements are often not recognized within the game's systems proper; they are recognized outside the structure of the game in the gamer's platform profile. Achievements are typically awarded for difficult tasks, and sometimes strange activities to incentivize the game's less-explored possibilities; as their name implies, they are another way games fulfill the "achievement" motivation of players as described in this dissertation's introduction, giving players bragging rights for accomplishing feats of skill (X number of kills in multiplayer) or investment (X many hours played, storyline finished, etc).

⁶⁷ In gaming parlance, "respawning" is the replacement of a player character, non-player character, or resource, after its destruction/death.

⁶⁸ Not all of the Indigenous peoples that call the Great Plains their traditional lands had the same investments as others in buffalo hunting. Many tribes were forced into hunting, as discussed in the introduction, as part of the destruction of Indigenous agriculture, forcing all Indigenous peoples to conform to ways of life that fit with settler notions of savagery, which itself provided warrant for further elimination. See the sources cited in the following footnote.

those Indigenous peoples that did not starve to death could be more easily coerced into the United States' assimilative (and thus still numerically eliminative) policy aims. As scholars have shown, what Tasha Hubbard (Cree) calls the "buffalo genocide" was, as is typical to later stages of settler invasion, a partnership of white private interest and the federal government—the former being enriched by the killing's spoils, the latter benefitting from clearing the land of Plains Tribes for privatization and further white settlement.⁶⁹ The game's much earlier mention of "Manifest Destiny" as a myth of American progress is here localized into a played specific instance of that genocide. Players not content or unconcerned with removing Indigenous peoples from the game's environment entirely through the storyline can be rewarded for engaging a parallel genocide in the autonomous, extractive, violent gameplay. Indeed, players can engage both to no consequence; Rockstar's cynical satire offers only a rehearsal of the Turnerian frontier logic of "disintegrating forces," its only repercussion the loss of one late-introduced animal in a world overwrought with profitably hunted, detailed animals. This investment in explicit genocide is made coherent with the other, implicit genocidal appropriation of a vanishing Indigeneity for its white protagonist.

Red Dead Redemption 2: Larger World, Larger Systems, Same Appropriation

While *Red Dead Redemption (RDR1)* makes its contradictory genocidal appropriation of Indigeneity for its settler hero implicit, its even more successful prequel *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)* makes that appropriation all the more explicit. Player character Arthur Morgan, a white outlaw in Dutch's gang with John Marston, makes multiple explicit comparisons of the plight of Indigenous peoples to his own, and to the

⁶⁹ For more on the buffalo genocide beyond Hubbard's important work, see also Isenberg, and Smits.

vanishing world of outlaws. This is, in many ways, emblematic of *RDR2* as a sequel to *RDR*: it is an intensification, where the systems, critique, and style are larger, more overt. As such, *RDR2* features all of the things an open world sequel requires in the escalating technological arms race of big-budget game development: a larger world than its predecessor, much improved photo-realistic graphics, an expansion of the first game's systems, and inclusion of new ones. The overall structure, however, remains the same: it is an open world game that focuses on player autonomy for progression. Like *RDR1*, *RDR2* is more serious and dramatic than the *GTA* series, and has garnered a great deal of critical praise for its story and characters alongside its significant sales figures. One of the systems that returns in expanded, more emphasized form in *RDR2* is the "Honor" system.

Gareth Damian Martin argues that the "Honor" system of *RDR2* is demonstrative of the "representational crisis" apparent in many video games (n.p.). Big-budget open world games increasingly "pride themselves on the 'realism' of their representations, and the powerful proficiency of their visual and technical recreation of the world," but "they remain unnatural, predicated on an algorithmic system" tied to every facet of its representations. As Martin puts it, "there is nothing within a game without a corresponding set of values and properties that dictate its exact behaviour and nature within the world. The player is no different, and their honor is a particularly transparent representation of that." *RDR2* features more varieties of interacting with the environment and the people that inhabit it than *RDR1*; whether it is choosing how to speak to any NPC in the world (with some mix of positive "Greet" or negative "Antagonize" prompts), or how to handle any number of the optional encounters such as lawmen ferrying prisoners, or swamp-dwellers picking through a camp of slaughtered civilians, *RDR2* and its Honor

system are meant to bring more substance to the choices available in its world. That said, even measured against interacting with NPCs (including the other outlaws in Dutch's gang), exploration, and picking plants for crafting helpful tonics, violence is still the primary activity of the game, particularly in the storyline missions whose completion is necessary to unlock the entire world for exploration.

As Martin argues, this ubiquitous violence is par for the course for *RDR2* and most games like it, where violence is the “most common form of challenge, and power their most prevalent reward.” Though the disjunction between narrative ambition and played violent interaction is common in many games,⁷⁰ Martin argues that *RDR2*'s dissonance in this regard reveals precisely how violence and its algorithmic measurement of the player's choices in that violence outside of the storyline missions is used to give its actions symbolic weight. *RDR2*'s Honor system, Martin suggests, shows that the game attempts to both engage and evade its violence as “as symbolism and nothing else.” The ubiquitous violence of these (and other) games, as stated in the introduction of this dissertation, can at the very least be said to self-perpetuate as the “common form of challenge” as per Martin. What becomes more important is the “symbolic nature” of that violence; as Martin argues, in a video game “violence is not violence, but a symbol of violence. . . . there is no violence in games, only the representation of violence. There is

⁷⁰ This is akin to the much-discussed “ludonarrative dissonance” as described by Clint Hocking (2007), where a game's ludic elements counter its narrative representation. It has become increasingly common for games of constant violence to in some way narratively critique that violence, which has made the popular discussion of ludonarrative dissonance largely evaporate. Rockstar games, the games of Ubisoft (to be discussed in the following chapter), and many other big-budget games, have largely addressed the concern by making its protagonists anti-heroes that question their own violence. *GTAV*, both *RDR* games, and countless others use this maneuver to smooth over the dissonance of its systems that encourage the gleeful engagement of constant symbolic violence. As Martin's argument implies, however, this maneuver is largely meaningless: introducing a nominally *moral* nuance to *symbolic* activity does not change the symbolism when the activity remains.

no moral judgement to be made on a player's acts, as there is no physical harm, no assault, no death." Most importantly, when violence is merely an unquestioned mode of interaction, pleasure can be derived not only from the skillful execution of that interaction, but also from the *meaning* derived from that interaction as a destruction of a symbolic image. It is along this line of reasoning that Martin suggests *RDR2*'s Honor systematics assigns its "symbolic imagery" of violence "arbitrary values within a wider numerical system," demonstrating that this violence is "nothing but meaning." It is not violence *as violence* that carries symbolic weight; it is the meaning attached to that violence narratively, and borne out by the numerical systems that are the entire foundation of video game representation. Rockstar is willing to let players be a villain, killing random passers-by and robbing them; indeed it encourages these actions in various ways, in the same way it encourages being a kind, heroic cowboy. Actions of either sort provides a "Pavlovian chime," Martin says, "marking the player (and Arthur's) actions along a numerical bar that stretches from dishonorable red at one end to honorable white at the other." The equivocation is important, as the symbolism remains intact, and re-establishes Rockstar's characteristic worldview in a "landscape of tired and cynical symbolism, trotted out to trigger the required response." The required responses of the design are certainly partially affective, but they are more directly a funneling of expected play-styles into the patterns of rehearsal the game's available interactions allow, and from which the game's dramatic storyline is least dissociative.

Martin's argument suggests the moral character of these actions is less important than the overarching symbolism that inflects that crudely numeric moral system. Players may partially choose to what degree Arthur Morgan is a "good" person apparently

worthy of the titular redemption, or a man lost to his most violent impulses; players may invest themselves in Arthur as a nuanced character, or go through the motions to experiment with the more nuanced systems of destruction and exploratory domination. Martin points to the popular videos players upload to YouTube of their exploits in the open world, its available encounters, and their possible outcomes: players set Ku Klux Klan meetings aflame, the chime sounds, and the meter shifts to the good white right; players attack a protesting suffragette and feed her to an alligator, and the meter shifts to the bad red left. The morals are not made equivalent, but neither are they in any way mutually exclusive; both can be done within minutes of each other, and the effect is little more than visible subtraction and addition of the world's algorithmic response. The sum total when players reach the end of Arthur's story determines whether a low-honor Arthur is killed in a fight with an antagonist, or a high-honor Arthur dies more cinematically from his injuries and worsening tuberculosis shortly after that same fight. The open world gameplay is assigned values for their symbolic significance, for the sense of *immersion* of a responsive world and a character arc with impact. That players do "good" or "bad" things in *RDR2* merely provides its overarching language of symbolism *weight*. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that *RDR2*'s network of symbols is another system carried over from its predecessor but emphasized.

The introduction to *RDR*, as already discussed, establishes its tone and setting with a train ride and intercut snippets of conversation. The game's themes of a closing Western frontier are given room to express itself within the world's introduction. Emblematic of *RDR2*'s contrasting approach not taking any chances with its setting and symbolic themes, *RDR2* opens with appropriately weathered title cards featuring cursive

lettering, like handwriting on a daguerreotype. “By 1899, the age of outlaws and gunslingers was at an end,” the first reads. “America was becoming a land of laws . . .” says the next, complete with dramatic ellipsis. “Even the west had mostly been tamed” says the following, without apparent irony. “A few gangs still roamed but they were being hunted down and destroyed” reads the final card, “destroyed” underlined. Much like Arthur’s repeated connections of his position as an outlaw to the Indigenous peoples of America, hunted and destroyed, *RDR2* wants to be certain its symbolic associations are blatantly divulged, and easily understood. It is precisely in that connection, like *RDR1*’s appropriation of Indigeneity for its elegy to settler masculinity, that this power fantasy rehearses the first game’s symbolism, only with greater emphasis and self-seriousness. But like a title card that literally spells it out, emphasizing this appropriation of Indigeneity requires making it more apparent by bringing Indigenous people out of occlusion and slightly more into frame with its white protagonist.

RDR2’s map stretches from the New Mexico/Mexico border equivalent of the first game to a New Orleans stand-in; as such, the game features even more varied climates and regional topographies than any other Rockstar game. Much of the game’s storyline takes place in what appears to be an amalgamation of cherry-picked terrain from New Mexico, Colorado, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Missouri, Louisiana, and other bordered states. Some of these areas are given stand-in state names, too: New Mexico, as in the first game, is New Austin; Louisiana is Lemoyne. The Indigenous peoples given names and voices in *RDR2* are part of a tribe called the Wapiti. As Miner puts it, “*RDR2* attempted to sidestep historical accuracy by writing a generic conglomerate of Native U.S. cultures into the fictional Wapiti tribe” (“Surveying the Frontier” 129). Though the

Indigenous tribe is indeed left largely vague as to its culture, there are enough clues to suggest this amalgamation, like the rest of the game's terrain, is drawn with some specificity. The game's subtitles denote that the two central characters of the Wapiti, pacifist Chief Rains Fall and his disaffected, fight-seeking son Eagle Flies, occasionally speak Lakota. The longest river in the game's map is called the Dakota River and runs next to the Wapiti reservation. When Arthur meets Rains Fall, the chief is in the process of petitioning the American government regarding broken treaties and worsening relations. These game events take place in 1899; that year in the real world saw the passage of the Sioux Bill "which reduced the Great Sioux Reservation by 9 million acres" and "separated the seven tribes of Lakota onto six new reservations" (Means 15). Thus the amalgamated ersatz "Indian" Wapiti are obviously referential to that increasingly dire position; they are a broad, vague, symbolically over-determined and culturally non-specific version of the Sioux. Based upon the use of Lakota language (Lakḥótiyapi), a mission centered on Rains Fall seeking his tribe's "Chanupa"⁷¹ (sacred pipe), and the real-world equivalents of the land said to be the in-game tribe's traditional territory, the Wapiti are perhaps most closely appropriative of the Oglala Lakota Sioux. For land, that symbolism is merely meant, like its Honor system, to create an immersive sense of authenticity and significance to its inclusion; for the Wapiti, the symbolism of Indigeneity similarly confers an immersive sense of authenticity, and then lends that authenticity to players of its white protagonist.

⁷¹ This is the spelling as it appears in the game, but "Čhaṅnúṛpa" is how it appears in Standard Lakota Orthography; see Ullrich (2008).

As Indigeneity is a symbolic category for *RDR2*, it makes sense that one of the most obvious connections of the game’s ersatz “Indian” tribe is with its similarly symbolic Honor system, and that connection be made through a symbol of animal life. Wapiti is a word that comes from Algonquin dialects⁷² for what is commonly known in the North American settler nations as “elk,” the impressively antlered larger cousin to deer. Naturally, Rockstar is unconcerned with cultural specificity; Lakhótiyapi is a Sioux dialect, not an Algonquin dialect, and thus the artificial tribe of *RDR2* would be unlikely to self-identify in such a way. Instead, *RDR2*’s use of the word appears motivated by a symbolic visual connection of its honor system to its digital Indigeneity. Unlike *RDR1*, in *RDR2*, player character Arthur’s dialogue in some cutscenes—and consequently his personality—changes slightly depending on whether the player’s honor rating is in the white, good, right side of the bar, or the bad, red, left side of the bar. A low-honor Arthur is gruffer, meaner, and more self-interested. A low-honor Arthur has dreams and visions of wolves and foxes; a high-honor Arthur instead sees various kinds of deer. As already mentioned, the player’s honor also determines the exact nature of Arthur’s death. When high-honor Arthur dies watching the sunset, players are treated to one final vision of an impressively antlered buck, wreathed in golden light, turning to the sunset on the horizon and disappearing. This is perhaps foreshadowing the game story’s final obvious visual motif. The last interstitial clip played during the ending credits crawl is of Rains Fall, the pacifist Chief alone on a clifftop, his son Eagle Flies having perished much earlier in the game saving Arthur’s life. Rains Fall, now with greyed hair, watches an eagle literally

⁷² Usually attributed to the Shawnee dialect specifically; see the OED and *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* for “Wapiti.”

flying into the horizon until finally disintegrating into the distance, occluded from view. These similar images provide conclusive metaphors for the game's elegiac equivocation of Arthur's death as a good-hearted masculine outlaw cowboy with the tragic genocide of Indigenous peoples. Both of these elegies are themselves here connected, with the *image* and *name* of an animal, to the game's constant evocation of the tragic destruction of the natural world by industry (Turner's "disintegrating forces" all over again), uttered by multiple characters across multiple circumstances. This is itself an aforementioned theme carried over from the first game, which I suggested is typified by a conversation between its protagonist and its only substantial Indigenous character. *RDR2* combines what presumably passes for subtle visual metaphor with a player character who, seconds after meeting Rains Fall a second time, tells him that "like you, my time here is nigh on done."⁷³ The game makes that explicit connection between his masculine outlawry to the oppressed position of Indigenous peoples—through their mutually inevitable disappearance—multiple times through the game.

Players are given the option to decline helping the Wapiti for a few missions as they are with other storyline threads, but a few missions are not optional, and the most obvious appropriations of Indigeneity for its white outlaw Arthur (like the quote above) are a non-negotiable core of its narrative. One of the major climactic scenes in the main storyline⁷⁴ sees Arthur riding alongside members of the Wapiti into battle, cementing his role, like the equivocations of *RDR1*, as a superior warrior masculinity with an equally foregone conclusion of extinction. That this equivocation is more explicitly emphasized

⁷³ From the introductory cutscene to the mission "American Fathers."

⁷⁴ From the mission "My Last Boy."

also bleeds into the game's open world mechanics. Players are able to visit the Wapiti reservation outside of missions. Unlike the rest of the world in the game, however, players cannot use their weapons, or even use the "Antagonize" prompt on the appropriately dejected and largely static Wapiti NPCs. The tents and buildings cannot be entered; by and large, the space is simply less interactable than the rest of the power fantasy sandbox. This is perhaps to avoid having YouTube videos like those mentioned above, where players upload apparently amusing depravities of available interactivity; murdering a suffragette is par for the course, but allowing players to conduct a one-man genocide of a small tribe is perhaps too far a bridge even for Rockstar. More importantly, however, it ensures that Arthur's unavoidable self-identification with the Wapiti cannot be invalidated by player autonomy, and enforces a clean separation of its settler cultural elegy from the genocidal racism that is foundational to settler colonial past and present. Consequently, just as the Wapiti NPCs on the reservation are quite simply less active than the world's other NPCs and certainly less interactable, they are less understandable as living, responsive humans in a detailed open world, and more understandable as environmental objects, symbolic referents for simplistic notions of Indigeneity.

It is this lack of interactability of the reservation and its denizens that Miner and his theory of settler digitality and occlusion focuses on: "By not being as interactive or dimensional as other towns, forts, and camps in RDR2, the reservation's façades occlude possibility for the player. Narrative collapses into linearity" (131). Miner compares this to how these games' very technological regimes occlude Indigenous life and stories, the settler digitality of "the renderer's culling algorithms, along with mesh simplification and draw distance, serve to limit the player's contact with Indigenous characters." This

occlusion and uncharacteristically restrained interactivity “leave the Native characters in the game relatively cinematic, rather than capable of the kind of dynamic interaction required for subjective rendering” (131). Martin’s argument that the weight of *RDR2*’s violence is *symbolic*, and thus about the interplay—and destruction—of *symbols*, suggests this interactive distancing is related to Indigenous occlusion. To prevent violence against these NPCs on its face seems to be an attempt at constraining players’ violent impulses against an undeserving group, but in the context of the game’s central mechanics, actually relegates these ersatz Indians to a more *outside* symbolic presence, rather than one that bears an “immersive” sense of living subjectivity. However, that is the sum of Indigeneity’s parts for *RDR2*: merely a symbolic connection meant to inject pathos, significance, and authenticity for its very appearance, rather than its subjectivity, historical authenticity, or cultural specificity. Besides which, the game’s over-determination of this ersatz Indian symbolism, and the barely necessary supposed humanity of Indigeneity as an identity category, is buttressed by another aspect that is uncharacteristic for Rockstar’s most recent games: a recognizable actor.

We may recall this chapter’s earlier discussion of Rockstar’s later titles eschewing well-known actors to fill its roles because “most important of all,” in Houser’s words, players “get a better sense of immersion” when the characters are played by “talented actors whose voices you don’t recognize” (qtd. in Goldberg). One might be surprised, then, to learn Rains Fall is played by Oscar-nominated Oneida actor Graham Greene. The aforementioned *Vulture* profile of *RDR2*’s development, which features a rare interview with the famously reclusive Houser, calls Greene the “most famous actor” in the game, and says that his role as Rains Fall is “close to Dan [Houser]’s heart because it signifies

everything that's compelling about the game: history, politics, and a sense that this same kind of thing could happen in the world today." The connective tissue of symbolic Indigeneity, real Indigenous genocide, and its relevance to the increasing surplus of populations under neoliberal capitalism are recognized as thematic content, but without the political or historical knowledge to do anything but rehearse the very inevitability of its continuing logic by narratively sterilizing the structure of settler colonialism and providing gameplay functioning on settler colonial logics. That Greene is famous is not a problem, apparently, for Houser's treasured immersion, as it only supports its representation of symbolic Indigeneity. To recognize Greene would be to recognize an "actual" Indigenous person of renown for this clichéd role of a Chief facing his people's destruction. Houser is quoted praising Greene for his "brilliant job of bringing this chief character to life. The government is coming down on him hard. He's losing his rights as an independent king, and he's a gentle soul in that violent world. [Greene] brought this great depth to [the story]" (qtd. in Goldberg). Rains Fall, the gentle soul, representing the very righteousness implied by the "good" side of the game's honor system, is the representative of the Wapiti, the elk, like the great antlered buck a high-honor Arthur sees in his final moments. That Houser uses the word "king" (as Rains Fall uses for himself in the game⁷⁵) betrays precisely the lacking awareness, characteristic of the settler "forgetting" that Turner's thesis so influentially exhibits.

As Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. notes, when settlers were dependent upon Indigenous sovereignties for survival, Indigenous representatives of their peoples were called "Kings" before they were called "Chiefs" ("Self-Determination" 22),

⁷⁵ In the introductory cutscene for the mission "Archeology for Beginners."

and represented “the nationhood” of their people. Houser’s use of the term is only slightly ahistorical, but it certainly represents how *RDR2*’s framing of Indigenous sovereignty works in the overarching cynicism and acceptance of imperial logics that unite the *GTA* and *RDR* franchises. Deloria highlights that the 17th and 18th century European understandings of sovereignty was primarily interpreted—aside from the ever-important absolute authority over a jurisdiction *inside* borders—through the appropriate and independent applications of warfare (22); thus Houser’s close-to-the-heart depiction of gentle soul Rains Fall as a “King” is important. He is the symbol of his tribe’s nationhood and its falling sovereignty, as his all too narratively appropriate name implies. Graham Greene, as a famous Indigenous person, imbues this symbolic sovereignty with authenticity rather than complicates its immersive qualities with pop cultural recognisability as it presumably would for settler characters. This sovereignty, fashioned as kingly, is not an alternative structure to what settler colonialism has wrought in Rockstar’s ideological framework, but instead merely a tragically failed iteration of the same kind of power and authority. Rains Fall speaks of his past seeing “death handed out so freely,”⁷⁶ articulated as agentless conflict in the wars of his lifetime. This is another aspect of his character Arthur explicitly states he relates to: both men are tired of the violence that seems inescapable to their equivocated position against the Turnerian disintegrating forces of civilization. As the following section will argue, the reality of Lakota sovereignty and nationhood is far more specific and contrastable to the colonial notions of sovereignty than such a simplistic symbolic equivocation can sustain.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Oglala Communalism and *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s Mechanisms of Playing Indian

By the end of Arthur's plot, the Wapiti flee from their reservation to Canada, and as with *RDR1*, Indigenous people retreat from the game's world into occlusion like an eagle dissolving in the horizon. The reservation lies empty, and the only remaining Indigenous NPCs can only be seen in the distance, standing in areas not accessible to the player, watching. Here too, they cannot be interacted with. This echoes when Indigenous figures are first seen in the game. Shortly after a tightly limited prologue in snowstorm-locked mountains that serves to introduce players to the game's mechanics, there is a lavish cutscene more similar to the first game's introductory train ride. In this scene that shows off the advanced graphics by displaying the first region players are given the opportunity to explore freely, Arthur and his gang are shown to be watched by Indigenous figures high on a mountaintop, a shot made complete with mournful flutes to contrast with the sweeping choral arrangement that accompanies its opening shots. This is just one way the freedom of open world gameplay, as players' spatial autonomy, is immediately associated with Indigeneity. That this follows a very particular treatment of one of the game's most expanded and re-emphasized systems from its predecessor, hunting, is significant.

In that aforementioned snowstorm prologue, Arthur is taught how to track and hunt animals by Charles, the gang's self-identified half-Black, half-Indigenous scout. Charles is not Wapiti, and says his family's flight from his mother's ancestral lands and her early death is why he "doesn't know" his people.⁷⁷ A stoic cliché of the noble savage, Charles is often referred to as quiet and aloof by the rest of the gang, but in that early ride

⁷⁷ From the mission that introduces the region players are given autonomy in, "Eastward Bound."

back carrying the deer he just taught Arthur how to hunt, Charles speaks openly about how the gang, in all its post-racial wisdom, treats him “fair,” and “for a feller with a Black father and an Indian mother, that ain’t normally the case.”⁷⁸ Like *GTA: San Andreas*’ multi-ethnic gang of criminal capitalists, this gang is presented as separate from the racism that is foundational to the very metrics of settler dominance that are the core of its power-fantasy gameplay. Though the hunting is first introduced as a way to provide food to the gang’s itinerant camp, that system’s importance is then quickly connected to the rest of the game’s core play: the spoils of hunting can be “crafted” into upgrades to the gang’s camp (thus increasing its passive income), into new clothes for Arthur’s wardrobe, into satchels that let the player carry more items and extracted/hunted resources, and into other “trinkets” to gain more combative power like more health, or better aim. In other words, the hunting system’s design satisfies those two important gamer motivations for “immersion” (with cosmetic autonomy) and “achievement” (in the extraction and crafting of items for violent prowess). The hunting system’s introduction by Charles as an Indigenous person, and its expansion into the autonomous power fantasy of the game whose first terrain is introduced by distant observant Indigenous peoples, provides the gameplay with its symbolic depth via Indigeneity. Players are encouraged to seek out high-quality animals (depicted only by a 1-to-3 star rating of the animal as it is targeted) and to kill them with the appropriate weapon in one shot to maintain the profit and use for crafting upgrades. Arthur gruesomely strips animals, tearing off skin easily with quick slices of a knife and gruff tugs with his hands, as if hastily stripping carpet. Imbuing symbolic Indigeneity to the quick, detailed gore that is a constant part of the

⁷⁸ From the mission “The Aftermath of Genesis.”

game's central system in hunting is an especially interesting emphasis given the history of the Oglala Sioux that *RDR2*'s ersatz Indigeneity most directly appropriates.

The Oglala Sioux in the mid-to-late 19th century were dealing with the results of devastating war, broken treaties, and the aforementioned buffalo genocide of the Great Plains, and had their remaining subsistence tied to forms of property ownership and family life that were alien to Oglala norms of kinship, sovereignty, and relationships to land. The traditional "basic unit of Lakota society" was the *tiospaye*,⁷⁹ "a small group of bilaterally related kin," whose division of labour and way of life "centered around daily subsistence tasks," where hunting and its products were a part of every member's labour and cultural life in some way (Wishert). As Paul Roberston's *The Power of the Land: Identity, Ethnicity, and Class Among the Lakota Oglala* describes, *tiospaye* as a notion of extended family units is also closely connected to Oglala sovereignty and nationhood, where this familial unit is inherently connected to other units as bands of political organization. As Oglala scholar Jeffrey Means explains, the reservation system and rules for federal land and cattle allotments were specifically motivated to deconstruct these kinships and replace them with settler forms of nuclear, private-property-owning family units. Means writes that the *tiospaye* relation developed to emphasize a communalist "flexibility" for sustainable migration with and hunting of bison herds, while simultaneously maintaining "social and political bonds of kinship and reciprocity" for sharing food and products (4, 7).

Means details how, in the latter half of the 19th century, the Oglala's traditional hunting lands had been stolen, and their treaty reservation lands increasingly encroached

⁷⁹ I use the spelling provided by Oglala scholar Jeffrey Means.

upon by private interests. Treaty entitlements favoured “mixed blood families” that were predominantly “white husbands” with “mixed-blood children” (13), and “alienated the Oglala who favored communalism—the vast majority” (18). This meant that most Oglala were essentially forced into the “assimilation policies and the concepts of capitalism, materialism, and individualism,” or face starvation (11). These policies were enforced while many Oglala attempted to transition to maintaining their traditional ways of life by breeding herds of issued cattle that they would hunt and harvest in the field as a tiospaye. This traditional hunting and harvesting of cattle herds saw children and the elderly take part, a sight that a young settler called “sickening” in his account written in 1899 (qtd. in Means 4), the year Arthur’s interactions with the Wapiti take place. It is the year “other draconian regulations also came into effect” to inhibit these traditional hunting methods applied to federal cattle issuances that had been going on for “more than twenty years” (15). The “perceived ‘savagery’” of these traditional methods was cast by settler officials as a hindrance for Oglala “progress toward civilization” (15). 1899 regulations from the Department of the Interior were specifically aimed at reducing this traditional practice and dividing tribal cattle holdings. These regulations gave Indian agents—the governmental representatives given great legal authority over reservations and legally recognized “Indians”—full discretion over who could breed and kill issued cattle and how they were harvested. As Means notes, the hunts were ended on this discretion “shortly after” these changes, exacerbated by the fact that all calves were required to receive “individual brands rather than the tribal band” (18), dismantling traditional Oglala communalist title.

All told, the policies of 1899 meant it was the last year of this traditional form of hunting, replaced by “the domination of the reservation cattle industry by ‘white husbands’ and mixed-bloods,” and full-bloods were forced into “selling the animals for cash” (18); tiospaye camps were eliminated to displace the Oglala into reservations and make individual holdings of private property, the only settler-recognized way of life. As Mark Rifkin writes, dismantling Indigenous kinships by enforcing settler heteronormative nuclear family life goes hand-in-hand with the relegation of Indigeneity itself to a supposedly quantifiable racialization of “blood.” Kinships like tiospaye are “measured against the natural and self-evident model of nuclear conjugality,” and the “presumption of heterocouplehood as the atom of social life helps position other logics of identification, affiliation, and self-representation as ancillary to such *blood* inheritance” of “racial Indianness” (37), a phenomena that will be more thoroughly investigated in Chapter 3. The division and forcible redistribution of Oglala title, then, was the complementary enforcement of a crude metric of racialization over a different social and political structure, and of a particular relationship to land as individual property. As Means sums it up, “by forcing individuals to segregate their property, the federal government sought to instill individualism and material accumulation as dominant economic motivations,” an interdiction of a “market economy” (18) over the desire imparted by Oglala Chief Lip to settler authorities that his people should, as they always had, “have the land *in common*.” (15)

It is important to recognize the significance of Means’s emphasis of 1899, the same year the majority of *RDR2*’s plot takes place, as an important year in the settler colonial structure’s concerted elimination of Oglala communalism. This communalism’s

interrelated social, political, and economic life connects its tiospaye kinship and related interdependent tribal sovereignty to its traditional community-involved hunts and harvests on the plains of their lands held in common. This communalism is the important and exactly timed cultural specificity that *RDR2*'s ersatz Indian Wapiti symbolic representation of Indigeneity merely swaps for a tragic friction between pacifism (symbolized by Rains Fall) and a warrior's death (symbolized by Eagle Flies) against insurmountable "disintegrating forces" of civilization. This trade-off is not simply the product of Rockstar's ignorance or negligence; indeed, *RDR2*'s gorily detailed harvesting of animals as part of its formula of open world power-building is a classic settler cultural "contradictory reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality" à la Wolfe (389). Here, players as Arthur are inculcated in design principles that structure an experience centered on careful awareness of the land for an individualized, stylized, and economically incentivized version of precisely the apparent "savagery" of field harvesting animals that was eliminated for the Oglala. This appropriation disavows precisely how these manners of individualization and economic incentivization are the logics that structured the very elimination of that Oglala cultural tradition *as* savagery. Players use the "Focus" mechanic for spotting animals and their trails, taught to Arthur by the Indigenous man Charles, an immediate empowerment for "savage" behaviour now motivated to gaining power, and thus "play Indian" as per Standing Rock Sioux scholar Philip J. Deloria Jr.'s aforementioned delineation.

By having players emphasizing and incentivizing mobile spatial autonomy through an Indigenous unreal and an effacement of the Indigenous real, *RDR2* echoes Deloria's connection of modern settler cultural and organizational appropriations of

Indigenous cultures to its beginning in the early twentieth century. This exact period is just after the Oglala turning point Means highlights *and* the game's temporal setting. As Deloria notes, this appropriation centered on connections with nature and masculine power in wilderness, a settler fascination "with a positive *exterior* Indian Other, one who represented authentic reality in the face of urban disorder and alienating mass society" (74). The early history of American organizations adopting "Indianness" as a "role model" to shape modern character "in children (especially boys)" was an attempt to salvage a masculine national identity "perceived by many at the turn of the twentieth century to be imperiled by an effeminate, postfrontier urbanism" (96). The *RDR* series, in its own ways, replays this attempt and provides its players a settler-Indianness which naturalizes its artificial frontier's power fantasy. *RDR2*'s emphasized gameplay as a detailed, "living" artificial frontier to be hunted and harvested without limit puts it in a similar lineage as the early anxiety of the "postfrontier" period: settler appropriation plays Indian by mimicking aspects of the "savagery" settler colonial structure constructed *and* eliminated, and continues to use for further elimination of Indigenous people and title.⁸⁰ By inflecting symbolic Indigeneity on the player's autonomy, white protagonist, and the limitless and economically incentivized hunting and harvesting gameplay, *RDR2* yet again attempts to separate the logics of the frontier's racist genocidal structure from its played rehearsal. Players get to play Indian, surpass Indians, and engage a one-man mass hunt and outdoor harvest, leaving skinned corpses to rot in a savagery that bears

⁸⁰ As per footnote 68, some of these "savageries" were actually enforced upon some Indigenous groups, making them conform to a lifestyle of the "Indian" understandable by settlers, and thus putting them on the same track for the logics of elimination the Oglala face as discussed here. This is the way the frontier creates the conditions of its own necessity and realization, as noted in the introduction.

greater resemblance to the private hunters that conducted the buffalo genocide than to the Indigenous practices that are fully occluded from the game's narrative and mechanics.

Another related part of this hunting and harvesting system expanded from *RDR1* is players' ability to pick plants, and use both these plants and animal parts as part of multiple "crafting" mechanics for making useful items for combat, or for the cosmetic, capacity, and combat enchantments mentioned above. In an aforementioned optional mission where Arthur helps Rains Fall retrieve his tribe's "Chanupa," Rains Fall picks some plants for Arthur to mix for treating his tuberculosis, a dramatic disease plot point that dominates the last stages of Arthur's story. What is particularly telling is that this mixture cannot actually be crafted by the player even once. It is merely part of a ride-along experience for Rains Fall and Arthur to relate to one another. A missable instance in an optional mission, this small inclusion of ersatz Indigenous knowledge is never integrated into the game's central systems of collection and crafting; it merits only Arthur's passing mention of its effectiveness in a following mission. To play Indian means playing those activities that are coherent with the settler notions of that "*exterior* Indian Other," the outdoor warrior masculinity that *RDR2*, like *RDR1*, mourns and celebrates with cowboys *as* Indians. An impactful mechanical rendering of Indigenous knowledge to alter the protagonists' narratively inescapable illness is not here. It is this illness that, we may recall, relates high-honor Arthur's foregone conclusion of extinction to the game's equally foregone conclusion of Indigenous peoples' elimination. There can be no gameplay investments into real referents of Indigenous culture, sovereignty, or kinship in this technological microcosm of settler colonial structure. There are no relations of communalism, no alternatives to cynicism, nor cultural specificity of the

appropriated Indigenous real—that which is still *outside* the enduring frontier logics of settler colonial culture—here, playing Indian is, as it always is for settler cultural production, only the play of empire.

Red Dead Redemption 2: The Continuing Masculine Redemption of Settlement

When players reach the substantial epilogue section of *RDR2* which takes place years after Arthur's death, they play the series' previous protagonist John Marston. Set a few years prior to the start of *RDR1*'s plot, *RDR2*'s epilogue follows Marston's attempt to leave his outlaw lifestyle and establish his ranch—the same ranch on the same land of the first game where he will help kill the remaining Indigenous people. Dutch's gang has split up, but Marston does find and invite Charles onto his ranch as he develops it. Marston's core motivation is the same heteronormative propertied nuclear family unit that was the mode of "civilization" the US government legally enforced in an attempt to dismantle Oglala tiospaye. This civilized life is what both low- and high-honor Arthur encourages for Marston, and what Charles, at the very end of the game, departs to assimilate to. After spending time on Marston's ranch, Charles says he will "go north. Canada. Find a woman. Start a family, if I can," because he sees John's life, and says "well, I'd like to try it."⁸¹ Though Charles is not a white man,⁸² the game operates on an ideology that, like the Indian agents that assaulted Oglala title and tiospaye, literally privileges only the Indian that conforms to the modes of "civilization" acceptable to settler colonial interests. This hopeful vision for racially inclusive settlement is typical of

⁸¹ From the early unskippable section of the mission "American Venom."

⁸² As Dia Lacina points out in her article "Red Dead Redemption 2's Redface Proves How Far Games Haven't Come," that the most heavily featured Indigenous character in *RDR2* is also not an Indigenous actor highlights a productive racism endemic in games generally. As I pointed out previously in this chapter, it is not Rockstar's first "redface" in the series.

modern neoliberal post-racialism and, as mentioned in the previous section, a development of early settler appropriations of masculine “Indianness.” The game’s characteristic saturation of symbolic parallels shows just how limited this vision is in practice, and evades how materially exclusionary settlement and its continuing structure was and is today.

As both *RDR* games cohere bygone settler productivity with Indigeneity via clichéd representations of rugged, stoic masculinity, they rehearse the tropes of “playing Indian” as related by Philip J. Deloria and of the formulas of “Western” literature and cinema as identified by Klopotek. Settler colonial cultural production and the Western genres specifically posit “imagined” Indians as “an impossibly masculine race” (251). As such, Indigenous women are most often relegated to “playing secondary roles” (251), usually notable only for their sexual availability to white men. There are no Indigenous women with speaking roles in the main plot of *RDR2*, and none at all in the first game. One of the only Indigenous women to appear in *RDR2* is the silent pregnant wife of US Army deserter John Weathers. This appearance takes place near the end of Arthur’s life, in Chapter 6, when the Honor system gains a multiplier, and the opportunities for the largest positive gains to the player’s Honor rating are available in missions locked out from players with too-low honor,⁸³ clearly incentivizing the correct performance of righteous cowboy masculinity. Aiding Weathers’s escape to a new life with his wife is among the highest honor gains available in the game, a tidy example of the games’ embrace of the Indian-agent-enforced white-husband mixed-blood family structure that

⁸³ The locked mission set is titled “Do Not Seek Absolution,” and a breakdown of the values and precise player actions/choices that change the honor rating is available from the “Honor” page of the Red Dead Wiki.

was used to dismantle Oglala life in the very year the game takes place. This example with a silent Indigenous woman also tidily represents the limited white, heteronormative, masculinity-obsessed formulas of Western cultural production that Klopotek summarizes. It is also one of many symbolic parallels to Marston's desired life of trading masculine outlawry for masculine settlement.

RDR2's representation of settler masculine identity, so relatably applicable to the modern neoliberal sensibility, is like *GTA*'s extrication of racism from capitalism in that it is a motif of appropriative equivocation that extracts legally enforced oppressive relations from gamers' power-fantasy settler play. This is, as in Veracini's aforementioned summation, a settler colonial cultural hallmark, where settler colonialism "obscures the conditions of its own production" (*Settler Colonialism* 14). The final central and compatibly neoliberal image of Marston's propertied nuclear white family is not changed by the player's honor rating. This happy ending is only complicated by gestures to its inevitable doom at the hands of the government agents stalking Marston to begin the events of the first game; that eventual destruction only further relates the game's settler idyll to its ersatz Indigeneity, already occluded. It is not, however, the only way the narrative plays out its settler mythology by well-worn method. The penultimate combat of the game's epilogue sees Marston and Charles fighting off attacks by a gang called the Skinner Brothers. Said to be a mix of white American, Mexican, and Indigenous outlaws, the Skinner Brothers are little more than a post-racial—and thus plausibly deniable—representation of Indian savagery at its most excessive. The Skinner Brothers live in the woods next to Marston's ranch—the same woods in which he will later kill the many Indigenous people of Dutch's gang in the first game—and their camps

are strewn with body parts and elaborate scenes of torture and gruesome death. Charles suggests they often scalp their victims,⁸⁴ a violence popularly cast as a savage trait of “Indians” throughout Western cultural production, but one whose actual proliferation in settling-America was the result of settler colonial incentivizations (such as scalp bounties) and settler participation, yet another way the frontier manufactures its own necessity through a supposedly *outside* savagery.⁸⁵

Even exploring these forests in autonomous gameplay outside of missions can see Marston ambushed by the Skinner Brothers, the only enemies in the game to use bows and arrows, and who shout war cries indistinguishable from the recognizable sounds of Indians in Wild West cinema. Marston’s survival and violent defense of his brand new ranch is thus the same masculinity-proving battle against “tough men” Indians that MacFarlane relates in *RDR1*. After the main story mission with Charles, where Marston kills a great number of Skinner Brothers, Charles congratulates Marston on making his home safe for his ranch and family.⁸⁶ By ensuring players hear the various stereotypical Mexican and “redneck” white American accents among the Skinner Brothers alongside the tropes of Indians of Wild West mythology, Rockstar gets to embrace its Indians and kill them too. Arthur’s and Marston’s cowboy masculinities get to cannibalize Indigeneity for its authentic warrant to the land, provide equivocating elegies for vanishing Indians and vanishing settler masculinity, and have that settler masculinity prove its strength and warrant by slaughtering symbolic savagery to protect private property. It is in this way that the Skinner Brothers are part and parcel of the settler

⁸⁴ Charles relates this in the beginning of the mission “Uncle’s Bad Day.”

⁸⁵ For an excellent, detailed study of this framework and the sources that substantiate it, see Ball (2013).

⁸⁶ From the mission “Uncle’s Bad Day.”

mythology of “the Indian” as it is framed and reinterpreted through a neoliberal culture that believes itself constitutively multicultural and post-racial. As the following, final section shall outline, this is an expression of what Byrd terms “zombie imperialism,” and is a symbolic representation Rockstar and other open world games have trafficked even more explicitly elsewhere.

Zombie Imperialism and the Enduring Frontier Power Fantasies of the Besieged

Rockstar Games, as the influential standard for big-budget open world games made in the West, thus display a number of repeated but cosmetically reshaping narrative and gameplay formulas. This chapter elucidates a few things about this influential standard in its expression and context: (1) Big-budget open world games are indebted to and accelerations of neoliberal supply chains that are exploitative; (2) this neoliberal exploitation is aided and abetted by individualization that obscures neoliberalism as contemporarily productive of and historically founded upon racialization for that exploitation; (3) neoliberal ideology is as such the inheritor and continuance of the settler colonial relation; (4) national sovereignties once so important to settler identity are compromised by the colonial and capital relation that is integral to its structure; (5) this compromised sovereignty and the increasing failure of neoliberal policy reasserts the need for settler colonial and neoliberal cultural expression to both disavow continuing racism and Indigenous genocide *and* appropriate Indigenous identity to salve its own identity crises and ruptures of sovereignty. Rockstar’s games are products and producers of those listed phenomena, and the big-budget open world genre it so greatly influenced are as such similarly representative. Later chapters will pick up on the threads here laid, but I would like to lay some groundwork for this dissertation’s later points by way of a

conclusion that quickly focuses on Jodi Byrd's analysis of settler colonialism, video games, and genre conventions, how that theory has since been evidenced, and how it fits into my framework of these games as artificial frontiers.

It is abundantly clear that the *RDR* series trafficks in the masculine stereotypes of "Indians" as noted by Klopotek. At the same time, *RDR2* uses aesthetic and gameplay cues of savagery to adopt and destroy Indianness in its absence and presence. Indigeneity is here an alluring and threatening *outside* both consumed and rejected by the settler psyche of *inside*. Jodi Byrd argues that Indigeneity for U.S. empire, though a limited set of cultural images, is nevertheless a dynamic and shifting category that determines that empire's boundaries and targets for violence and marginalization. As argued, settlers' "salient surplus" population is historically "the Native population" (Lloyd and Wolfe 111); Indigenous peoples' existence *outside* settler sovereignty and *inside* its imagined or legalistic borders contributes to what Byrd calls Indigeneity's "transit" as an imperial concept, where Indianness is "recycled and reproduced so that empire might cohere and consolidate subject and object, self and other" (*Transit of Empire* 221). For US empire specifically, the "Indian" is the "originary necropolitical" figure (229) enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as "merciless Indian savages," existential threats to sovereign nationhood. The Indian is thus repeatedly resurrected in various forms and by various names, a frontier danger that both produces anxiety for the safety and sanctity of the *inside*, and invites access, usually violent, to the *outside* open for extraction.

Price notes the anxiety of empire-making that is "with us still" (44), and Lloyd and Wolfe identify the development of new lexicons to both activate and *act through* that anxiety in perpetuating empire's violence: the War on Terror and its amorphous

“terrorist” figure is a variation of the Indian as locus of American anxiety; this figure undergirds the “deadly if preposterous situation” where “the most highly armed states in the world assure their populations that they (or their interests) are under a permanent state of siege, diffusely threatened by ragtag platoons of the dispossessed who, despite the considerable differences between them, uniformly qualify for the indiscriminate designation of ‘terrorists’” (110). Like Indians, terrorists partially refer to real groups, a racialized “kaleidoscopic variety of ideologies and religious beliefs,” but are nevertheless more broadly associated with their collapsible and simplistic part in a “narrative that . . . has legitimated” violent empire in its continuation through the “neoliberal state” (110). In such a way, terrorists are another development of the Indian: at once a savage existential threat, and also a conveniently simplistic population to be removed from land and resources targeted for extraction. The settler figure of the “Indian” is thus a legitimating danger for actual “citizens of American Indian nations” as it is for racialized peoples in America and abroad, as the Indian is “the origin of the stateless terrorist combatants within U. S. enunciations of sovereignty” (Byrd 227). The anxiety of settlers—as subjects of empire—and the mechanisms of their states—foundationally genocidal—can be tracked by this shifting category, a quality Byrd terms the “transit” of the Indian in empire. The Indian, as the inside/outside aggressor in that “permanent state of siege” (Lloyd and Wolfe 110) of colonial and neoliberal anxiety, is what Byrd calls a “living dead,” constantly reemerging “to haunt cosmopolitan colonialism,” and “serve as the deferred melancholia of a lingering sense of retribution that hovers over a nation that forever strives to make native the foreign through and abandonment of the native to the foreign” (229). Indians and terrorists, and any dispossessed or disaffected group that

invites the violence of the settler state are the already-dead and constantly reanimating threat that will “consume the proprietary domains of a forever threatened and embattled whiteness” (229).

It is with this “transit” of the Indian figure that Byrd relates the history of Indians in Western cultural production to the Western pop cultural popularity of zombies. “Indians are the original American zombies,” says Byrd, “because, within these tropes, and especially within the generic conventions of the Western, Indians are always on the threshold of past doneness, always signifying precipice of dead to the future” (“Red Dead Conventions” 347-8). The continuing representations of the vanishing and dead Indians, like *Rains Fall and Eagle Flies*, exhibit the settler impulse for a “contradictory reappropriation” (Wolfe 389) of Indigeneity akin to the historical appropriation of a “positive *exterior* Indian Other” (P. Deloria 74). These representations, however, merely advance the usually white central figures of the settler imaginary (the individualistic outlaw, the hardworking propertied settler). That advance necessitates the Indian as living dead, or Indian as terrorist, to take the role of existentially threatening enemy against which the settler hero must overcome as on Turner’s Indian frontier. Zombies, Byrd argues, are such a fascinating image for settlers partially because they—and the apocalyptic consequences they entail—exist “at the boundaries between human and inhuman, legal and illegal, sacred and bare life that exist in the no-man’s-land that constitutes the states of nature and exception” (*Transit* 225). The “zombie imperialism” of “liberal democratic colonialism” (228) can here safely hide the genocidal impulses of its enduring colonial anxiety behind a figuration not so obviously racialized, but rehearsing the very dehumanizing tropes of historical colonial racialization. Thus the

“emerging national US literature” of zombies makes the horror genre the “menacing doppelgänger” of Wild West genre conventions (“Red Dead Conventions” 348).

As Byrd suggests the settler imaginary and its cultural production “evolved cowboys to monopolize and dominate in a sea of living dead Indians,” it is little wonder that as an example they cite *Red Dead Redemption’s Undead Nightmare*, “that literally replaces Indians with zombies” (“Red Dead Conventions” 348). *Red Dead Redemption’s Undead Nightmare [RDRUN]*, released in 2010, is downloadable content (DLC) for *RDR1*, a purchasable “expansion” that has players inhabit Marston again, this time playing his nightmare of a zombie apocalypse in the same world as the original game. Eschewing any moral ambiguity—the Honor meter is helpfully removed—for the limitless destruction of the living dead, *RDRUN* is a pure expression of genocidal open world frontier impulses, and it came during a glut of zombie narratives in video games and other media. That many big-budget open world games after *RDRUN* would combine zombies and Wild West aesthetic and sensibility speaks to Byrd’s points. Open world zombie game series *State of Decay* especially leaned into a Wild West aesthetic with its second entry released in 2018; one of its four “leader” types for players is “Sheriff,” and the core gameplay revolves around defending settlements sieged by zombies set in maps that resemble the American Great Plains. *Days Gone*, released in 2019, sees its player character outlaw biker called “Sheriff” by characters in fortified settlements who enlist his aid. Obvious comparisons are made of his motorcycle-riding outlaw masculinity to horse-riding Wild West cowboy masculinity. Most importantly, one of *Days Gone’s* most heavily marketed features are the roaming zombie “hordes,” which players are

encouraged to seek out and destroy to the very last, a gameplay loop that rewards complete genocide of migratory savages in the American Pacific Northwest.

These zombie apocalypse visions in open world gameplay play both to the fantasies of the individual rugged hero's dominance over space and destruction of life (or unlife) that inhabits it, and to the enduring settler anxiety of a savage outside coming to destroy the sovereign inside—an anxiety of projection, a “lingering sense of retribution” (Byrd, *Transit* 229) for a genocide conducted, validated, forgotten, and re-validated as with *RDR*'s obfuscations and equivocations. Chapter 3 will handle in greater detail the implications of these gaming apocalyptic settler narratives; for now it is enough to say that a fictional world of recovering or foundering civilization, besieged by mindless savagery, is conducive to open world gameplay precisely because it opens an entire frontier that can be pillaged without moral quandary (indeed, rather more with civilizing heroism). Big-budget open world games and their privileging of player dominance (“achievement”) and the believability (“immersion”) of lands modeled on those accumulated through Indigenous dispossession would be identifiable as salve and entertainment of the settler imaginary even without their importantly Turnerian frontier narratives and symbolisms. *With* those Turnerian frameworks read in hobbyist outlets as what makes games the premier medium of modern storytelling, and in the context of their neoliberal productive materialities, they are products of continuing settler colonial structure *par excellence*. The continuing colonial sense of siege, like Turner morphing settler invasion into “resistance to aggression,” is rehearsed and normalized in these games.

RDR's equivocation of embattled settler masculinity to Indigenous genocide is a way of speaking to the anxieties of neoliberal mindsets that fear, as the Vulture profile notes, elimination "could happen in the world today" (Goldberg) for the white masculinities of its apparently relatable or laudable white protagonists. This equivocation necessarily eclipses settler colonial structure as it is still in place; the reality of these eliminations is that they are not a matter of *could*, but a matter of *whom*. The "lingering sense of retribution" thus makes Indians, as post-racial savage Skinner Brothers, as terrorists, as zombies, a still-profitable and common transit. These games play to the desires and anxieties the frontier has always elicited for settlers. Neoliberal economics must make the world a frontier, and the gamers being indulged by these games may be similarly indulged by rhetoric from politicians like Donald Trump, who assuage increasingly disaffected populations by assuring them the failures of neoliberal policy is the result of kinds of invasion (by terrorists and criminals posing as refugees and immigrants), threats to the *inside*. The central racist structure of the capital-colonial relation and their historical forebears are denied, and these cultural expressions—games and political rhetoric alike—suggest the individual empowerment so important to neoliberal democratic culture is under threat not by the very contradictions of the structure of settler sovereignty, but by *outside* forces, often existing *inside* the boundaries of their borders. The Indian-as-zombie, and the power fantasies of Rockstar's open world stories and play, fit into this cultural context.

With the marketability of the psychological sense of siege of embattled neoliberal individualism so thoroughly catered to by Rockstar's open world games, and Rockstar's stripping of racism from the structure foundational to that siege mentality, racism, let

alone capitalism or colonialism, is not a serious target of their critique or concern. As such, the nominally non-racist neoliberal wisdom of Rockstar's narratives—and the gameplay structures that deliver the more important and narratively centered settler colonial ideological empowerments—actually serve only to validate a fundamentally racist structure and its warrant for violence. Rockstar's influential narrative and mechanical formulas for open world games demonstrate a celebrated cynicism, salved anxiety, and power fantasy delivered for a settler colonial structure in its contemporary neoliberal reality. Rockstar's oeuvre provides ideological cover, an equivocating shrug to allow the finely tuned gameplay to do its work in providing players with an individually empowering sense of achievement and immersion. Whether *GTA* or *RDR*, these are artificial frontiers: invitation to access and accumulation by violent dispossession sold to consumers in hypnotic structures meant to be played for tens of hours at least. These are frontiers with all the joys of accumulation with none of the attendant downsides or unsustainability—the violence is unreal, and its extraction is infinitely repeatable. The stories position economics, race, crime, and genocide in ways that make them palatable to any number of grievances for subjects of empire *except* those that would pose empire as anything but universal, timeless, and inevitable. This is settler cultural production, artificial frontiers that implicitly justify a historical and continuing exploitative relationship to land and Indigenous peoples in frontier spaces. This is what the frontier has always been for the settler experience: a concept constructed precisely to justify that colonial relation.

**Chapter Two: *Assassin's Creed 3*, the Tribal Un/Real, and Ubisoft's Proliferation of
Settler Simulation**

If Rockstar Games is an early and consistent model for the Western big-budget open world game genre, Ubisoft Entertainment is that genre's premier proliferator, and at least equally as influential for its increasingly popular formulas. Ubisoft develops and publishes several *series* of games that are open world: *Assassin's Creed* (more than 12 big-budget open world entries between 2007-2020), *Watch Dogs* (3 entries between 2014-2020), *Far Cry* (more than 5 open world entries between 2008-2020), *The Division* (2 entries between 2016-2020). Some of the rest of the company's catalogue include a franchise recently made into open world games (*Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* features 2 open world entries between 2017-2020), and another open world game perhaps with ambitions for further serialization (*Immortals Fenyx Rising* in 2020). No other company boasts such a quantitatively significant library of this particularly expensive video game genre. Indeed, though Rockstar might be considered one of the genre's important originators, or even its most critically acclaimed, Ubisoft's sheer output captures a considerable share of that genre's cultural impact and substantially more of its market share. The 2007 release of the first *Assassin's Creed* [AC] saw Ubisoft's first foray into the genre that would become a central part of its business model, and contributed to the company's first annual self-reported earnings of more than a billion USD. This earnings trend has only increased along with the company's reliance upon open world game production; the company's earnings have hovered between 1.5 and 2.25 billion USD for

the last few years.⁸⁷ The *Assassin's Creed* series, then, is at least equally if not more important for a cultural study of open world games as the *GTA* or *RDR* series.

Since the release of the first *AC*, another big-budget open world game in that series has been released every one-to-two years; as such, a wide-ranging study of the games is likely not desirable, and certainly not feasible in this context. Instead, this chapter will elucidate some of the series' relevant notable traits by primarily focusing on the game with a narrative most explicitly about settler colonialism and Indigeneity. The *Assassin's Creed* series is marketed on and praised in hobbyist media for its meticulously represented historical settings. Despite a running through-line science fiction plot, the games themselves mention "historical tourism"⁸⁸ as constitutive of the game experience. *Assassin's Creed III (ACIII)* is largely set during the American Revolution, circa 1765 to 1783, and is to-date the only big-budget open world game to feature an explicitly Indigenous protagonist. The game sold 12 million copies globally in under four months of its initial release in October 2012 (Ivan), and as such, is an important representation of an Indigenous character in the open world genre specifically, and in the billion-dollar popular culture powerhouse that is the videogame industry broadly. *ACIII's* representation of Indigeneity and settler colonialism (depicted in the pivotal historical moment of American Revolution) has a reach that cannot be understated for the purposes

⁸⁷ See Ubisoft (2008 and 2020) for post-*Assassin's Creed* and most recently available earnings reports; intervening reports can be found at the Investor Center link provided in the bibliography as of August 2020.

⁸⁸ Ubisoft marketing and game journalists have taken to the phrase "historical tourism" as an accurate descriptor for the series' draw, including Stephen Totilo's article referenced later on. Similar phrasings are used in *Assassin's Creed III*, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and *Assassin's Creed: Rogue*. For example, the phrase "virtual tourism" is used in a message between fictional developers (in the collectible "Abstergo Entertainment Tablet Document 4") for the "Animus Omega" game system, which features game-setting equivalents of the *Assassin's Creed* series, a kind of meta-acknowledgement by Ubisoft of the Ubisoft games themselves.

of this dissertation's investigation. *ACIII* is an excellent case study of the gaming industry's inscription of settler colonial fantasies of territorial expropriation and New World belonging, and how those trends are enacted via representations of Indigeneity specifically.

Unlike the *RDR* games' ersatz Indigeneity, *ACIII*'s Indigenous protagonist is Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), a member of a real, existing Indigenous nation. Ubisoft hired two Kanien'kehá:ka consultants for the game, Teiowí:sonte Thomas Deer and Akwiratékha Martin,⁸⁹ the latter also serving as the game's voice actor for an important Mohawk character, Kanen'tó:kon. In an interview a month after the game's release, both consultants articulated the perceived respect with which Ubisoft approached Mohawk culture. Martin noted that the developers "were all very open," and Deer pointed out that Ubisoft was clearly invested in the game being "culturally sensitive and accurate" (Venables, n.p.). Though Deer says the team "bounced ideas off" him, he said that "Certainly, a big part of why I was recruited was to ensure that Ubisoft did not produce anything that would be considered culturally offensive to our people" (qtd. in Venables). Guarded against offense, and, in Deer's words a month prior to the game's release, armed with a desire to "cover their butts," Ubisoft could market the game as "a real, authentic product that stood up" (qtd. in Newman). Consequently, *ACIII*'s storyline tackles notions of empire and freedom (a particular focus of the *AC* series) quite explicitly. Although Ubisoft attempted a respectful and nuanced approach to colonialism with its Indigenous

⁸⁹ It is worth noting that both Deer and Martin are from Kahnawake, a part of the Mohawk Nation that is culturally distinct from the Mohawk depicted in *ACIII*. The historical Kanien'kehá:ka of Kahnawake moved North from ancestral lands around the Mohawk River in what is now New York State about a hundred years before the main events re-framed in the game. The game's Kanien'kehá:ka are of those that remained in what is now New York state, and were thus embroiled in the settler colonial politics and displacement to come during and after the American Revolution. See Snow (pp. 131-158) and Richter (pp. 130-213).

protagonist, *ACIII*'s mechanics are based in settler colonial economics of acquisition, and de-contextualizes the genocidal and continuing effects of settler colonial society. The game perpetuates established societal assumptions about Indigeneity's vanishing nature, and functions as a denial of continuing settler colonial structures that still oppress Indigenous peoples today.

In this chapter, I will highlight several aspects uniquely presented by *ACIII*: its friction between critique of American Revolution mythology and its protagonist's confused positioning as authentically Indigenous within this critique (which the game's colonial assumptions muddle), and the settler colonial systematics encoded in the game's mechanics. The friction of its protagonist and critique, I argue, is a primary factor in the gaming community's divided response to the game's central half-Mohawk character, his eventual erasure from the series' subsequent entries, priorities, and marketing, and the settler colonial anxiety and desire this divided response represents. My aim is to sketch out how the game's narrative, gameplay, and continued marketing of the series result in *ACIII*'s success as colonialist apologism disguised as critique of colonialism, and failure as a positive representation of authentic Indigeneity. This argument is thus essentially a close-reading of sorts, a case study of big-budget game development's most prominent depiction of a real-world Indigeneity in a fictional narrative. *ACIII*, a multi-million dollar game about an Indigenous protagonist, apparently explicitly made with a mind to respectful treatment of the historical and ongoing culture and experiences of Kanien'kehá:ka, still displays a number of persistent tropes of and about settler colonialism and Indigeneity that the previous chapter argued is encoded within the Western big-budget open world genre. This chapter will then detail the ideological

constraints of the broader mechanical formula of the genre—and the so-called “Ubisoft formula” that has come to be associated with the genre’s popularity *and* notoriety—and how they are emblematic of the settler colonial imaginary. The tropes of the genre *and* the tropes of the settler colonial imaginary center on the paradoxical *mobility* of the figure of the settler, a primarily theoretical mobility that is necessarily placed in contrast to static Indigeneity. Ubisoft and Rockstar’s narrative, ludological, commercial, and ideological sensibilities are essentially identical under a rubric of the settler colonial imaginary.

Templars, Assassins, and Other Players of Settler Colonialism

ACIII, though a game that ostensibly tries to critique colonialism with a supposedly authentically Indigenous avatar, is much like the *RDR* series in the way settler colonialism’s historical atrocities and contemporarily relevant particularities are still largely disavowed, and Indigenous authenticity or “authority” is desired. Unlike Rockstar’s characteristic cynicism, however, Ubisoft’s games, though dystopian, are typically more aspirational; where Rockstar games have players play assholes in a world of assholes, the *Assassin’s Creed* series is largely about a never-ending battle between good—styled as freedom—and evil—styled as tyranny. Thus *ACIII* and other games in the series are explicitly designed—as their cultural consultancy implies—with a care to represent (or at least *market*) a more progressively-minded depiction of these political histories and contemporary realities. As it is for *ACIII*, the care only relates to a supposedly culturally authentic representation of Mohawk peoples as a past-gone people, and a contradictory re-enactment of the broader structural settler colonial relations. Ubisoft’s “respectful” approach merely makes *ACIII* a paean for the ideologically over-

determined Western notions of liberty and freedom that developed directly from the exploitation and elimination of capital-colonial relations.

The *Assassin's Creed* series interweaves science fiction and historical fiction. The franchise has a mythos that connects the incredible number of games. This mythos is at times erratic, complex, and (frankly) often overwrought. The *Creed* series refigures world history as the stage of a never-ending war between two secretive factions that manipulate world events but are not visible to or acknowledged by the global populace. These two factions, Assassins and Templars,⁹⁰ are largely representative of rather broad political ideologies, but are also part of a sci-fi plot about an alien race, the “First Civilization,” that created and genetically engineered humanity at some point in the ancient forgotten past. The Templars seek global domination whereby a powerful elite controls the masses with the alien “First Civilization” technology. The Assassins are the opposite: a rival group of freedom fighters who seek to keep people free from Templar reign. Most plots of the series end up focusing on powerful information or alien technology, with the Assassins trying to stop that information and technology from falling into Templar hands. The alternate modern-day sci-fi setting backbone to these games has this war between Templars and Assassins raging behind the scenes. The majority of gameplay across the series, however, is not part of the modern setting; player interaction is nearly always in an alternate historical setting.⁹¹ Players navigate these historical settings as a character pivotal in real historical events, albeit for alternative, fictionalized reasons and

⁹⁰ In later *AC* games that depict earlier historical periods, these groups are known as Hidden Ones and the Order of the Ancients, respectively.

⁹¹ *ACIII* is the first entry where the historical component of the game takes place in the so-called “New World.”

specifics.⁹² The primary quests typically relate to First Civilization technology that has various capabilities, from mind control to earthquakes.⁹³ It is the crucial “science fiction” component, then, that provides the underlying meaning that connects seemingly disparate historical contexts represented by different entries in the series. These “real” historical events as we know them are fictionalized as “false” histories, ones edited by the overwhelming modern success of the Templars over the Assassins.

The historical settings are part of the game’s narrative through a device called the “Animus.” In the *AC* mythos, the Animus is a device that can create a sort of virtual reality representation of the “genetic memory” of its user. When a person uses the Animus, they can view and “play” the memories of their ancestors. As such, the primary historical gameplay of the *Assassin’s Creed* series in most entries is actually a kind of game-within-a-game in the overarching meta-narrative of Assassin-Templar conflict itself. The gamer playing *ACIII* plays a character in the modern world *and* plays the character in the historical setting, narratively “played” by the modern character through the Animus. Neither the player (nor the other player character “playing” the historical simulation) can change history; they are merely “synchronizing,” in the series’ parlance, with the memories of that historical figure. Kill a civilian, and the game warns the player that since the historical figure did not kill civilians, continuing to do so will “desynchronize” the player; this leads to a game over, which in open world gameplay, functionally, is only a brief delay of open world play, or a restart of the story mission

⁹² For example, Sir William Johnson died in 1774 of natural causes, but in *ACIII* he is killed by the player’s historical avatar—albeit at the right time, 1774.

⁹³ The “pieces” and “apples of Eden” (Eden being the setting of the First Civilization), for example, are made instrumental in historical leaders’ success, including Napoleon and Elizabeth I.

being played. *AC* stories usually feature the Animus because Assassins want to view a part of an ancestor's memories that has information needed in the present day, and only by proceeding through the relevant figure's life—"synchronizing"—can they reconstruct the memories well enough to get the desired information. As such, though the games are of the "open world" genre, the missions (within memory "sequences") are more tightly structured, linear, and have defined or limited narrative outcomes, typically the assassination of important antagonists.⁹⁴

The series clearly wishes to pose itself as ethically complex. How the Assassins and Templars fit, exactly, into each historical time and space does not always fall where one might expect, and the dynamics of association are often presented as rapidly shifting. Individual Templars and Assassins each have differing reasons for being involved in their respective organizations and have differing methods for enacting their broad ideologies. A series staple is conversation with "primary" assassination targets (those that cap off memory "sequences"), wherein the ethics of both Templars and Assassins are called into question. Individual Assassins, too, question their own methods,⁹⁵ and in-fighting among both organizations has been a constant across the series.⁹⁶ That said, this complexity does not compromise the series' commitment to interpellating the player with the Assassin ideology of "freedom" and "free will"; after all, the open world genre's vaunted autonomy and mobility is the apparent ludic echo of this ideology. The gray areas the series introduces merely serve to show that enacting such ideology is complicated, messy

⁹⁴ Player "freedom," then, is largely constrained to where to explore, what soldiers to kill, how precisely to achieve certain objectives (like via stealth or direct combat), and what side-missions to complete (missions not required for the completion of the main narrative).

⁹⁵ Shaun Hastings, a recurring Assassin character through many of the entries of the series, often points out their similarities in methods of achieving goals between Assassins and Templars.

⁹⁶ The first *AC* ultimate antagonist, in the end, is a leader of the Assassins.

work. Even with *Assassin's Creed: Rogue*, where the historical player-controlled avatar is a former Assassin turned committed Templar, and the modern-day avatar is a nameless, mute individual being inducted into the Templars, it is clear that the Templars are the villains. *Rogue's* play-the-bad-guy narrative merely shows how the road to hell can be paved with its travellers' good intentions, but the destination (the hell of authoritarianism) remains the same. The modern-day storyline literally ends with a sequence where modern day Templar masters provide the nameless player character the opportunity to join or die, and the historical avatar acknowledges that he may have become a "monster" when he became a Templar.⁹⁷

What is telling, however, is what is taken for granted in the alternate history the series creates, and the supposed moral ambiguity that ostensibly underpins this historical trajectory. This approach to alternate history, alongside the player's inhabitation of roles centrally important to this history, naturally carries some ideological assumptions. Perhaps most obviously, this approach requires a kind of "Great Man theory" of history, where massive social changes, political events, and even environmental changes are often the result, essentially, of one person putting a blade into the neck of another. Here particularly, these individuals are the ones fighting an apparently trans-historical and post-racial struggle, presented as ideologically global, and yet only articulated in an over-determinedly Western liberalized discourse. The "secret history" of *Assassin's Creed* does not, of course, push people to believe that the "hidden events" of its historical plot are true, but it does require the player to think it credible that material contexts are conditional upon individual action, rather than the other way around, or even a

⁹⁷ Sequence 5, Memory 2, "Bravado." The word "monster" as self-accepted term for protagonist Shay comes up again in the game's final cutscene.

particularly complicated meeting of either. As the previous chapter's outlining of neoliberalism's individuating culture and apparatuses highlights, the *AC* series' treatment of history is a neoliberal lens through which enough individual deaths and individual efforts are primarily responsible for historical shifts. Indeed, the series' focus on broad, Western-stylized freedom and "liberty" as the Assassins' primary ideological goal across space and time, the focus on individuals and their exceptional economic and violent acquisition or disruption of power are not dissimilar from the hyper-individualism of Rockstar-style neoliberalism. These neoliberal individualizations are a set of principles Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Audra Simpson, in *Mohawk Interruptus*, characterizes as settler colonial assumptions. Simpson says "the values of individual rights over 'collective' rights—the ahistorical and presumed evenhandedness of liberalism to determine and render justice, in part, through presumed shared values of freedom, justice, equality, individualism . . . are the same values" that many Mohawk find "intrusive and forcible" (14).

What is even more telling about this particular brand of alternate history, which is actually the hegemonic, typically imperial history of the world reframed by way of sci-fi conspiracy theory, is who is assumed to have agency and power within it. Wolfe points out that "thoroughgoing diminution of native entitlement was axiomatic to [settler colonialism's so-called] discovery," and that "the discourse was primarily addressed to relations between European sovereigns rather than to relations between Europeans and natives" (390). The diminution of Indigenous title is most clearly visible in the European colonial powers' "doctrine of discovery," where particular land could be bartered for or taken from Indigenous peoples only by the European power that "discovered" them. This

“distinction between dominion and occupancy illuminates the settler-colonial project’s reliance on the elimination of native societies” (390). The massive, globe-spanning war and politics of the Assassins and Templars is, throughout the series, more concerned with creating fiction within the borders of European dominion narratives than earnestly troubling or exploring the alternatives that have existed and continue to exist. Thus these depictions are again frontiers, invitations of access to the fictionalized historical margins of colonial sovereignty, where the player’s violence, power-building accumulation, and autonomous mobility carry the same values identified in the previous chapter. In *ACIII* specifically, it is a re-enactment of the diminution of Indigenous title, replaced by the relations of apparently de-racialized global (but certainly not Indigenous) powers. Indigenous societies, as we shall see, are relegated at best to vanishing pawns in a global game, and Indigenous individuals are either assimilated into Assassin “liberty” or are irrelevant.

***ACIII*, Narrative, and Indigenous Past and Future**

ACIII is part of the series’ original “trilogy.”⁹⁸ The trilogy’s modern-day setting and overarching plot focuses on Desmond Miles, a white American born into a family of Assassins, and gameplay largely revolves around Desmond (and the player) playing the memories of his ancestors to uncover information and First Civilization technology critical to the cloak-and-dagger war between Assassins and Templars. In the process, Desmond saves the planet from a massive apocalyptic event, a coronal mass ejection. In *ACIII*, the ancestor who Desmond (and by extension, players) primarily control is

⁹⁸ The trilogy is actually 5 entries, but *Assassin’s Creed II*, *Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Assassin’s Creed: Revelations* is often considered by developers and fans alike as one large narrative entry—further held by the fact that *ACIII* was released after *ACII*, *Brotherhood*, and *Revelations*, and ends Desmond’s story; it is, however, the fifth game made in the main series.

Ratonhnhaké:ton, a half-Mohawk, half-British Assassin who is given the name “Connor” by his eventual Assassin mentor, and is largely referred to by that name throughout by all characters except others from his Kanien'kehá:ka village. The son of Haytham Kenway, a high-ranking British Templar, and Kaniehtí:io, a female Mohawk warrior, Ratonhnhaké:ton is eventually inducted into the Assassins, and then largely fights to secure the success of the American Revolution as it happens in history. The Templars, who control the British crown at this point in history, desire British victory, or to steer the Revolution to Templar agents like historical Continental Army general and George Washington-rival Charles Lee (who is the game’s final antagonist and target for assassination). *ACIII* is not, however, an overly obvious pro-United States tale. Ratonhnhaké:ton consistently questions the motives of the Founding Fathers; the player is free to kill Continental Army soldiers as freely as they kill British soldiers (to little consequence either way⁹⁹), and an “Epilogue Mission” available after completing the main storyline missions perhaps caps off the game’s narrative ambivalence about America. This “mission” is actually an unplayable cutscene that shows Ratonhnhaké:ton witnessing Evacuation Day, when the last British forces leave America. Immediately after turning from the sight of the British ships leaving New York harbour, Ratonhnhaké:ton looks upon a nearby slave auction, his facial expression one of obvious disgust. He simply walks away.

⁹⁹ Though killing “civilians” (unarmed non-player characters that are not targets or soldiers) will lead to a “game over” for the player’s actions not “synchronizing” with Ratonhnhaké:ton, Continental and British soldiers in the free-roam gameplay and tightly scripted missions of the game can be killed at will. Again, even though violence is the prime mover of political ideology in the series, it is only the “important” targets that are given any attention in the narrative, whether hundreds or thousands of soldiers die by Ratonhnhaké:ton’s hand.

Ratonhnhaké:ton, as the half-British half-Indigenous protagonist, is the vehicle for narrative parallels of familial relations and colonial politics and identities, the main sites of the game's political ambivalence. In varying degrees, "Patriot" colonists and Indigenous peoples are associated with the "freedom" of Assassin values and influence, while Loyalist colonists and the British Empire are associated with Templar values and influence. In a sense, Patriot colonists become de-racialized Indigenous peoples; they become equally legitimate claimants to land as part of their overwhelming association with the broader ideology of the Assassin-Templar war. This ambivalent equivocation, of course, presents some rather striking problematics. Ratonhnhaké:ton, who is a freedom-fighting Assassin child of a British Templar father¹⁰⁰ is obviously positioned as a counterpart with or allegory for American colonists fighting British tyranny, an equivocation in favour of the "settled on the land" populace rejecting the paternalism of its originating empire. Indeed, that Ratonhnhaké:ton fights for the American Revolution, despite personal reservations, merely to combat the Templar threat makes this connection all too obvious. Ratonhnhaké:ton questions the Founding Fathers' efforts, noting that it appears "one must be a landed white man to be free." But when he asks "What of someone like me? Or Surry [Samuel Adam's emancipated slave]?" he poses the question as "What role for us is there in this *New World*?" [emphasis mine].¹⁰¹ Even Ratonhnhaké:ton articulates the struggle over the land in the naming and authentication of the colonizers, rather than his Mohawk heritage. Ratonhnhaké:ton's hybrid race not only allows him to blend successfully into white society, it also quickly assimilates him

¹⁰⁰ The player actually controls Haytham, the Templar father, in the game's prologue, when Desmond and his modern day Assassin partners are trying to synchronize with the correct memory sequences.

¹⁰¹ All of this dialogue comes from the narration that introduces Sequence 10.

into the Euro-settler project's apparent inevitability. This inevitability is what I call futurity: not simply that which has future occurrence, but that which is constitutively characterized by its inevitable continuance in the present and beyond, a no-escape certainty like that of Rockstar's cynical worldview. Ratonhnhaké:ton's assimilation into and representation of white settler futurity—imbued with his Indigeneity's of-the-landness—makes him a successful Assassin in the fight for the settler American project for which his multi-racialization is a metaphor.

Even Kaniehtí:io, Ratonhnhaké:ton's Mohawk warrior mother, further illustrates this racial hybridity's parallel with the struggle for American independence. In an introductory scene before her death in a Templar raid of the Mohawk village, the player hears narration by Kaniehtí:io about her growing child. She mentions that she cut Haytham, the British father, out of her life and the life of her child because of his Templar associations. She refers to his Templar allegiance as his “eyes to the future,” a future where “he and his Templar brethren controlled all.” She notes that Ratonhnhaké:ton has “his father's features, but enough of me that he did not appear a stranger” to the Kanien'kehá:ka. However, Kanienhti:io worries that someday she will look into Ratonhnhaké:ton's eyes “and see the same dark hunger there.” This, in a way, racializes the ideology of settlement *through* Ratonhnhaké:ton: half his features and eyes betray his British, Templar half, as dark but necessarily of *futurity*, while the other half represents the Mohawk “people” and their apparently natural association with freedom and a kind of proto-multiculturalism. The Mohawk, his mother says “loved him *as* their own” [emphasis mine].¹⁰²

¹⁰² This narration appears in the introduction of Sequence 4.

In creating these shifting parallels and equivocations, the game re-enacts a consistent trope of colonial representation: Ratonhnhaké:ton's Indigeneity is associated with being "American." He must struggle against the Templar half of his heritage (read in this context as British) to fully embrace the "freedom" of his role as an Assassin, one inherently tied to the "freedom" associated with American independence, and substantiated by the Indigenous half of his heritage—he is loved *as* one of them, but his destiny is not *with* them. This representation of Indigeneity is typical of Indigeneity in settler colonial literature, as Terry Goldie points out in *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literature*, where white characters gain "soul and the potential to become of the land" (16) through their connections to Indigeneity, precisely as the *RDR* protagonists do. Goldie asserts that settler colonial literature reveals simultaneous settler colonial revulsion for the "nature in human form" (16) that is the Indigenous person, *and* desire for the Indigenous person's concomitant natural belonging to the land they inhabit. But Ubisoft's cosmetic difference from Rockstar's unabashedly cynical anti-heroic investment in a paradoxical but equally vanishing Indian-styled savagery and outlaw-styled liberty is worth noting, if only for that difference's fundamental similarity. Ratonhnhaké:ton's hybridity combines the soul and of-the-landness Indigeneity with a whiteness of futurity that handily addresses the *AC* series' thematic explorations, and provides a marketably multi-racial identity for gamers to explore those thematics *through*. After all, as Goldie says, "the 'natural' character of the indigene is etymologically obvious in the term itself," where Indigeneity "represents beginnings" (21). As such, the "authentic" Indigenous protagonist here mobilizes that "natural" authority of the land from his Mohawk tribe on behalf of the settler colonial

struggle for sovereignty. That the settler sovereignty seeks to impose itself on the same lands Indigenous people inhabit is treated as a messy but necessary consequence, and no attention is paid to the particularities of Kanien'kehá:ka sovereignty much older than settler history. *ACIII*, then, is similar to the “sensitive novels of appropriation” that Goldie studies, and “the few basic moves which the indigenous pawn has been allowed to make” (15) in settler colonial literature are remade in play. The “New World” here is a staging ground for a fight between liberty and oppression, but that fight is no longer (or, for the Assassins more explicitly, never has been) between Indigenous peoples and settler colonialism. The fight is part of a global war of importance that is and can only be fully realized, won or lost, in the machinery of settler colonialism and its governance on land that once belonged to Indigenous peoples. Ratonhnhaké:ton’s Indigeneity in the game is symbolic of the natural, free belonging to the land that the liberty-loving settlers are fighting for, all along familiar colonial tropes.

This appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ natural freedom by European/settler liberty is established almost as soon as the player is first given control of Ratonhnhaké:ton; those opening moments are also where *ACIII* introduces its mechanical gameplay additions to the series. As Goldie posits regarding the traditional European philosophical binary of art/culture and nature, “the most natural” Indigenous person is “the least evolved,” and this trope plays out in colonial literature as part of the settler’s alienness “in spatial terms” to the land, compared to the Indigenous people (21). This connection to and familiarity with the land is one of Ratonhnhaké:ton’s strengths, but a strength only to become fully realized on behalf of settler colonial politics and logics and, in turn, a strength eventually completely divested from Indigenous peoples.

Ratonhnhaké:ton is the first character of the series that traverses vast wilderness in different seasons, and, with Ratonhnhaké:ton as the avatar, the player can hunt animals and skin them for sale or to create products for greater profits. This hunting mechanic (similar to that of the *RDR* series) is established when the player first inhabits Ratonhnhaké:ton as a young boy, living in his Mohawk village, unaware of Templars or Assassins. Ratonhnhaké:ton's early Indigenous experiences are central to his role as hyper-mobile Assassin. This sequence also introduces the ability to climb quickly in the countryside, allowing the player to scale enormous rocks and trees and leap from branch to branch; heretofore the series' "freerunning" movement mechanics only allowed fast vertical and horizontal spatial mastery of urban edifices. The introduced mechanics of hunting and tree-climbing spatial dominance of nature are literally the majority of the player's experience of Ratonhnhaké:ton's Mohawk life. Echoed by *RDR2*'s introduction of hunting and harvesting by the Indigenous character Charles, Ratonhnhaké:ton's young life as part of his Mohawk community is a tutorial of sorts, merely a few skills for the player to take into a life more fruitfully devoted to death and settler economics (as will be further discussed in a later section). Tom van Nuenen similarly analyzes *ACIII*'s introduction of natural-world spatial mastery and hunting/animal harvesting to the series in his connection of *Assassin's Creed* series gameplay to so-called "anti-tourism." The "colonial ideology" (36) of spatial-mastery mechanics will also be further discussed in a later section. For now, it is enough to highlight these specific mechanics' introduction *alongside* the games' early and most sustained attention to an "authentic" historical depiction of Mohawk life and culture. Van Nuenen suggests these mechanics can be broadly interpreted as "hunter-gatherer mechanics commonly associated with the

‘native’” to give the game’s “spatiotemporal environment” a sense of “authenticity and belonging” for the player (34).

Ratonhnhaké:ton’s village has been a secret protector of a First Civilization artifact that the Templars seek. His tribe, then, is a kind of familial, racialized group of Assassins who are not even aware of the Assassins and the vast conspiracies they conduct, nor do they have specific, complete knowledge of the First Civilization whose artifact they hide. His fellow Mohawk, exposed to the artifacts and given glimpses of the First Civilization that demand protection and secrecy, are “natural” Assassins, if you will, in the same vein as they are “naturally” free peoples who, like the American colonists struggling against British tyranny, are the ignorant pawns of the Assassin-Templar war. The Mohawk are presented, as in Goldie’s phrasing, as the less “evolved” Assassins, with incomplete knowledge and capability, merely a close connection to the land (here, a sacred place that turns out to be a First Civilization ruin) that places vague responsibility on them that they cannot handle in the future. The American colonists are the true inheritors of this war, for their struggle defines a much grander scheme of power—a struggle for a Western notion of “freedom.” This succession of responsibility away from Indigenous peoples appears as quite natural; after all, the Indigenous peoples of the “New World” are simply different groups of people whose genesis lay also in their forgotten creation and direction by alien gods, less equipped to handle this fight than those European colonial and settler colonial superpowers.

Ratonhnhaké:ton’s consistent distrust and criticism of the Patriot figures he aids is a defining character trait, and appears to be the most prominent vehicle for Ubisoft’s depiction of the “ugly” side of America’s birth, of racism and marginalization alongside

lofty goals of freedom. We can here recall the aforementioned post-game cutscene with the slave market, for example. That Ratonhnhaké:ton simply walks away, however, is consistent with that distrust and criticism: it amounts to little more than complaining. Ratonhnhaké:ton's cynicism is not the "refusal" of Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus*, a historical and modern political and personal strategy of Mohawk peoples refusing to live in accordance to settler colonial norms, laws, and institutions. Ratonhnhaké:ton repeatedly questions those he aids for their colonial assumptions and perspectives, but he does so generally, with little to no reference to the specific differences from Mohawk culture and governance, or the effects of colonization thereupon. Simpson calls Mohawk refusals "assertions based upon the validity and vitality of their own philosophical governmental systems, systems that *predate* the advent of the settler state" (19). Compare that modality of political vitality and resistance to Ratonhnhaké:ton's narration describing his training by Assassin mentor Achilles, where "for every lesson that concerned the body, there were two that concerned the mind. Language, philosophy, logic, the arts" and "most often of the Assassins and Templars, their structures, origins, and purpose."¹⁰³ None of these lessons on language, philosophy, logic, or "the arts" are located by origin, for they are apparently inextricably associated with the Assassins and Templars, an apparently timeless and placeless ideological global struggle. Ratonhnhaké:ton's life and knowledge of Mohawk culture apparently equip him with little "philosophy" or "logic" that will help him. His depiction is instead consistent with the "least artful" and "least evolved" Indigenous person that Goldie identifies in settler colonial literature. He cannot mount a refusal of these lessons any more than he

¹⁰³ Introductory narration to Sequence 5, Misson 2, "A Trip to Boston."

can reject the “structures, origins, and purpose” of his newfound allegiance.¹⁰⁴ There is no assertion of “validity and vitality” of Mohawk philosophy or politics, even if the game does acknowledge things like the American Constitution’s intellectual debt to the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace in its “Animus Database” of historical information, like a small placard in a recreation center for playing Indian.

The game’s consistent failure to acknowledge the “validity and vitality” of Kanien’kehá:ka knowledge and culture is partnered with its inconsistent acknowledgment of Kanien’kehá:ka land claims and history. The game of course presents Indigenous dispossession as tragic, but when Achilles shows off the armour of John de la Tour, “first Assassin in the Colonies,” to Ratonnhaké:ton, he says: “It is your duty to keep it. It serves as a reminder for how long our brotherhood has really been here. How long we’ve been protecting the people of the land . . . I know you appreciate what it is.”¹⁰⁵ Ratonnhaké:ton, a member of the Mohawk, is assumed to appreciate “how long” the Assassins have been there—approximately 70 years—protecting “the people of this land,” which is to say “the Colonies.” Ratonnhaké:ton remains silent, apparently appreciating it appropriately, despite the laughably short period in question compared to his own people’s history of deep time on the land. The occasional egregious disregard,

¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Ratonnhaké:ton’s Indigeneity often appears to be used as a cypher for a complete *lack* of knowledge so the player can be “taught” things alongside him, and to have the character remain questioning rather than refusing, à la Simpson. When asked to officiate a marriage on his Homestead property (in the mission “The Marriage”), Connor tells the priest that he does not know “colonial wedding customs,” by which he apparently means a Christian marriage. This appears to be a rather significant historical oversight, as many of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois), of which the Mohawk were a part, were of Christian faith. Many Mohawk, for example, were Catholic at this time. Even if Ratonnhaké:ton’s tribe stands apart, as it is repeatedly said they do, that they would have little to no knowledge of the customs, adopted or otherwise, of the rest of the nation’s people appears rather absurd. That’s just a small example of the kind of positioning of Ratonnhaké:ton’s solitary tribal identity as little more than a state of knowledgelessness. For more on Iroquois and religion at this time, see Snow and Richter.

¹⁰⁵ This is an optional conversation available after the player retrieves the armour.

like this, for what the game poses as central to Ratonhnhaké:ton's characterization (his distrust of colonial independence in the face of Indigenous suffering) further betrays the settler colonial ideology and futurity that are the real motivating forces behind the game's narrative.

Though Ratonhnhaké:ton often argues (emptily) with non-Templar American Revolutionary figures and his Assassin mentor throughout the game, his journey ends with his full integration into Assassin ideology and acceptance of Assassin responsibilities. These responsibilities lead to the historical end of the American Revolution as we know it: the overthrow of British domination and the supposed liberation of the American nation. More importantly, his final act as an Assassin, and the very reason Desmond is replaying Ratonhnhaké:ton's memories, is his retrieval and concealment of the First Civilization artifact from his ancestral lands after his village's expulsion by the new American Congress. His people forced off their land, Ratonhnhaké:ton, now an Assassin of Western notions of freedom, removes their protected "sacred" artifact, puts it on his settler colonial "Homestead" for his multiracially lineaged—but white—descendant Desmond to take and use to save the world. The world Desmond saves is a contemporary alternate modern world, where the current state of Indigenous peoples is not mentioned by a single character even once. Their land, and their role protecting "artifacts" is no longer theirs. The multiple current Kanien'kehá:ka communities, from only one of which Ubisoft drew consultants and voice actors, inside and between the national borders of two settler nations, with historical and continuing refusals of settler domination, are sovereignties themselves successfully resisting exactly the oppressions the *AC* series typifies as Templar tyranny.

But Kanien'kehá:ka futurity, or even current sovereignty, is not of importance to the aforementioned and optionally perusable Animus Database. The global ideological war of the series can exist no other way, and that the artifact of the storyline—necessary for modern day Assassins to save the world—is taken from Indigenous stewardship is presented as a natural, even heroic, inevitable progression.

Perhaps the most telling moment of the game's narrative treatment of Ratonnhaké:ton's racialized identity is a mission¹⁰⁶ that involves Ratonnhaké:ton racing to save his tribe from Continental soldiers. The game acknowledges that most Mohawk tribes sided with the British, but Ratonnhaké:ton's particular village, secretly tasked with protecting the land to hide the First Civilization artifact, had remained neutral in the conflict. However, Ratonnhaké:ton discovers that Washington, who up to this point had been an ally, has ordered the destruction of his village, thinking it is no different from the Mohawk allied with the British. Ratonnhaké:ton kills the messengers of this order, and eventually the Continental troops are recalled to take part in the Battle of Monmouth.¹⁰⁷ Once Ratonnhaké:ton arrives at the village, however, his childhood Mohawk friend, Kanen'tó:kon,¹⁰⁸ influenced by Templar agents, attacks Ratonnhaké:ton. After a brief struggle, Ratonnhaké:ton kills Kanen'tó:kon. While dying, Kanen'tó:kon reiterates that his actions were to protect his people from destruction at American hands. Once his former friend dies, Ratonnhaké:ton says “It seems our

¹⁰⁶ Sequence 10, Mission 2, “Broken Trust”

¹⁰⁷ Also worth mentioning here is that with this wave of the hand (the troops being sent to Monmouth), the game eschews further mention of Washington's direct orders in the further destruction of Iroquois land and people with the Sullivan Expedition. Ratonnhaké:ton even continues to aid Washington, characteristic cynicism-with-acceptance in tow. For more on the Sullivan Expedition and its crippling blows to the Iroquois people, see Graymont.

¹⁰⁸ Voiced by one of the Mohawk consultants, Akwiratékha Martin.

people will never be safe,” eliding any possible culpability for the murder of his friend, and the eventual and inevitable disappearance of his Indigenous people. These are things for which not even the individualized history-changing superhero Assassin can be ascribed any agency. Though Ratonhnhaké:ton had previously angrily renounced his partnership with Washington, he begrudgingly helps him many more times in the game. The goals of the Assassins have primacy, after all. As Achilles says, Ratonhnhaké:ton’s “struggle is the colonists’ struggle,”¹⁰⁹ despite the fact that even in the game’s narrative the Patriots displace and kill Indigenous peoples. By killing Kanen'tó:kon and merely accepting that his “people will never be safe,” Ratonhnhaké:ton essentially renounces his Indigeneity in its racialized, colonially oppressed realities. Instead, his Indigeneity can be fully mobilized as a symbolic “natural freedom” associated with the very land he was born on, a freedom which Assassins fight for, and which American colonists must slowly mature into, eventually figuring out how to stop enslaving and exterminating non-white peoples. A true Assassin now, one aligned with American liberty, Ratonhnhaké:ton takes up the critically important protection of the artifact his Mohawk people can no longer handle, for they are apparently not long for *this* world. Freedom, as we shall further see, is the right—and under guardianship—of white settler colonists and runaway slaves, here.

My claims regarding *ACIII*’s treatment of Indigeneity are substantiated by the next game in the series, *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag*, which features Edward Kenway, a Welsh-born Caribbean pirate grandfather of Ratonhnhaké:ton. He, like all protagonists in the *AC* series, has supernatural powers of sight. Edward and

¹⁰⁹ Conversation takes place in Sequence 7, after the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Ratonhnhaké:ton both possess this talent without any Assassin training. In *Black Flag*, Assassin Mary Read explains the ability to Edward in these terms: “Every Man and Woman on Earth has in them a kind of Intuition hidden deep away . . . Most never find it. Others it takes Years to tease out. But for a rare Few it comes as natural as Breathing.” This natural power is inherent in humans due to their lineage with the “First Civilization,” who were an “ancient People . . . a wonderful Race,”¹¹⁰ according to the Sage of *Black Flag*, a human iterative reincarnation of a First Civilization member. All of the played protagonists of the *AC* series are “naturally” gifted with this genetic trait of an ancient “Race,” where some bloodlines express their alien godhood more purely than others. It is clear that lineage is deeply important to those crucial individual heroes of the global war between Assassins and Templars. This treatment of lineage perhaps retroactively explains why the role of Ratonhnhaké:ton’s village as protector of a First Civilization site and artifact, despite being ignorant of their purposes or histories, is left unexplained in its genealogy. Players should apparently simply be comfortable understanding that a group of Kanien'kehá:ka would blindly follow the vague commandments of the planet’s first true “Race” provided by an alien site and artifact they do not fully understand. The games use stereotypes of (super-)natural spiritualism that it closely associates with Indigeneity, and then does away with Indigeneity after using it as warrant for those same values.

Black Flag makes the series’ use of Indigeneity as authenticating identity of the “natural” freedom associated with the Assassins completely blatant, then, when Mary

¹¹⁰ *Black Flag*, Sequence 10, Memory 3, “The Observatory.” The particular capitalizations used here is as they appear in the subtitles of the game, which somewhat mimics Early Modern English in those conventions.

Read describes the first contact of European Assassins with Indigenous peoples: “The Natives of this New World had a Philosophy like our Creed for as long as they’ve been here. And when Europeans arrived, our Groups sort of... matched up.”¹¹¹ This odd, pan-Indigenous claim¹¹² essentially literalizes the connection I have interpreted with *ACIII*; Indigenous peoples are the ignorant forebears of a freedom more clearly articulated, and in perpetuity solely maintained by, the supposedly global but clearly Western liberally coded Assassins. As Read continues, “Cultures and Religions and Languages keep Folks divided... but there’s something in the Assassin’s Creed that crosses all Boundaries. A Fondness for Life and Liberty.”¹¹³ This sentiment is echoed by Taino Assassin Opía Apito when speaking to a fatally injured Templar, saying, “You believe we wasted Freedom by living freely? You die a Prisoner of your Templar mores.” What this “freedom” means to the Taino is never explained; the word is just a simplistic appeal to the natural “freedom” of living on the land they belong to and are associated with (as discussed in the third section of this chapter with Goldie). For *Black Flag*, long gone are the “Animus database” entries on Indigenous culture; now there is only a remark that though the Mayan civilization “collapsed around a thousand years ago,” there are still “plenty of Mayans in that part of the world with their own culture.”¹¹⁴ Indigeneity’s authenticating value is swallowed whole, and the Indigenous characters and cultures fade into the background of an otherwise meticulously historical fantasy, with much longer

¹¹¹ Ibid. Sequence 4, Memory 2, “Nothing Is True...” Ellipses and capitalizations are as the text appears in the game subtitles.

¹¹² This pan-Indigenous claim is particularly odd when this dialogue is spoken in, and the game’s primary representation of Indigenous culture is, ruins of the highly hierarchical ancient Mayan civilization.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ *Black Flag* Animus Database Entries for “Mayan Ruins” and Assassins leader “Ah Tabai.”

detailed entries on, for example, the political history—specifically the *colonial* history—of Kingston, Jamaica.

The Homesteading Indian Fantasy and the Vanishing Protagonist

If these narrative themes were not enough to encode the logic of settler colonialism, unconcerned with Indigenous knowledge, culture, philosophy, or politics as part of the game’s ideological framework, the largest new game mechanic addition *ACIII* brings to the series, makes that ideology abundantly clear. One set of player interactions that does not have even a token gesture of ethical complication in the game’s narrative is Ratonhnhaké:ton’s leadership of the “Homestead.” Ratonhnhaké:ton lives in his Assassin mentor’s manor in Massachusetts, “Davenport Manor,” and he can develop the surrounding lands with a tavern, a lumber mill, a Church, and so on, if the player completes side-missions wherein Ratonhnhaké:ton invites settlers and a couple of runaway slaves to “settle”¹¹⁵ on the lands surrounding Davenport Manor. In so doing, Ratonhnhaké:ton develops an entire community of which he is the de facto leader. In yet another instance of the dissonance between character trait and actual narrative and mechanical outcome, Ratonhnhaké:ton repeatedly refuses titles of “lord” and “leader,” but as the player’s actions, through Ratonhnhaké:ton, are the only ways to develop the Homestead, he acts as lord and leader. Through Ratonhnhaké:ton’s leadership of the Homestead, *ACIII* encodes Veracini’s previously cited settler colonial culture’s disavowal, “where the actual operation of settler colonial practices is concealed behind other occurrences” (*Settler Colonialism* 14).

¹¹⁵ Ratonhnhaké:ton does, tellingly, use the word “settle” repeatedly, such as when he invites the carpenter Lance O’Donnell to the Homestead.

ACIII lazily conceals the “actual operation of settler colonial practices” with an Indigenous protagonist who simply rejects the terminology that might make obvious his role as an economic developer for a land he populates with non-Indigenous settlers. None of the cast of characters that players can invite onto the land are Indigenous, but all fit cleanly into Veracini’s identified strategy of settler colonialism hiding the negative activity of “settlers elsewhere, behind the persecuted, the migrant, even the refugee (the settler has suffered elsewhere and ‘is seeking refuge in a new land’)” (14). All end up on the Homestead to escape other persecution, such as the tailor getting away from an abusive husband, the innkeepers looking for somewhere to go after a politically-motivated eviction from Boston, and a settler deserting his company of British troops (because he “don’t much agree with the fight” and “love[s] this country”¹¹⁶). All the while, Ratonhnhaké:ton enacts a comforting rhetorical distance from his position of colonizing leadership. Yet, Ratonhnhaké:ton’s Assassin mentor Achilles tells another character that Ratonhnhaké:ton is there to “restore the property” to its former glory of Assassin prominence in the colonies,¹¹⁷ and restore colonial property he does.

Ratonhnhaké:ton acts as guardian to colonist whites and former slaves on this Homestead, all of whom engage in the foundations of settler colonial production and economics for the reward of in-game currency and equipment.¹¹⁸ Ratonhnhaké:ton, in this way, acts as a champion of settler colonialism in the game’s most extensive mechanical additions to the series. By using a ledger in Davenport Manor or any settler

¹¹⁶ Homestead Mission, “Blacksmith 1 (Deserter).”

¹¹⁷ Sequence 5, Mission 5, “The Hard Way.”

¹¹⁸ Though these missions are not technically required or necessary for completing the game’s main story, the money and equipment given as rewards are nearly indispensable for doing so, so most players would be exposed to at least some of this otherwise optional gameplay.

“general store” in the game world, players can procure, produce, and export goods depending upon how far they have progressed in Homestead side missions. For example, if the player has completed enough missions with hunter Myriam or lumberjacks Godfrey and Terry, they can pay a minor fee to secure bear pelts or rosewood lumber, which can then be sold at a profit at general stores the player unlocks around the game world. Players can also raise their profit margins by capturing forts held by British forces in order to lower taxation rates on their trade convoys—and if ever there were a crudely neoliberal historical fantasy, it would be violence lowering taxation on a growing, vertically integrated trading power. Trading cannot be done with any Indigenous tribes or individuals—apparently Ratonhnhaké:ton, despite being Iroquois, has no relationships with Indigenous trade of any kind. His profit margins are tied directly to the success of Patriot settler colonists, which historically were themselves dependent upon trade with Indigenous peoples. Similar to how Turner must elide the importance of Indigenous trade and agriculture for his notion of the “trading frontier” to develop into the “farming frontier,” *ACIII* cleanly eschews Indigenous trade power altogether, rather than having to contend with it as something that settler states had to violently remove rather than compete with or benefit from.

The resource pool the Homestead draws from can only be exhausted temporarily, as everything slowly regenerates and can never be completely depleted. Resources, if they have been unlocked by completing missions, are apparently infinite on the Homestead—a paradisiacal rendering of the New World’s “land of plenty,” where resources are obtained with no notion of sustainability, ecology, or exploitation, just the limitless profit and expansion of an artificial frontier. One of Veracini’s points about the

invisibility of settler colonialism is that it is often expressed in a theoretical “differentiation” between colonialism and colonisation. The Homestead’s depiction of settler economics neatly expresses this differentiation, as it separates Ratonhnhaké:ton’s settling of up-to-that-point empty land from the very processes of settler colonialism that the game half-heartedly questions. This kind of differentiation, says Veracini, “is premised on the systematic disavowal of any indigenous presence, recurrently representing ‘colonialism’ as something done by someone else and ‘colonisation’ as an act that is exercised exclusively over the land,” and that “sustains fantasies of ‘pristine wilderness’ and innocent ‘pioneering endeavour’” (14). Indigenous people and trade are absent from the Homestead’s developing settlement—instead players are invited to fill up a beautiful but empty land with economic engines. That this economic development in “pristine wilderness” aids the player’s destructive capabilities by accumulating wealth to purchase or craft better equipment is an unintentional *replay* of Veracini’s identification of the false, evasive differentiation of colonialism and colonisation.

The Homestead economics are the game’s primary method of acquiring enough in-game currency to experience the totality of the game’s content and narrative with the non-Indigenous denizens of the Homestead. Settler colonialism, it seems, is central to whatever freedom Ratonhnhaké:ton can foresee; after all, *his* people “will never be safe.” Settler colonial acquisition and domination is the only ludic and narrative option for the liberty Ratonhnhaké:ton apparently fights for. The game unwittingly acts as proof to Patrick Wolfe’s claim that settler colonial “invasion” is a “structure not an event” (388), insofar as it is not a series of acts containable in a limited timeframe, but rather a structure of governance and economics, executing the same logic of elimination via

different strategies. These strategies continue in perpetuity after colonization is supposedly complete. The game's very ludic components, the structural mechanics of the player's interaction with the game, privilege settler colonialism as the only approach to fully "synchronizing" with Ratonhnhaké:ton's story and as the positive expression of the Assassin ideology of "freedom." That freedom, apparently, is a free pursuit of the marketplace, an economics of acquisition, and the "pioneering endeavour" of settlement in an infinitely resourced "pristine wilderness."

This economic gameplay ties together the series' themes of freedom in a post-racial but non-Indigenous fantasy for a happy outcome of the American frontier. The Homestead as profit-generating collection of settler relationships is a utopian fantasy that ejects nuance and invests in settler economics as a depiction of rewarding freedom. That depiction both flattens the racializing and eliminative nature of the colonial relation, and elevates these economics as paramount to the positive futurity of the artificial frontier. As Audra Simpson points out,

In the case of settler societies, there is an old Aristotelian problem of how to govern alterity, how to order it, how to make sense of that which is not yours—a question that is not normative but rather tactical, and it reemerges, violently. The ideal of transcendent principles, still divine and sometimes democratically inflected, animate the governance of these territories (*Mohawk Interruptus* 16).

The Homestead is the central depiction of *ACIII*'s freedom-loving imaginary, and in the Homestead there is no sense to be made of alterity: all are united under settler economics. Its transcendent principle is "freedom," supposedly universal but explicitly associated with Western philosophical tradition and the mechanics of settlement. *Everything* can be

yours, and there is no need to contest with any complex history or relationship with the land or its Indigenous inhabitants and neighbours. When Stephen Totilo, writing in defense of the game for popular gaming news blog *Kotaku*, called the Homestead part of how “the game is actually able to criticize what actually happened in the founding of America while simultaneously celebrating the spirit and intent of the idea of America” (“Nine More Hours,” n.p.). Totilo specifically refers to Ratonhnhaké:ton’s Indigeneity in that critique and celebration. Ratonhnhaké:ton’s Indigeneity is presented simply as his part of a racialized group Totilo says “is going to lose no matter what” in the American Revolution. But with the Homestead, writes Totilo, “the player builds a whole new community away from the British and Washington and all their warfare. The homestead is the realization of the American frontier . . . In a way, it’s a little, idealized America. Connor [Ratonhnhaké:ton] is its founding father” (Totilo, Comment). Thus even Ratonhnhaké:ton’s alterity is flattened, and here too associated with and legitimation of the American settler colonial project, which finds its modern expression in the current United States. As Simpson asserts, the “modern order itself is entwined with capital as this accumulative and acquisitive force,” which “further detaches people from places and moves them into other zones for productivity, accumulation, and territorial settlement” (17). Ratonhnhaké:ton’s fullest characterization is represented as part of the capitalist project in its settler colonial nascence, removed from his ancestral lands, and leading a community of productivity, accumulation, and territorial settlement. That characterization is partnered, of course, with his primary (for both character and player) activities as an Assassin, an explicitly violent reemerging tactical ideology if ever there was one.

Jodi Byrd's lecture on *ACIII* highlights that Desmond, the game's modern-day white protagonist (the character that unites the series' original trilogy), has these multi-racial ancestors as part of his "modern post-racial, if not non-racial construction, where whiteness and citizenship are the fulfilment of character." Byrd says this "neoliberal multiculturalism, tied to the acknowledgment of the difference that is not really [difference] . . . moves race comfortably out of the social and into another seemingly less contentious realm," an instrumental realm for convenient mobilization. This move is made all the more obvious by the game's refusal, Byrd says, "to assign any futurity to Connor's [Ratonhnhaké:ton] role as a Mohawk ancestor," and instead we are left with a "stoic, inanimate, and past-tense" character in the series mythos. This point is not a small one, as Byrd rightly points out "how quick developers have been to move beyond him as a subject of the series." A week before the release of *ACIII*, associate producer Julien Laferrière noted that the previous three entries of the series (all of which fell under the *Assassin's Creed II* sub-trilogy¹¹⁹) featured the same ancestor of Desmond, Ezio Auditore (an Italian Assassin from the Renaissance), "because people loved Ezio." At the time, he said: "We're going to see how players react to the guy [Ratonhnhaké:ton] for sure. You'll get to experience portions of his life, you'll see why he becomes an assassin and what his motivations are . . . The more you know about Connor the more you'll love him, but in the end we'll see what the reception is like" (qtd. in Phillips). A month after *ACIII*'s release, Ubisoft ran consumer polls asking players if they would like to see Ratonhnhaké:ton return as a protagonist (Robinson, "Assassin's Creed Survey" n.p.). Ubisoft never released the results, but two years down the line, Darby McDevitt, lead

¹¹⁹ See footnote 98.

writer of many entries of the series (though not *ACIII*), did a Reddit “Ask Me Anything” Q&A in which he confirmed Ratonhnhaké:ton would not return as a primary figure. His explanation:

[W]e planned the Edward [Ratonhnhaké:ton’s grandfather], Haytham [Ratonhnhaké:ton’s father], Connor [Ratonhnhaké:ton] saga more than 2 years ago, long before any of you had heard Connor’s name or learned his backstory. We had no idea how he (or Haytham) would be received, but we had our own long story to tell, and we embraced it. And it was our hope that -- taken together -- this saga would represent the story of a family... a migration, a mixing of cultures, and a dashing of ideals [. . .] Don’t rely on us to deliver new content... make your own stories.

Those final lines are in response to the healthy community of Ratonhnhaké:ton fans among cosplayers and Tumblr users,¹²⁰ but it is also something of a mantra for developers and gamers defending a lack of diversity in videogame representation. The defense is also rather suspect; the polls two years before these statements contradict a solid, unchangeable plan. That McDevitt also frames this multiracial lineage as “migration” and “mixing,” does little to contradict Byrd’s contention that Desmond is a “multiracial” or “non-racial” avatar of neoliberal multiculturalism, one that devours Indigeneity for its apparent symbolic powers of rightful heritage and natural freedom, and excretes settler mythology. The fans of the character have to make their own stories for Ratonhnhaké:ton now; Ubisoft certainly will not.

¹²⁰ A point highlighted by Plunkett (2013).

Whether this decision to shelve the character was based on player response or not is difficult, if not impossible, for me to know. Even a brief Google search will show that among gaming communities Connor is a divisive figure, but one that was largely disliked upon initial reception. Luke Plunkett, also writing for *Kotaku*,¹²¹ celebrated that “the series has swiftly moved on without him,” and characterized Ratonnhaké:ton as “[s]ucking much of the life out of the franchise with his solemn frown and humour deficiency.” Characterizing Ratonnhaké:ton as “humourless” and “solemn” fits neatly with the character’s reception as something of a noble savage, and Plunkett’s added rebuttal to criticism is telling. He says, “I often wonder whether the Tumblr cult¹²² are so attached to him because he's such a blank canvas. They can project whatever they want onto him, since there's so little to show for his appearance in the actual game” (n.p.). Byrd also argues Ratonnhaké:ton is presented as “stoic” and “inanimate,” but more accurately notes that the narrative’s failure is not that Ratonnhaké:ton is a “blank canvas.” Instead, Byrd argues that “the narrative investments continually avoid addressing the normative materiality of racialization and colonization by framing both through the state-sanctioned multi-culturalism of neoliberal capitalism” (“Nothing is True”).

Stephen Totilo has pointed out that originally playing the game and ignoring the Homestead missions (in the interest of completing the game’s main “required” missions more quickly) left him feeling Ratonnhaké:ton’s “attitude and his discomfort with nearly everyone in the game's main story” was “justified,” but he was nevertheless “hard

¹²¹ The headline, “Assassin’s Creed’s Connor, Who Was The Worst, Is Done For” speaks to some of the popular reception of Ratonnhaké:ton.

¹²² This is in reference to a sizable community on the website Tumblr that created a great deal of fan-art of the protagonist.

to like.” After returning to the game and playing the many aforementioned Homestead missions where Ratonhnhaké:ton is given the most characterization—and most thoroughly invested in the mythology and economics of settler colonialism—Totilo found the character “more likeable and interesting” (“Nine More Hours”). These two perspectives from *Kotaku* writers appear to me largely consistent with the split of opinion on Ratonhnhaké:ton among gamers. Both, I think, reveal the same thing about the character’s depiction: he is a largely dissonant character, whose justifications for sullen behaviour (the historical, ongoing, and future genocidal practices of his allies) could be more sensibly motivated towards a Mohawk refusal à la Simpson. Even his sullen behaviour is undercut by his consistent acquiescence to the Patriot cause, and completely gutted by his total investment in the settler colonial project with the Homestead, his “little, idealized America” (Totilo, Comment). This mixed-race character is a catch-all for Ubisoft, where they can gently critique American colonialism while having gamers “play Indian” in the mechanics of literal settlement.

Much like Rockstar’s semi-utopian moments (the endings of *San Andreas*, *GTAV*, and the ranching of *RDR1* and *2*), for *ACIII*, post-racial settler economic accumulation is the only available felicitous and uncompromised narrative reward in gargantuan power fantasies on artificial frontiers. Veracini’s noted obscuration of settler history through an anxious differentiation between “colonialism” and “colonization” has a rather complete expression in *ACIII*. Just as *RDR2* does, *ACIII* depicts the problems of colonialism (violence against and dispossession of racialized peoples) as bad, but the very causes of those problems (the economic and ideological frameworks of the colonial relation) as good. Ratonhnhaké:ton achieves fullest characterization as a settler, and his Indigeneity is

an apparently exhaustible—or exhausting—resource in a colonial fantasy of infinite natural resources of profit.

The Manifest Manners of Playing Ubisoft’s Simulated Indian

Ratonhnhaké:ton’s role in gaming culture (and the wider pop culture it is a part of) is perhaps a more damaging representation of Indigeneity for a product consumed far more by non-Indigenous, settler colonial, or colonial individuals than Indigenous demographics.¹²³ I have already pointed out, following Byrd’s lead, the various ways the game plays into the trope of the disappearing Native. There is no future for Ratonhnhaké:ton’s people in the narrative; the mechanics almost completely ignore them, and it appears that Ratonhnhaké:ton, too, immediately outlived his usefulness for the *Creed* series. Both narrative and mechanics make clear that it is settler colonialism that inherits the freedom the Assassins fight for, and Indigenous peoples themselves are simply an ignorant casualty of the wider war that the post-racial/non-racial Assassins wage. Indigeneity here is an authorizing, justifying identity category associated with rights and freedoms, but it is one to be superseded by others. This depiction fits well with the notion of Manifest Destiny, or perhaps more accurately, Gerald Vizenor’s notion of “manifest manners.” Vizenor, in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, calls the Western artistic representations of Indigeneity that follow such lines the “simulations of manifest manners” (4). They are “simulations” because they simulate Indigeneity in a way that centralize things like disappearance, or barbarism, and so on, as inextricable from Indigenous identity. These works, which include *ACIII* and the *RDR*

¹²³ Though this is a rather broad assumption, it is one I make based upon statistics regarding gaming demographics generally (see, for example, the Pew Research Center’s 2008 “Adults and Video Games” study of American gamer demographics, which does not even count Indigenous demographics, or Asian demographics, for that matter), and *ACIII*’s high sales.

series, draw from the same ideological tradition, one that is functionally identical to the teleology of Turner's frontier and the ascension of a "fit race" to "free land." They are "manifest manners" because they are part of a culture that continues to perpetuate its dominance *with these simulations* of dominance and Indigenous marginalization that is like a culturally modern variant of Manifest Destiny. As Vizenor notes,

Manifest Destiny would cause the death of millions of tribal people from massacres, diseases, and the loneliness of reservations. Entire cultures have been terminated in the course of nationalism. These histories are now the simulations of dominance, and the causes of the conditions that have become manifest manners in literature . . . The simulations of manifest manners are the continuance of the surveillance and domination of the tribes in literature. Simulations are the absence of the tribal real. (4)

Vizenor's claims are particularly applicable to the *simulations* of videogames, where the simulation is *played*, enacted with the audience's own input. That interactivity is a step beyond the manifest manners of textual literature or passively viewed film. With its Indigenous simulation, *ACIII*—like Rockstar's artificial frontiers—gets the player mechanically involved in activities associated with Manifest Destiny.

Vizenor is clear on the debilitating affect these kinds of simulations can have: "The once bankable simulations of the savage as an impediment to developmental civilization, the simulations that audiences would consume in Western literature and motion pictures, protracted extermination of tribal cultures" (6). While *ACIII* does not necessarily pose its Indigenous simulations as civilizational impediments (they are perhaps too vanished for even that), the tropes of this kind of simulation are still very

“bankable” in today’s dominant Western cultural climate. As James Patton writes in “Colonising History: The Culture and Politics of *Assassin’s Creed*,” *ACIII* “fits neatly into an existing genre of media . . . in which white people get to relive the (now unacceptable) colonial era and behave nicely instead” (n.p.). With current cultural norms, Ubisoft was bound to play up a stance that the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples was terrible, but the game’s fundamental thematics render colonialism’s depravity past-tense, positing players under post-racial neoliberalism as disconnected from the errors of history. As Patton points out, though Ratonhnhaké:ton is not strictly white, “he passes as white, spends most of the game in white-dominated environments rather than tribal ones,” and is likely very often controlled by a white player. Settler players, then, get to act out their manifest mannered simulations and fully associate themselves with the broad, Western Enlightenment-style forms of freedom that the Assassins represent, in all their “presumed homogeneity” (as in Simpson’s formulation). This homogeneity, this apparently self-evident and universal freedom, can use Indigeneity and eject it. Settler players can cluck their tongues at the evils of colonialism and its treatment of Indigenous peoples, all while taking the behaviours and methods, the “structures, origins, and purpose” of those evils as fundamental, as inevitable if not righteous.

It is clear that *ACIII*’s manifest manners rehearse the genre tropes of settler entertainment’s depiction of Indigeneity. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang highlight scholarship that suggests “another component of a desire to play Indian is a settler desire to be made innocent, to find some mercy or relief in face of the relentlessness of settler guilt. . . . Directly and indirectly benefitting from the erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples is a difficult reality for settlers to accept” (9) in modern

circumstances. Even before this post-racial neoliberal guilt had time to fully develop, however, the formulas of playing Indian were simply an antidote for another form of anxiety: the lack of a coherent settler identity. Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, analyzes these tropes in canonical American literature like the works of Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. His study finds a particular "contradiction" of these depictions; what better word than "contradiction" is there for an idealized colonial settlement run by an idealized Indian, one whose Indigeneity is both authenticating and vanishing? Deloria calls the contradiction a consequence of settlers "wanting to savor both civilized order and savage freedom at the same time" (3). Byrd's use of American empire's "transit" of the Indian is similar to Deloria's argument that "Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self" (3). *Playing Indian* describes how, by the time the frontier closed, early American 20th century literature, organizations, and culture used "wild Indianness" (3) to imagine that "civilized national Self." I should note this was the same time period when Turner's reformulation and mis-history of the frontier's existence and stages was first en vogue. Now "coded as freedom," a desirable and invented Indigeneity was an antidote for "the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life," (7) a "postfrontier" (96) character in need of inspiration from stoic, noble savagery. Playing Indian, both as modern neoliberal maneuver of guilt and as settler *modernity's* desire for a coherent cultural identity (in the midst of what my introduction quotes Turner calling the "social ills" of postfrontier life), is still necessarily the "transit" of empire as per Byrd. Playing Indian is what Deloria calls a "dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion" where the "awkward tendency" of Americans "to

define themselves by what they were not” (3) is expressed by what I have consistently cited as the settler “contradictory reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality” (Wolfe 389). Though *ACIII* mobilizes a “tribal real” (Vizenor 4) for its past-tense historical authenticity, it is a simulation, a tribal unreal that necessarily locates futurity in settler neoliberalism.

This contradictory tribal un/real dynamic of playing Indian is encapsulated by *ACIII*'s rehearsal of the manifest manners of an historical event it depicts: the Boston Tea Party. Deloria uses the Boston Tea Party as an early case study of the settler trends of playing Indian. In the actual historical event, when settlers dumped British tea in protest of British taxation, they did so in costumes they believed resembled Mohawk garb. Participants “took pains to offer up Indian identities, grunting and speaking stage Indian words that had to be “translated” into English . . . they cared immensely about the *idea* of disguise and its powerful imputation of Indian identity” (6). This temporarily adopted identity was meant to create an association between settlers and Indigenous peoples, and thus fulfil that “awkward” desire to define oneself by what they are not: in this case, their British oppressors. This event, popularly held as an important historical colonial event of *symbolic* importance in creating a cultural identity, thus saw settlers play Indian and define that identity by two disavowals: disavowal of British taxation, and an inhabited disavowal of grunting savagery that nevertheless appropriates its inherent association to the land those settlers occupy *and* its difference from the taxing authority. As Deloria puts it, “dressing as an Indian allowed these pretend Mohawks to translate texts, images, and ideologies into physical reality. In doing so, they lived out the cultural ideas that surrounded Noble Savagery as concrete gesture that possessed physical and emotional

meaning” (6). This translation of cultural identity through the transit of imagined Indianness (at the ongoing expense, or at least disavowal, of the Indigenous Real) would go on to become a consistent part of the burgeoning American settler identity. Revolutionaries-turned-politicians of the new settler state and national poets of the twentieth century donned Indian garb and simulated Indian ritual for the embodied symbolic power the acts conferred (7).

In the alternate history version of the Boston Tea Party in *ACIII*, the settlers do not engage in this roleplay, which might appear awkward to contemporary sensibilities. Instead, the historical record’s remembrance of this Playing Indian is fictionalized as Ratonhnhaké:ton taking part in the Boston Tea Party at the behest of American revolutionaries. It is an almost comic congruence to turn the historical settlers’ desperate appeal to the symbolic warrant of a simulated Indigeneity into an opportunity to literalize that appeal with a simulated Mohawk for gamers to inhabit. Just as the false Mohawk garb of the Boston Tea Party participants brought “ideologies into physical reality” (6), this gameplay has players digitally embody that exact transmission in simulated circumstances. It is *play* that literally associates Mohawk identity with this appropriative and symbolically catalytic event of nascent American identity. For white settler players and all others, *ACIII* provides the opportunity to translate players’ own reality into this broad, contradictory political construction. Ratonhnhaké:ton, the divisive figure, largely lamented for his humourlessness and relenting stoicism that need be understood through the coterie of settlers he collects, is a literalization of the stoic grunting Indian stage play, an Indian virtual reality in an artificial frontier. If seeing settlers donning Indian garb and grunting might have been precisely the kind of offensive depiction that Deer said Ubisoft

wished to avoid, it appears the temptation to have players embody this exact ideological manifestation themselves is unavoidable.

The Ubisoft Formula and the Mobility of the Settler Subject

Gameplay in Ubisoft open world games is popularly recognized to conform to several traits, a collection of activities and design principles that have come to be colloquially known in hobbyist media as the “Ubisoft formula.” Clayton Purdom, writing for *A/V Club*, used the term “map games” to highlight the prevalence of particular aspects of most Western big-budget open world games:

a big open world, with a few distinct regions, and you have a couple of different weapons and a skill tree, and you get missions and collect things and occasionally climb towers that clear up portions of the map. It’s a map game; you spend a ton of time looking at a map and thinking, “What the hell else can I do while I’m around here?” and the answer is always, “A ton of shit” . . . This vast sense of empowering leisure—of endless activities, all yearning to make you stronger—is the defining characteristic[.]

The particular reference to climbing towers to reveal activities on the map is a direct result of the Ubisoft formula. The first *Assassin’s Creed* introduced this trope, and it has appeared in some form in so many Ubisoft and non-Ubisoft open world games that the co-creator of the *AC* series Patrice Desilets humorously apologized for its ubiquity (Grimm). What *exactly* makes up the Ubisoft formula, like most delineations of genre forms, is a cluster concept that is not complete in and of itself, and each example rarely exhibits every trait identified. Early *AC* games did not have “skill trees” where players get to choose what skills to upgrade (though later entries do), and not all open world

games that are otherwise extremely similar to Ubisoft's games feature tower-climbing to reveal its myriad activities. But the open worlds that are recognizably influenced by the Ubisoft formula are all filled with activities; the Ubisoft formula may be best understood as steering the open world genre into "a steady, ceaseless dopamine drip of busywork" (Margini). Traversing a map and accomplishing tasks to grow in power is the artificial frontier's invitation, gameplay meant to draw in players with feelings of empowerment in the same way Turner's frontier was meant to empower a nationality.

At a basic level, open world games as map games/Ubisoft formula games, nearly always appeal to the simplistic motivation of "achievement" noted in the introduction, and that appeal's satisfaction in game design is comparable to the frontier as "invitation to access." The Ubisoft formula currently breaks down to various forms of a broader format. This format is about dominance over an over-filled gamespace, accomplishing myriad immediate-reward goals, eliminating icons of tasks on a map, and thus encouraging players to move on to fresh new areas with repeated modalities of achievement. This format has led to critics calling the Ubisoft formula a "checklist" style of gameplay (Purdom). Vacuuming up the land's possibility (in terms of its interactive capabilities and empowering rewards) to then move on to the next area and repeat the process is a bluntly colonialist set of priorities tailored to be psychologically rewarding in these games. The "dopamine drip" is, in many cases for big-budget open world games, the result of neuroscience and psychological research applied to game design. Large game development companies increasingly employ psychologists and behavioural scientists for honing their design principles (Clay). It is not, of course, that these colonialist and neoliberal ideologies are inherently more psychologically rewarding to the

human brain. Instead, the advance of these scientific studies in game design are, as psychologist Laura Crawford suggests, geared primarily toward “controlling player behavior” (qtd. in Wawro). In other words, it is not just that these games are designed specifically to fulfill players’ *motivations* of play, it is that they are designed to *direct and shape* those motivations *and* their fulfillment *through* play. The settler and neoliberal ideologies that inflect the design and narrative of these artificial frontiers (and their access-invitation dopamine drip-feeds) are far more reflective of the cultural contexts in which they are produced and played than any universalities of human nature.

The previous chapter established big-budget open world game design as one necessarily indebted to neoliberal ideology in material context and productive practice. The ubiquity and same-ness of the Ubisoft formula’s dependence on spatial dominance and abundant, repetitive empowerment is reflected by the concurrent settler colonial depictions the gameplay engenders and is engendered by. Joshua Jackson suggests the big-budget “videogame production and consumption process mimics the more insidious aspects” of neoliberal cultural production, “conditioning consumers to think/act/perpetuate certain things and actions (or become *subjectivized* by that media)” (45). Given the reach of the videogame industry, and the billion-dollar revenues of Ubisoft’s open worlds, Jackson’s claims regarding the industry are specifically applicable to Ubisoft:

Capitalism has allowed videogame production to target certain audiences, readily subjectivize them to accept certain bodily, racial, and sexual portrayals as valid. Any attempt to break with those readily recognizable tropes would mean that the entire industry would have to radically reformat not only itself and who it is

marketing to, or risk the entire medium crumbling in on itself from alienating faithful consumers. Again, this is played out in the culture of videogame production spaces; the bodies at work creating the subjectivizing material have themselves been subjectivized into accepting the validity of only certain bodies, and whether consciously or not, that subjectivization has embedded itself in workplace cultures that actively favor (mostly white) straight men for meritocratic purposes (51).

Ratonhnhaké:ton's white-passing simulated Mohawk ancestry barely stretches the boundaries of neoliberal post-racialism, and Ubisoft is often featured in reporting on the white straight male dominance of the Western video game industry.¹²⁴ Ubisoft is now notorious for its workplace culture; recent allegations have focused primarily on sexism, sexual harassment, and managerial reprisal on employees (Gach). Though every *AC* game opens with a disclaimer about it being a “work of fiction, designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team”—a pre-emptory message to guard against offense—“its powerful Editorial group, a senior team that oversees the work done by the company's many studios” is, in 2020, “a group of seven white men” (Gach). This Editorial department, with overwhelming creative control, can use its neoliberal multiculturalism to outsource labour *and* use the varied ethnicities of its precarious and exploited employees as an apparent warrant for its cultural production, which is itself predictably settler colonial and neoliberal in expression.

All told, a confluence of factors underpins particular developments in open world game design as expressed by the Ubisoft formula. Homogeneity of the ideology and

¹²⁴ See, for example, Martens (2020).

demographic of its authoritative creators is the Ubisoft productive model, and the refinement of repeated gameplay activities for guiding *played* behaviours into expected outcomes is the Ubisoft formula. That these games are both produced by and cater to settler colonial norms is a consequence of these factors, results that subjectivize consumers into those very productive ideological bases. Essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy, this neoliberal network of production and play persists precisely because the artificial frontier of the open world game is—just like the conceptual frontier through history—an exceptionally profitable model. The profits then engender further investment, devouring more and more capital for fine-tuning the achievement-and-reward gameplay, and for marketing these frontiers globally. These titles are meant to keep players in their digital worlds for tens to hundreds of hours, and it is consequently unsurprising that the Ubisoft formula features an escalating inclusion of the microtransaction model discussed in the previous chapter.

Manveer Heir, a game developer who formerly worked at Bioware after its acquisition by game publishing giant Electronic Arts, spoke at length on *Waypoint Radio* about large game development corporations “pushing for more open world games” (“Episode 106”). Heir points out that this kind of game development “scaled up our budgets to a hundred plus million dollars . . . big publishers in general only care about the highest return on investment.” Furthermore, “in the west” the major video game companies have “consolidated,” and have a shared “conservative” ethos, with ballooning team sizes and “middle management bloat.” The corporate ethos’ response is to make these open world frontiers places where gamers *settle* for a great length of time—until the next artificial frontier is available—and target these settlers as “repeatable income.” This

logic is put into practice, Heir claims, though microtransactions. Indeed, all of the latest *AC* games that have no multiplayer component (*Origins*, *Odyssey*, *Valhalla*) include microtransactions for access to special equipment and cosmetics, *and* for in-game resources that reduce the in-game labour—the so-called “grind”—required to empower the player’s avatar to effectively dominate the open world. These digital goods are available in Ubisoft’s store as “time saver packages,” where gamers can pay more money on top of the initial sale price to reduce the substantial amount of time it would take to finish even a non-completionist play-through of each open world game’s central narrative.

Jackson, Heir, and Austin Walker—interviewing Heir (“Episode 106”)—all in some way connect these financial accumulative logics to the aforementioned homogeneity of demographic and ideology in the Western video game industry. Heir speaks about the development of a game he worked on, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, before leaving Bioware. The game was pushed into open world design by the publisher, and took the established *Mass Effect* series into a new setting, with a storyline that focused on settling new worlds. Heir suggests he and other developers raised concerns about the treatment of “colonialism” in the game, and were repeatedly shut down by leadership composed entirely of white men. Walker in turn suggests these issues can be particularly difficult to engage because of corporate structure: the cellular nature of distant teams, and hierarchies where final creative decisions are made in absentia and with prejudice by these demographically homogenous authorities. That the power fantasy gameplay experiences (with less in-game labour required for those with the money to purchase a time-saver package) *play* as they do with the *narratives* they do is connected to historical

and ideological debts. The historical progression of settler colonial economics and racialization to modern material realities of corporate practice and demographics, as well as the abstract inheritances of settler mythology developing into neoliberal capitalist ideology, go some length to explaining the Ubisoft formula's form and development.

The previous chapter also highlighted how capitalist accumulation has shifted from actual space to the non-physical frontiers of digitality, and this too is pertinent for understanding how the Ubisoft model and formula is now so desirable for other companies to mimic. As Jackson notes, in neoliberal practice, "physical proximity no longer plays a substantial role in capital production, nor in social and cultural production" (45), and the ways in which bloated companies like Ubisoft and Rockstar make bloated digital worlds is interestingly symptomatic of these settler neoliberal logics. Just as, in Veracini's words, "Capital is thus literally settling on space that is made empty through financialization" ("Containment" 119), the deeply financialized, microtransaction-addicted open world game genre has gamers settling on artificial frontiers, unreal spaces that are functionally empty without players' progression of dominance. Massive game development companies like Ubisoft settle gamers into non-physical spaces for simulations of self-empowerment. The formula consequently refines itself to extract more and more money from those players settled on unreal space for their leisure.

These virtual spaces, empty of physicality, are designed to be emptied of their simulated content and possible reward, letting players move through and dominate frontiers, only to be replaced by yet more inviting spaces in more iterations of multi-million dollar franchises. Thankfully for the bottom lines of Ubisoft and its ilk, that design engenders a continuous cycle: larger budgets for larger worlds with hopefully

larger returns, providing gamers renewed fresh access to fresh frontiers, and exploiting more globalized labour as detailed in the previous chapter. As such, these artificial frontiers and the Ubisoft formula necessarily highlight the most important trait of the settler throughout the history of settler colonial cultural production: mobility. The Ubisoft formula's emphases are its use of open worlds as *spatial* experiences. The desired "immersion" is part of these games' baked-in fantasy of power, power of violent dominance, power of the accumulation of currency, and collectible items and equipment—a fantasy that is expressed through constant mobility in that world. The unreal space of the virtual frontier, and the proliferation of multi-entry franchises based around repetition of *mobile* dominance over new, inviting lands to be dominant *through* (and *down* the checklist) reveal another way Western big budget open world game design is emblematic of the settler colonial imaginary, and neoliberal cultural production broadly.

My argument that the Ubisoft formula and open worlds are expressions of, and cater to, desire and anxiety around *settlement* may seem paradoxical to this mobility, I draw the position from a great deal of scholarship's identification of "mobility" as a central settler colonial and Western neoliberal cultural hallmark. Lloyd and Wolfe note that "Colonial settlement, of course, depends on the mobility of the settler who migrates, whether that displacement was initially coerced or voluntary, and thus furnishes an icon of the modern subject defined by movement" (115). Cheryl Smith (Ngati Apa, Whanganui, Te Aitanga a Hauiti) argues that an obsession with "collecting" is a settler colonial modality that has developed into a modern neoliberal one. Contrasting settler "collection" with Māori modalities of "collectivity," Smith argues that "with

colonisation, it was the pioneering spirit that encapsulated the dreams of advancement” (69). In its current neoliberal form, “it is the entrepreneurial spirit that encapsulates the dream of roaming the world and discovering untapped resources, of being able to achieve a sense of freedom through gathering and accumulating” (69-70). Open world games, particularly of the Ubisoft “checklist” model, are easily understandable as digital realizations of that dream: roaming, untapped and infinite resources, and a “sense of freedom through gathering and accumulating” (70). The player’s advancement in open worlds is in this roaming accumulation, and an attendant violence to roam into the frontier’s great danger. The advancement of the player’s character in achieving a positive “spirit” in these fantasies is so often, as with *ACIII* and the *RDR* series, pioneering settlement purchased with that mobile accumulation and violence. That the very *experience* of freedom is characterized specifically as an accumulative mobility, in a checklist open world, is an enduring settler and neoliberal cultural expression, and the rave reviews of these big-budget open world games often highlight “tremendous freedom” (MacDonald) along exactly these lines.

As noted, however, the “freedom,” or “autonomy” of open world games is deceptively limited. The available activities of these open worlds conform to particular standards—the neoliberal priorities of Rockstar and Ubisoft games—and are precisely tested and designed to direct player behaviour to experience the “immersion” into and “achievement” of violent accumulative power the genre provides. Western big-budget open world game developers, evidenced by Rockstar design and the Ubisoft formula alike, provide a sense of “freedom” through a rather simplistic set of these enduring cultural hallmarks: mobility over an inviting land, and a mostly illusive autonomy to

choose where to go and what to do. The autonomy of mobility in gameplay combat in the Ubisoft formula is also structured on different literal approaches to the engagement (does the player climb the roof and drop down, or find a hole in the wall?), or the style of violence engaged, be it stealthy or immediately hostile. This autonomy is illusive precisely because the available interactions are tightly coded, literally programmatically for the optimal direction of player behaviour, as well as in pre-set unlocking availability of missions and activities to provide the correct progressive sense of “achievement.” The autonomy is also tightly coded ideologically. The actual gameplay experience of this freedom and autonomy is located in the affective allure of the artificial frontier: a large open space that invites the player to traverse and grow in power. The opportunity for gamers to *voluntarily* choose which available experiences are engaged, and when, in a detailed gamespace, is the open world’s digitalized experience of “freedom.”

One of the points of connection Maria Bargh (Te Arawa, Ngāti Awa) uses to track the coherence of settler colonial ideology with neoliberal ideology is precisely in this kind of illusive sense of autonomy. Bargh says “neoliberals essentially take the status quo of social and political economic relations in society as impermeable, and leave individuals to their fate. This assumption arises because neoliberals equate ‘free’ with ‘voluntary’” (9). This view is necessary to uphold the neoliberal sanctification of the market as the core expression and predictor of human society. All behaviour not immediately and obviously coerced is thus voluntary, and therefore not subject to moral quandary in a hopefully “free” market, nor should these interactions inspire political resistance. Bargh notes that this of course neglects the wide and variable forms of coercion, and “how ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ actually function in the marketplace . . . [supply

and demand does not determine every transaction in a free market because] the market does not necessarily respond to people's demands in the form of needs. Instead the market responds to money and those who have the power and privileges to pay for their wants" (9). Ubisoft's "time-saver" microtransactions are microcosmic demonstrations of how not all autonomies are equal in the market. The sense of freedom given by an illusion of autonomy, even on the artificial frontier, is negotiable depending on the amount of money one may spend. Regardless of how much money each player brings to the table, however, the freedom and autonomy, based on voluntary mobility, is the broad strokes power fantasy born of the settler colonial imaginary and its newer entrepreneurial bent. Players of *ACIII* can engage as much or as little of the Homestead missions and economics as they desire somewhat in the order of their choosing, but all paths in the open world lead to the accumulation of the mobile settler.

Third-Person Perspective and the Settler as Universal Subject

I must conclude this chapter by analyzing one of the Ubisoft formula's enduring visual regimes, overwhelmingly popular in open world design. After all, if mobility is key to the artificial frontier's allure, how that mobility is visually represented is deeply important to understanding that allure's characteristics. In the Ubisoft formula that mobility is presented, in video game parlance, in a third-person perspective. Players do not see out of their avatar's eyes, but instead control a camera tethered to that avatar simultaneously as they control the avatar's actions. In a study of player embodiment in third-person games, Daniel Black notes that "video games have demonstrated an ability to create a sense of immediacy and involvement in players, which suggests that a sense of involvement in their represented events and agency in their simulated environments is a

key part of their appeal” (197). That “sense of involvement” is the “immersion” that these games’ sense of freedom is motivated to empowering. Comparing third-person perspective to first-person perspective in games, Black is careful to point out that even in a first-person game the player is not utterly convinced their virtual embodiment is a direct consequence of their literal embodiment. Controlling the avatar via gamepads or keyboard-and-mouse schemes necessarily separates virtual embodiment from physical embodiment. The available interactions and movements of an avatar are necessarily limited in programmed possibility, albeit ultra-empowered in the *intensity* of the available mobility to climb buildings, and so forth. In Black’s words, it is “implausible” to suggest that simulated embodiment of video games, regardless of perspective, “swamp” players’ “existing subjectivity or [physically] embodied experiences” (197). Instead, Black argues, video games create

another layer of embodied experience that is able to articulate with the foundation of embodied experience that is with us all the time, creating novel combinations. Rather than confusing or replacing our everyday sense of where our bodies are or how they can sense or act upon our world, video games provide an experience of vision and action that is multiple and distributed across physical and simulated space. (197)

Third-person perspective’s multiplicity and distribution is different from first-person perspective, but both provide a level of distanced embodiment, an immersion staked on the “simultaneity of the activity represented in the game and the actions of the player’s body, which are generated in response to that activity in a circular fashion” (195). An open world video game’s “simultaneity can only ever be imperfect and unstable” (195),

but I argue the Ubisoft formula's third-person—seen in the majority of Western big-budget open world games—carries with it a kind of immersion and achievement associated with the settler colonial imaginary.

I have argued that the Ubisoft formula avatar is a figure of the mobile settler. Yet again relevant is van Nuenen's suggestion that the spatial mastery of the *AC* series—associated with “the ‘native’” in *ACIII*'s addition of tree-climbing—is akin to the phenomenon of so-called “anti-tourism” in its colonial ideology. Anti-tourism is still simply a form of tourism, but one that hopes to eschew the “commonalities of crowds . . . superficial experiences that are associated with traditional tourism” and instead gain a more “authentic” experience (30). Of course, the anti-tourist is a subject defined by their mobility, and the authenticity achieved is still nevertheless one predicated upon a *superiority* over regular tourism *and* the locals whose life and culture the anti-tourist has the privilege to supposedly temporarily sample and transcend. As I argue above, van Nuenen highlights Ratonhnhaké:ton's Mohawk ancestry is part of what relates the Ubisoft formula's “spatiotemporal” dominance to “a notion of authenticity and belonging” (34). That players can *see* Ratonhnhaké:ton in their control, and can *see* their simulated embodiment's spatiotemporal dominance with and as him, provides players with another layer of colonial embodiment.

This extra layer of embodiment is that of the mobile settler, an avatar for all players to play Indian and surpass Indians as a settler-in-training-and-action. In analyzing the modern settler colonial imaginary's construction by literature and law, and drawing from Radhika Mohanram, Sherene Razack notes “the European settler becomes the disembodied Universal Subject” (13). In the artificial frontier, third-person perspective

provides that disembodied subjectivity. Mohanram herself calls the figure of the settler “a subject who is able to take anyone’s place” (15); this relationship is mirrored by the relationship of player and *played* Indian. All players of *ACIII* take the place of the Indigenous protagonist via disembodied subjectivity and simultaneity, and it is the player’s input that actualizes Ratonhnhaké:ton’s development into the neoliberal settler hero the game’s arc and gameplay entail. Just as importantly, this third-person perspective allows players to see their avatar literally *rise above* the “commonalities of crowds” (van Nuenen 30) represented by NPCs. The Ubisoft formula’s focus on players’ vertical ascent of urban and natural settings is further buttressed by these NPCs’ disappearance in destruction by the player’s actions *and* by their literal programmed occlusion every time they fall beyond the limits of the player’s view as explained by Miner. For players to see their mobile settler’s visual dominance of a purely visual space is an important characteristic of the formula; players seeing their avatar’s dominance contrasted with the comparatively static NPCs is an integral element of the Ubisoft flavour of power fantasy. After all, the “Universal Subject” of the mobile settler is only sensible as an empowered figure in contrast to its oppositional figure *par excellence*, the Indigenous person, who in Mohanram’s words is “immobile against the repeated onslaught of the settler” (15) in the settler colonial imaginary.

Lloyd and Wolfe also point out that the literal and conceptual mobility of the settler is necessarily constructed in opposition. The settler’s very existence on the frontier requires the “perpetual unsettlement” of Indigenous peoples and other surplus populations. This unsettlement “dialectically links the figure of the mobile pioneer to its other, the immobilized, exterminated, dispossessed Indigenous” (115). Indigenous

peoples' sequestration physically on reservations and legally through legislation is partnered with the settler colonial imaginary's narratives of Indigenous death and displacement as an inevitability, a Turnerian civilizing force of *settler subjects* meeting an immovable but destructible *object*. The previous chapter noted Saskia Sassen's argument that the contemporary reality and rhetoric of neoliberal ideology is similar: though mobility is often posed as the primary characteristic of the modern subject, burgeoning surplus populations are "warehoused" formally and informally, in "refugee camps . . . prisons . . . ghettos and slums" ("Expelled" 198). Open world games provide a fantasy of the mobile settler subject, visually transcending the simulated sequestered others. In so doing, these games replay the allure of the Turnerian frontier, where dangerous permeability is overcome and replaced by the supposed safety of borders. After all, as Lloyd and Wolfe articulate, "[e]nclosure, the first movement of accumulation by dispossession, is the institution of boundaries and limits, dividing the world between territory declared to be appropriable or unoccupied ('free land') and publicly or privately appropriated domains" (115-6). The confines of the magic circle makes the simulation of this process one that is never a true danger for its participants: the third-person perspective of the Ubisoft formula's Universal Subject does not replace players' physical embodiment; it provides a *pre-bordered* embodiment of accumulative power in an artificial frontier. The artificial frontier has only *play*-danger, and its third-person Universal Subject, the hypermobile violent accumulator, are important mechanical characteristics of the frontier logics inherently encoded in the Ubisoft formula, and rehearses those logics' forms of cultural (mis)remembrance.

It is then a natural consequence of the Ubisoft formula's popularity, and the big-budget open world games' settler neoliberal production and cultural context, that there are so many games in the genre with repeated specific treatments of Indigeneity and colonialism. Manveer Heir's experience of the production of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* turned into an open world game that glorifies and sanitizes colonialism is certainly not an isolated case. The artificial frontier, where the avatar is a Universal Subject of dominant mobility, necessarily produces narrative content that appropriates simulated Indigeneity literally (as in *ACIII*), or by association (in the *RDR* series). The open world avatar as mobile settler gains even more affective traction when it engages that time-tested favorite play of the settler colonial imaginary: playing Indian.

Chapter Three: The Settler Frontier Overlap of Neoliberalism and Fascism: *Horizon Zero Dawn*, Hypertopian Spectacle, and the Nomos of Open Worlds

As there are so many games that could fall under my admittedly overstuffed guiding phrase “Western big-budget open world games” and be relevant to my argument about that genre’s revealing qualities, my work on this dissertation encountered a kind of choice paralysis. With so many examples, it has been difficult to choose which games to deeply investigate. *Horizon Zero Dawn* [HZD], however, is an obvious necessity, even if it was not produced by powerhouses of the genre like Rockstar and Ubisoft. *HZD* is particularly emblematic of my dissertation’s findings, and rather blatantly combines central elements of the previous chapters: neoliberal production and ideology, as well as settler colonial formulas of Indigenous representation. As such, this chapter relies heavily on the theoretical frameworks set up previously, and is perhaps somewhat dismissive of *HZD*’s particularity compared to the more exhaustive treatments of the previous two chapters. It is also where this dissertation finally engages its proposed aim of highlighting how these games demonstrate the intelligibility between settler colonialism’s modern neoliberal expression with fascism, both historical and emergent. I begin by summarizing *HZD*’s gameplay and plot, as well as the role its protagonist plays in this particular iteration of playing Indian. I then proceed a discussion of the game’s depiction of its space, based on real-world referent and shorn of the real Indigenous sovereignties that persist to this day. I argue it is what I call a hypertopia, where white/settler supremacy is coded into a distracting spectacle of perfection, where the alterity of real Indigenous history and culture can be erased and replaced by a tribal unreal that can be contained and surpassed. I then move on to the game’s competing discourses of identity, and its primary

narrative thrust of genetic destiny, arguing that it is hypertopian settler supremacy, ultimately akin to the “gene fetishism” of real-world settler searches for “Native American DNA.” Finally, I rely upon the previous chapters’ theoretical work to summarize how all the games here studied exemplify the settler colonial imaginary’s coherence with fascist ideology: they are purveyors of the neoliberal illusion of the “sovereign consumer,” spectacles understandable through Walter Benjamin’s theories of art under capitalism and fascism, and their inescapably ludic structure “beyond the line” of law and morality as in Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt’s *nomos* reveals the genocidal genealogy of the settler neoliberal imaginary.

Aloy, the “Brave” that Surpasses All Others

Horizon Zero Dawn’s gameplay is derivative of other successful open world games and particularly draws from the later developments of the Ubisoft formula. As such, like many of its contemporaries, it features heavy emphases on vertical and horizontal hyper-mobility, resource collection (from plants and enemies), and crafting systems for gaining and upgrading items and weaponry. *HZD* even includes a version of the map-revealing tower-climbing challenges (mentioned in the previous chapter) which the *Assassin’s Creed* series started and proliferated in the open world genre. This proliferation was already a point of popular ridicule by the year of *HZD*’s release,¹²⁵ and it is indicative of the “advances” *HZD*’s gameplay brings to the genre. The towers in *HZD* are massive, mobile robotic dinosaurs. The mechanics of puzzling out how best to reach the top and the rewards for doing so are the same as in the *Assassin’s Creed* series (and, for example, the *Infamous* open world series), but the mobility of the “tower” itself

¹²⁵ See Purdom (2017) and Mike Williams (2017).

adds an extra visual spectacle. In other words, in terms of gameplay, *HZD* set itself apart from the glut of other contemporary open world games with cosmetic enhancement.

However, *HZD* received a glowing critical reception, winning a British Academy of Film and Television Arts award for “Best Original Property” and an “Outstanding Achievement in Videogame Writing” award from the Writers Guild of America.

Apparently, these cosmetic enhancements and the game’s narrative trappings were deeply important to its success in a market already saturated with open world games.

HZD’s setting is that of a post-apocalyptic Earth. It is, however, an almost utopian, gorgeous vision of nature—and robot dinosaurs—overtaking the ruins of the previous human society which was destroyed by a robot army. The titular “Zero Dawn” project was a pre-apocalypse last-ditch effort by a group of scientists, academics, artists, and corporate and government officials to secure a post-apocalyptic hope of human life. Zero Dawn was the creation of a new artificial intelligence that would, after the inevitable 2060 robot annihilation of the human race and Earth’s ecology, eventually “re-seed” the planet with flora and fauna via terraformers—the robot dinosaurs—and gestate humans from automated underground genetic facilities. The setting of the game takes place some 800 years after this AI-destroyed and AI-regrown Earth has been seeded with humans. In an interview with NoClip, the lead writer of *HZD*, John Gonzalez, revealed that when he came onto production, the game’s concept was already set with “tribal-looking” peoples with what he called a “pre-industrial level of development” in an underequipped struggle against robot dinosaurs in a lush but still distinctly post-apocalyptic setting. Gonzalez said his first challenge was to explain the tribal ignorance of the world’s humans, and why they lost “scientific and technological knowledge.” His

solution was Zero Dawn not going according to plan. Zero Dawn's world-rebuilding AI, titled GAIA, has separate subsystems, each with a different function and predictable name from the Ancient Greek pantheon. Just before the complete extinction of the human race, one of the project's corporate billionaires destroys APOLLO, the subsystem designed to educate humans in their bunker labs, guiding them into adulthood before *settling* the new Earth. This loss, along with other system failures, meant that these newly gestated humans were without the crucial training of APOLLO on the technological and historical knowledge required for appropriate settlement. They were instead released as adolescents from their robot-staffed bunkers, and survived long enough for tribes to form. Within 800 years, these tribes, with all their apparent primitivity, largely forget their own origins as bunker-living AI-babysat genetically farmed humans. Instead, these examples of the tribal unreal have stereotypically tribal mythologies about their origins that are allegorically in distant proximity of truth but blatantly wrong enough for any substantial self-awareness. Oral history, as this sci-fi variant of settler stereotype goes, is apparently a frail substitute for technological education. Tribal societal historical knowledge and cultural transmission is here a sad civilizational impediment compared to robots teaching humans math, history, and how to make a gun from the parts of robot dinosaurs. The narratively important matriarchal Nora tribe, for instance, live by the mountain bunker entrance to one of these genetic facilities, and worship its locked door as the "All-Mother," the deity that birthed them.

Players control Aloy, an exile of the Nora tribe, a white woman outfitted in *HZD*'s culturally appropriative mish-mash of tribal-looking clothing. Aloy, who appeared outside All-Mother as a baby, was exiled by the Nora tribe's matriarchal council because

of their fear of the pre-apocalypse technology the All-Mother represents. Players first control Aloy as a little girl after she accidentally falls into some ruins of the “Ancient Ones,” the future-past of pre-extinction humanity. The Nora, with their past-future ways, forbid entrance to these ruins and the use of the technology inside. Aloy the exile is not bound to these easy stereotypical cues of primitive superstitions, however, and finds a device called the “Focus.” The Focus provides the game’s user interface. The Focus, narratively, teaches Aloy bits and pieces of the future-past, but more importantly to both narrative and gameplay, it provides her the ability to see the world in technological, survivalist, and extractive terms. The Focus highlights resources that can be collected, reveals humans, robots, and wildlife through obstacles and points out their weaknesses for easier kills, and displays routes to player-chosen objectives through the game world. The Focus is the narrative metonym for the user interface geared to the gameplay’s progressive empowerment, and makes Aloy the ultimate tech-warrior. When the NoClip interviewer called the focus Aloy’s “superpower,” akin to the radioactive spider that made Spider-man out of Peter Parker, Gonzalez enthusiastically agrees. After all, it is Aloy’s relationship to the technology of the Ancient Ones, represented by the Focus, which grows her prowess to surpass the Nora tribe.

Aloy returns to the Nora and wins the “proving,” which allows her to become a “Brave,” a fully-fledged warrior of the tribe. That community and kinship is not her goal, however: Aloy is more interested in discovering her “true” origins, and eventually her goal is stopping another apocalypse. Her tech-warrioriness allows her to martially and intellectually surpass every tribal unreal person in the game, and save humanity from a second extinction. As such, Philip Deloria’s identified “dialectic of simultaneous desire

and repulsion” for the Indian in the settler psychology of playing Indian (3) is quite explicit in *HZD*’s progression. Importantly, *HZD*’s tribal unreal avatar and narrative also just as explicitly reveal that dialectic’s characteristic sense of superiority; it is a superiority born of technological power, the “knowledge” to create and wield it (often destructively), and relies on the righteousness of that tech-knowledge’s superiority wielded responsibly. These implications are bluntly communicated in the late-game main quest “The Heart of the Nora,” which is thick with plot reveals, including Aloy’s discovery of the exact details of Zero Dawn and thus the origins of her world. After a climactic battle requiring Aloy’s (and the player’s) by-now extensive technological armaments, Aloy is said to have done “what no Brave or warchief could do . . . save the Nora.” The (white) saviour must then enter All-Mother, to the consternation of some of the Nora’s matriarchal leadership. Teersa, the one elder that unequivocally supports Aloy and her entrance into the All-Mother (and revealing the secrets of the genetic facility within), quite literally steps aside. In a luxuriously climactic cutscene, the doors to the facility open and Aloy looks back to Teersa; a mournful flute accompanies the shot, a formulaic motif of vanishing Indian media stereotype (used to similar effect, as mentioned in the first chapter, in *RDR2*). Aloy turns back to the facility being revealed, bathing the shot in a hagiographic blue light the game consistently associates with pre-apocalypse technology. The music shifts to a decidedly more advanced string scoring reminiscent of European classical. Aloy’s ascension from “Brave” to something closer to the primary target audience, technologically knowledgeable Western gamers under neoliberalism, is given the appropriate dramatic flair.

Tribal Real Erasure in the Hypertopia

HZD's tech-saviour-surpassing-tribes narrative and gameplay echoes Vine Deloria Jr.'s description of Western settler culture's vision of its own teleology, written in 1994 and referencing the internet era "on the horizon":

Western civilization, unfortunately, does not link knowledge and morality but rather, it connects knowledge and power and makes them equivalent. Today with an information 'superhighway' now looming on the horizon, we are told that a lack of access to information will doom people to a life of meaninglessness and poverty. As we look around and observe modern industrial society, however, there is no question that information, in and of itself, is useless, and that as more data is generated, ethical and moral decisions are taking on a fantasy dimension in which a 'lack of evidence to indict' is the moral equivalent of the good deed. (vii, "Foreword")

HZD inhabits just such a fantasy dimension. It proposes Western-settler-centric notions of knowledge, relationships to the world, and the technology of post-industrial neoliberal society as the only possible responses to the imagined cataclysmic failures of that same knowledge, relationships, and technology. *HZD*'s aesthetics and the narrative tropes of its tribal unreal are shorthands for the settler stereotype of tribal peoples as little more than a nascence of civilizational development to be surpassed by a "fit people" armed (literally) with an apparently incompatible technological knowledge. Unindicted by the tribal real that *HZD*'s tribal unreal eclipses, *HZD*'s narrative "good deed" is the tech-warrior tribal protagonist surpassing other tribal peoples and preventing another world-ending cataclysm by learning fresh-start applications of the extractive, neoliberal settler

relationships typified by the game's open world mechanics. *HZD*'s setting alone makes the absolute absence of the tribal real particularly salient.

HZD re-presents a post-apocalyptic new world, to use a pointed phrase. The game takes place in and around a re-imagined Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada. The locations are made overt with the inclusion of landmarks, surviving ruins of the former United States. As detailed in the first chapter, *HZD*'s development was typical of other big budget open world games in that it heavily relied on out-sourced asset production, with Michael Tomsen reporting *HZD*'s developer Guerilla Games utilized 18 different "asset farm" companies. Clearly a great deal of attention was paid to the natural and urban spaces of the Southwestern United States.¹²⁶ The attention paid is most clearly demonstrated by the game's "Vantage Points," an optional activity to find audio-logs and attached images of the world before the apocalypse. These vantages include real world buildings in Southwestern US urban spaces, and natural landmarks that are a part of the national US identity today: from Eagle Canyon in the San Rafael Swell to the city of Colorado Springs, from Monument Valley to the Colorado Pioneer's Museum, which the game perhaps guiltily renames as "Explorer's Museum." The natural spaces are depicted in their broadest postcard-style visual motifs, whereas the ruins of settler civilization are more closely detailed. The NFL stadium in Denver and the Red Rocks Amphitheatre concert venue, for example, are given heavily detailed pre- and post-apocalyptic depictions as part of the "Vantage Points." The game never once mentions, however, that these lands today have some of the largest and most populous Indigenous nations and

¹²⁶ The attention is quite literally "paid," as detailed in the first chapter, in huge production budgets spent on in-house and out-sourced asset creation for the heavily detailed open worlds, building "production value" to achieve the much-desired "immersion."

federal reservations within United States borders.¹²⁷ In a Vantage Point, *HZD* lets players bask in the splendor of an NFL stadium in both its current form and in its imagined post-apocalyptic ruin to provide the setting a believably dramatic coherence and aesthetic pleasure. Though *HZD* also peppers its world with tribal unreal paintings and petroglyphs on cliff faces to complete the experience of playing Indian as Aloy, it must necessarily efface, then, the tribal real that contextualizes those lands in even greater relief. The Colorado Plateau, beautifully rendered in the game, does not feature a single glimpse or mention of, for example, its tens of thousands of years of rock art made by Indigenous peoples, including the ancestors of the Diné (also known as the Navajo), Ute, and Hopi peoples that still live on the surrounding lands.¹²⁸ The Indigenous stone art of the region, which has a great deal of cultural, historical, and spiritual significance to the tribal real these lands are still home to, has survived the deep stretches of time *HZD*'s post-apocalypse narrative instead tries to leverage with sights like iconic mountain ranges and a concert venue opened in 1941.¹²⁹ To include the real rock art would be to make this artificial frontier too porous to comfortably inhabit its desired fantasy dimension. Allowing a tribal real to exist where it wants players to *settle as* tribal unreal (and ultimately be superior to that tribal unreal as a tech-warrior representation of settler modernity) would be to draw itself too closely to the ugly implications of its Turnerian

¹²⁷ See, for example, the Navajo Nation's Department of Information Technology (DIT) official "History" webpage, which points out that the Navajo Nation itself is larger than 10 of America's 50 states, and the population of Diné peoples (not necessarily living in the legally recognized borders of the Navajo Nation) "surpass 250,000."

¹²⁸ For the connection between ancient and more recent cave art on the Colorado Plateau with the Indigenous tribes still living in the surrounding lands, see the "Rock Art and Cultures of the Colorado Plateau" page of the Museum of Western Colorado website for a very brief overview, Malotki and Weaver for a more in-depth overview (2002), and Kelley Hays-Gilpin (2008) for an overview of the literature focusing on specifically Navajo and Pueblo/Hopi rock art.

¹²⁹ See the "Red Rocks History" page of the official Red Rocks Amphitheater webpage.

teleology. The tribal real cannot remain, as the “lack of evidence to indict” the tribal unreal validates settler norms and provides space for Aloy’s “good deeds” as a heroic, Indigenized white protagonist who surpasses the other tribal peoples.

Unindicted by the tribal real, this tribal unreal land, even though a vision of the post-apocalypse, can make itself inviting through visual regimes akin to Miner’s settler digitality described in the first chapter. Shoshana Magnet coined the term “gamescape” to analyze how video game landscapes are “actively constructed within an ideological framework” (142), similar to Atkinson’s ludodrome. *HZD*’s “New World” that GAIA has created is an ideologically heavy gamescape with utopian aesthetic visuals. Magnet notes that some gamescapes are comparable to Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. Similar to but distinct from utopias, heterotopias are spaces both real and unreal, and in Foucault’s words, are “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites . . . that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). Foucault uses the mirror as analogous to heterotopian spaces, because they feature both “real” and “unreal” or “virtual” space: “it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (24). The mirror is physical object, one that creates a virtual space that (re-)contextualizes the real space that physical object *and its observer* inhabit. Thus heterotopias (in all their “quite varied forms”) are “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (24). In *HZD*, the lands of historical and current tribal real are represented, contested, and inverted to be a tribal unreal of settler myth. The real physical activity expended to *play* in the virtual

space makes *HZD* a kind of heterotopian experience, one that contests a real space of Indigenous sovereignty as an anxious-but-empowering frontier space of tribal unreal. Foucault argues that the role of some heterotopias is to “create a space that is other . . . as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled,” a heterotopia “of compensation” (27). Compensating for the historical and continued truths about the actual frontier requires precisely that kind of utopian-adjacency, a heterotopia meant to contain an idealized other. *HZD*’s gamescape is of course a highly programmed, quality assurance-tested playground in the ubiquitous open world gameplay formula, an utopian tribal unreal, a re-realized artificial frontier to compensate settler sensibilities and anxieties like the other games previously discussed. As such, the “perfect, meticulous” heterotopian nature of *HZD*’s gamescape was made to precise parameters.

Players can marvel at stunning vistas, day-night cycles, and weather patterns in *HZD*, but as is always the case with these big budget open world games, the gamespace is exactly programmed. Jan-Bart van Beek, the game’s art director, called *HZD*’s technical and artistic design of the landscape “hyper-realism.” In an interview given after the game was showered with accolades, van Beek explained the process this way:

[I]t was not a matter of turning the beauty to 11. It was a matter of removing anything less than a 9.5 on the epic nature scale. It’s not a ‘reality’ simulation, it’s all very controlled. If we like a certain amount of fog at a particular time-of-day because of the nice lighting effect it gave, we simply set it up so that amount of fog was the ONLY amount of fog ever allowed at that time of day. If we only liked a certain amount of snowfall, then that would be the only amount of snowfall ever allowed (qtd. in Hernandez, n.p.).

This paradisiacal visual framework, a hyper-representation of heterotopian space, recalls Miner's concept of settler digitality: a technical settler gaze that prioritizes an inviting beauty of virtual land by its exclusion of all other elements that fall outside the settler's gaze. Here, even that which would not be most beautiful, an invitation for a settler hyper-gaze, is excised. *HZD*'s hyper-beauty is the invitation, and the violent, extractive domination of that beauty is the *play* of the frontier. Hyper-beauty is here both spectacle and invitation to express *power* as an experience of space, a literal exclusion of anything not precisely chosen as "beautiful"—determined by very narrow aesthetic principle—meant to inspire further settlement in virtual space. *HZD* organizes a real space into a virtual space of monolithic beauty in a way that belies its reliance upon the settler gaze—and its desire for power over land—rather than the natural world's visual and organic spectrum in reality, an ever-dynamic balancing act even in industrialized and ecologically damaged circumstances.

The balance of the natural world with humans and human activity is an important part of the Diné concept of *hózhó*. *Hózhó* can be translated at times to "beauty," but as Vincent Werito (Diné) explains, it is a "multifaceted" term that can be understood as harmony in "a positive ideal environment" (26). More importantly, *hózhó* is "central to Navajo life" and Diné teachings like the *hózhó'jí*, a ceremony of harmony to balance "integral to our inherent human quality for making sense of our lives" (27) spatially and theoretically. *HZD*'s hyper-beautiful landscape erases anything less-than-inviting for the settler gaze, and simultaneously erases Diné culture, and its formulation of "beauty" as an inherently qualified, complex, and dynamic state that emphasizes "balance and harmony" (34) instead of invitation and human gratification. Balance and harmony are absolutely

disruptive to the power fantasy that *HZD*'s open world gameplay constitutes, where the individual is empowered to extract, craft, and destroy with ever-increasing dominant capability. Werito writes that though *hózhó* "could be interpreted as a state of being or a state of existence with harmony and peace, it is really about how the idea or concept influences a person's manner of living and thinking" (29); as such, it is a conception of beauty wholly counter to *HZD*'s beauty as seductive both *for* and *as* power of a solitary player-as-hero. Melanie Yazzie (Diné) argues that the poetry of Sherwin Bitsui (Diné) demonstrates the poet's "ceremonial knowledge and the ordinary effects of *hózhóǫ́jǫ́*" by using English to create an apocalyptic but harmonious vision which "narrates the unfolding processes of perversity that mark common forms of modern power, such as capitalist greed, state-sanctioned violence, and colonial domination" (86). Bitsui's poem "The Scent of Burning Hair" sets that narration "at dawn—the holiest moment of the day for Diné peoples" (86), and is emblematic of *hózhóǫ́jǫ́* practice "because it evokes several interrelated, visceral images of power that are at once disturbing and elegiac, forceful and real" (87), emphasizing balances of ecological degradation and ecological survival, of personal position in natural order and industrialized colonial extraction. Bitsui's balancing of what could be conventionally "beautiful" to settlers with visions of destruction wrought by the settler colonial structure, for Yazzie, signals the "unwelcomed forms of power" imposed upon Diné land, people, and culture, but describes their continued and "impending . . . unruliness . . . as real and intractable elements of everyday Diné life" that must be understood in a new, dynamically constituted harmony. The individual relationship to "beauty" is one necessarily negotiated with what could be considered ugliness, and *hózhóǫ́jǫ́* is meant to bring an individual's selfhood and activity

to a harmonious relationship between individual, community, and land. As Yazzie points out, “there is no equivalent concept, and therefore no equivalent word, in Diné for “power” (91); what is clear for the visual regime of *HZD* and the gaze of settler digitality, is that harmony is merely an impediment to “beauty,” which in the settler gaze is a scalable measurement, a ranking to be ascended, a characteristic congruent with *power* as expression and desire.

HZD’s hyper-real aesthetic then, is more accurately hyper-heterotopian, surpassing the real in favour of an inviting hypertopia to be dominated. I use hypertopia to denote a sense of superiority¹³⁰ coded into this schema of –topias, a superiority typified by the power fantasies these open world games represent. Rather than merely containing otherness as a heterotopia, the hypertopia compensates by refiguring otherness as playable virtual selfhood, and virtualizing real land as impossibly beautiful *inviting* land, created *for* violent dominance. Harmony is dispensed with for the total embrace of individual empowerment. *HZD*’s hypertopia re-envisioning domination as liberation, eclipses actual genocide for an anxiety of fictionalized annihilation, and does away with it by the narrative and gameplay goal of superiority. The hypertopia’s visual design marries a natural world of controlled, excessive beauty, to a gameplay and narrative that are explicitly and implicitly about surpassing its denizens, humans and otherwise. *HZD*, like the *AC* and *RDR* series, is an artificial frontier, an invitation to master the land to which its represented Indigeneity necessarily—and for the settler, anxiously—holds title. The land’s inviting “perfect” beauty goes-hand-in-hand with its total cleansing of actual Indigeneity. As Vizenor argues in *Fugitive Poses*, the simulated Indian “is the absence of

¹³⁰ I use the hyper- prefix, then, not only for its connection to van Beek’s “hyper-real,” but also for its denotation of “over” or “above.”

the native” (145). The titular fugitive poses of the simulated Indian, the tribal unreal, are “pageantry and portraiture of dominance.” The hypertopia of *HZD* is just such an inviting fantasy of dominance. Of course, again much like the *AC* and *RDR* series, *HZD* has infinitely renewing resources for player extraction and crafting, all in an immense land of this intensely precise beauty, a land of *infinity* rather than plenty. Just as late-1800s settler colonial tourist literature of *HZD*’s represented lands did, *HZD*’s inviting artificial frontier and its hypertopian sense of individualist superiority seems to have inspired desire in its audience to turn a virtual experience into a real experience.

Matt Miller, writing for the website of the most popular video game magazine *Game Informer*,¹³¹ suggested that dedicated fans of *HZD* could embark on a real-world tour of the landmarks the game represents, sharing a mapped route that takes gamers through “some of America’s most beautiful and engaging vacation spots” (n.p.). The tour would see fans driving through the Navajo Nation itself, the Ute Mountain Reservation, and the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation; Miller does not mention this, and the notion that the United States of America contains these “spots” as tourist sites is dependent upon that neglect. These tribal lands are home to diverse peoples, all of which have deep cultural ties to the land *HZD* represents and erases them from. Any trace of the tribal real, the actual Diné, Ute, and Hopi matriarchal cultures of the region, are completely absent from the game’s world, instead simulated by stereotypical and simplistic tribes with mish-mashed cultural and aesthetic referents drawn from varied examples of tribal real and unreal, like the tech-fearing matriarchal Nora that Aloy transcends.

¹³¹ See the Alliance for Audited Media (2016).

Hopi scholar Loma Ishii writes about the “intellectual colonialism” of the late-1800s popular tourist literature and its related academic literature, all of which was rather “imaginatively constructed” (35). The expanding railroad and government tourist services this literature served to authorize depicted the “mysterious” Hopi lives and cultures as part and parcel of the wondrous land to be explored. Ishii quotes John Bourke, the first non-academic to publish a book describing the Hopi: “Their religion, system of government, apparel, manufactures, no less the romantic positions of their villages, appeal to the curiosity or sympathy of almost every class of traveler . . . demonstrating that our South Western Territories contain much that is fully worthy of the attention and study of people of intelligence” (qtd. in Ishii 36). The language of territorial containment here is heterotopian: both real in space and unreal in *ascribed* quality, and here stretched over the beautiful land and its othered Indigenous people. The language and the tourist literature it is from is also hypertopian in the sense of superiority over Indigenous peoples that is part of its touring spectacle. Philip Deloria’s identified “dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion” (3) is echoed by Ishii’s claim that “in all these texts there is a separation or otherness [of Indigenous peoples] that is both inviting and repulsive” (39). These very same factors are at work in *HZD*, and it is of little wonder that gamers who loved “playing Indian” as Aloy wanted to bring that experience into real spatial experience, to bring the hypertopian game into a heterotopian half-real of actual settler tourism. Players are invited to play as tribal, and become heroes through their repulsion: technological mastery brings them above the apparently primitive cultural signifiers. For gamers to translate that feeling into touring real land is a predictable consequence. Ishii says the tourist literature and its connected industries provide “danger, discovery,

independence, the taming of the wilderness, [and] a superior temporal cognizance of the region and its people” (39-40) These very attributes could go on the back of *HZD*’s box: danger, discovery, and the independence of the player as individualistic survivalist techno-saviour Aloy. Gamers adopt her “superior temporal cognizance” of the origin of the virtual world, its people, and most importantly, its technology, and map that sense of superiority onto the real world. Hypertopia serves to regulate tribal life and Indigeneity as nothing more than a nascence of human development, an authenticity to be toured on the way to technological domination and individualist independence.

The hypertopian aspects of *HZD* (and the tourist literature analyzed by Ishii) are comparable to the connections of “anti-tourism” van Nuenen makes to *ACIII*. Just like the protagonist of *ACIII*, Aloy combines “spatiotemporal” dominance through the open world power-gaining gameplay, and “a notion of authenticity and belonging” (34) through her tribal aesthetics. Also like *ACIII*, *HZD*’s anti-tourist structure uses that “authenticity” to provide a sense of superiority over the denizens of the toured area in hypertopian fashion. Indeed, van Nuenen even points out that the anti-tourist structure of Ubisoft open world mechanics, together with the authenticating Indigeneity of its player avatar, allows the player “to enact neo-colonial and anti-touristic attitudes yet remain the underdog all the same” (35). To be an underdog elides the moral problematics invoked by the gameplay’s spatiotemporal mastery and the attendant narrative of dominance. *HZD*’s inverted replication of that underdog Indigeneity is in Aloy’s exile from the Nora. Indeed, during the *NoClip* interview, Gonzalez tellingly reveals that his decision to write Aloy as an exile was made to elicit players’ “empathy for the underdog” to connect with her. With an already-given white Indigeneity via aesthetic and setting, Aloy’s authenticity is

never in question in the lands of the tribal unreal, unindicted by the tribal real. Thus her exile sets up Aloy's progression as an underdog within the tribal unreal, a relatable, sympathetic protagonist who will transcend the backwards tribal ways she was exiled from, and gain the power of technological knowledge (including the true scientific history of the world the primitives do not know). Surrounded by tribal people, Aloy retains her Indigeneity as an innocent victim of their ways and bearer of their authenticity, but assimilating instead into a tech-cowboy rugged individualist, alone, riding a robot horse to kill and extract her way to victory. *HZD*'s Indigeneity is mirror to *RDR*'s inversion, where the neoliberal cowboy adopts Indigeneity. Aloy gets to be the Indian that becomes something more, at once an underdog and an epic hero above all else, a hypertopian figure of both technological supremacy and Indigeneity.

HZD's hypertopia retains elements of Foucault's heterotopia as a venue for "compensation" (27), here a compensation for the anxieties of settler colonial guilt and innocence discussed in the previous chapters. As it summons an artificial Indigeneity as constitutive of its gamescape, it is unsurprising *HZD* focuses on extermination as both origin of its setting and as central narrative threat for Aloy to quell. As Byrd has been cited earlier arguing, the settler colonial cultural anxieties produced by founding extermination continue "to haunt cosmopolitan colonialism" and "serve as the deferred melancholia of a lingering sense of retribution" (*Transit of Empire* 229). As Tuck and Yang have argued, much settler fiction that deals with Indigeneity "spins a fantasy that an individual settler can become innocent, indeed heroic and indigenized, against a backdrop of national guilt" (14), a guilt that *HZD* can dispense with for its white Indian underdog. *HZD* is in the same tradition as these narratives, a story that "absolves [settlers] from the

inheritance of settler crimes and that bequeaths a new inheritance of Native-ness and claims to land (which is a reaffirmation of what the settler project has been all along)” (14). Both Aloy’s dominance of the hypertopian gamescape *and* gamer-tourists heading into real tribal lands *as American sites the gamescape represents* are expressions of exactly the way these narratives function as absolving curative for settler anxieties. *HZD* provides another digital frontier for a settler identity to indigenize itself and validate the continuing “structure” (à la Wolfe) of settler colonialism and its elimination of real Indigenous peoples and sovereignties.

Cacophony, and the Indigenizing Settlers of Gene Fetishism

The tidy erasure of the tribal real in *HZD* seems to have made popular media coverage of the game quite comfortable embracing what Indigenous writer and artist Dia Lacina pointed to as *HZD*’s questionable terminology. Lacina’s article, “What We Talk About, When We Don’t Talk About Natives,” argues coverage of the game blithely and confidently uses terms the game also features heavily: “Tribal. Primitive. Braves. Savage” (n.p.). As Lacina says of the high-scoring reviews,

[I]n all those thousands of words, those dozens of instances of that particular list, no one calls them into question. Not a single review makes mention of the historical usage of those words, or the tropes reflected in *Horizon* that caused the writers to use them without hesitancy . . . the uncritical use of words like ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ to describe appropriated cultural signifiers on large media platforms serves to reinforce racist and colonialist ideas about [I]ndigenous people. (n.p.)

Lacina makes a comparison of the game to the stereotypical representation of Indigenous peoples in Western popular culture, at one point joking “Nothing says “Indian Princess” like a white girl in fringed leather, earth tones, turquoise, and wielding a bow.” Lacina’s words are a perfect description of Aloy’s iconic look *and* the results of any Google image search for “Aloy cosplay,” with fans from around the world playing Indian in Aloy’s appropriated aesthetic. The reaction to Lacina’s brief, comedic targeting of popular game critics was predictably hostile, considering the pop cultural terrain of representational matters, and in the often reactionary games industry and community.¹³² Even Gonzalez responded to Lacina’s article when interviewed in a Waypoint article. Gonzalez argued that the team wanted to “make sure we were sensitive to the cultural concerns of our audience” (qtd. in Diver). Who, precisely, makes up that audience is left unclear, but what *is* clear is how quickly white reviewers indulged and praised the game’s tribal unreal positioning.

As mentioned, *HZD* heavily uses “Brave” as a collective capitalized noun for the Nora tribe warriors, and many characters refer to Aloy simply as “Brave” in general through the entire game. Gonzalez said of that word particularly,

our research into it was that it was not a term that would seem to be offensive . . .

It was a term that [we felt] was not derogatory, as we came across some terms that were definitely slurs against Native Americans and other groups throughout

history. And so, our decision was based on ‘brave’ not being a ‘hot button’ term .

. . with the kind of culture of the internet that we have right now, it’s impossible

to predict what it is that may offend. (qtd. in Diver)

¹³² See Condis (2019).

It is instead rather predictable that Gonzalez would cite both “hot button” issues and “internet culture” to plead innocence, and either intentionally exclude or be ignorant of a long history of contestation by Indigenous groups in multiple spheres of popular culture. The American baseball team the Atlanta Braves have had public protests over the name and associated merchandise by Indigenous groups since at least 1991 (Jamieson), and continued to draw criticism from these groups for nearly twenty years (Edwards). Equally noteworthy is Gonzalez’s claim that Brave and other terms were used in lieu of “terms that were definitely slurs against Native Americans,” implicitly accepting that the design appropriated the primary cultural signifiers of its tribal unreal from the lands which it digitized, fictionalized, and erased of the tribal real. That slurs were at one point in development considered fair game and later dispensed with highlights that the game’s invitation to access Indigeneity and the frontier it exists on is a simultaneously derogatory and celebratory impulse. It is, like the many American team names that also appropriate Indigenous signifiers and slurs, a celebratory derogation. Again, to play Indian entails a conception of the Indian as “inviting” and “repulsive.” The cannibalization of an ersatz Indigeneity is to play the role but not inhabit the reality, to be enticed by authenticity and connection to the land, but to be repulsed by the ascribed intellectual inferiority and civilizational impediment. Playing Indian on the artificial frontier is inviting for the feeling of being a sympathetic underdog while achieving supremacy, and the concomitant feeling of “authentic” identity suggesting the land is *for you*. The repulsion of the Indian figure, in the open world game, is in that genre’s inherent progression of mastery *away* from savagery as underpowered ignorance; the boxes are checked, the knowledge and power gained.

Perhaps one reason reviewers felt so comfortable using this loaded, racialized language is that the depiction of these simulated tribes is noticeably post-racial¹³³: characters are defined by their place in simplistic tribal cultures rather than the diverse colours of their skin. Reviewers at the time of release, and game critics well after release, note this cosmetic diversity. This kind of post-racialism, as previously discussed, is a way for historical and continuing racialization to be eclipsed by a sensibility of the “imperial global rainbow” (Hardt and Negri, xiii). Byrd’s analysis of the “transit” of “Indianness” also highlights that “liberal multiculturalism” is still an attempt to claim the authenticity of Indigenous originary warrant to the land. Byrd writes,

As liberal multicultural settler colonialism attempts to flex the exceptions and exclusions that first constituted the United States to now provisionally include those people othered and abjected from the nation-state’s origins, it instead creates a cacophony of moral claims that help to deflect progressive and transformative activism from dismantling the ongoing conditions of colonialism . . . One reason why a “postracial” and just democratic society is a lost cause in the United States is that it is always already conceived through the prior disavowed and misremembered colonization of indigenous lands that cannot be ended by further inclusion or more participation (xvii-xxvi).

Thus settler colonial structure, now styled as multi-cultural and multi-racial, creates “competing cacophonies of race, colonialism, and imperialism that enjamb settlers, arrivants,¹³⁴ and natives into a competition for hegemonic signification” through “U.S.

¹³³ See Polo (2017) and Hayley Williams (2020), for a near-release example and a retrospective example.

¹³⁴ Byrd’s term for the various groups not so easily put into a possible Indigenous or settler binary categories, such as enslaved peoples and their descendants.

national geographies” (12). Cacophony opens space for a kind of “settler Indigeneity,” as far back at least to the Boston Tea Party that (as the second chapter argues) *ACIII* revisions as a mutual confluence of settler-Indigenous identity. *HZD*’s post-racialism, defined by its uniformly conventionally attractive, racially diverse characters and post-racial cultural mish-mash simulated tribal world, is just such a cacophonous cultural production that makes these kinds of identities legible. Indigeneity can be shorn of its historical referents and cleansed of the legislated racialization that would problematize its adoption by white people. As Gonzalez said in his response to Lacina, the team drew from tribal peoples around the world to design their tribal unreal; the Nora tribe wears clothes obviously reminiscent of the Indigenous cultures in North America, but their architecture is Norse, their symbology at times Celtic. *HZD* is overfilled with cultural signifiers for its tribal unreal, resulting in a cacophony that “is always a deferment or erasure of ‘originary’ experience, [and] only serves to cast off the ‘native’ yet again” (65). *HZD*’s post-racial depiction, in the game’s plot, is the result of the Zero Dawn project’s multicultural team and multiracial genetic databanks the tribes were produced from. That explanation is not, however, the plot’s premier concern with genetics.

The game’s most dramatic plot reveal is that Aloy is the genetic clone of white pre-extinction scientist Elisabeth Sobeck, the genius that predicted humanity’s annihilation, and was the lead project designer of Project Zero Dawn. Thus, as Gonzalez says in the *NoClip* interview where he agreed the “Focus” is Aloy’s superpower, he amends to say that “her real superpower” is that she has “the same genetic signature as Elisabeth Sobeck.” Not only does this genetic signature provide Aloy access to the bunker that teaches her the origin of her world, it presumably explains why she is so

intelligent and able to quickly gain the technological prowess that will save that world. Indeed, the game's cutscene finale features a series of long shots that would only look out of place in a spaghetti Western because the horse Aloy rides is robotic. These distant perspectives in a hazy desert environ eventually reveal Aloy is visiting her mother-self corpse at "Sobeck Ranch." The ending is yet another use of the cowboy-Indian-ranching individualist hero as the centerpiece to open world narrative pathos, easily comparable to *RDR* and *ACIII*. In *HZD*'s hypertopia, above the cacophony of competing, simplified, jumbled, post-racial tribal identities, tones a resonant note of techno-white supremacy, of settler victory, a reclamation of ranching on the New World frontier. The forthcoming *HZD* sequel will presumably pull this thread even further: it is subtitled *Forbidden West*.

That Aloy is genetically destined for supremacy and still, as in *ACIII*, a protagonist encoded with Indigeneity-as-freedom, is similar to the *AC* series' increasing focus not just on their "genetic memory" plots, but also on the literal genetic godhood of the series' heroes. The "First Civilization" of *AC* mythos have, in later entries like *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, gone from cryptic distant gods to literal genetic ancestors and clones of the superhuman protagonists of the series, likely in part to explain these protagonists' abilities becoming more extreme than previous entries. Indeed, the focus on superpowered genetics is connected to both the more recent entries of the *AC* series and *HZD* as newer variants of the Ubisoft formula: all tasks are rewarded with "experience points," which eventually provide skill points to progressively strengthen and expand the avatar's capabilities. The player is ever-increasing their power, and thus progressively more able to lay waste to growing numbers of humans and other foes. Gonzalez may be less literal when he calls Aloy's identical genetics to Sobeck her "superpower," but it is

precisely what connects Aloy to the “Ancient Ones” her fellow tribal people fear and do not understand, and precisely why she excels at using martial technology where all others have failed. The fictional narratives of cacophonous identity, strongly founded on a fictional “originary” genetic supremacy, have comparable phenomena in the real world.

As Kim Tallbear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (Kanaka Maoli)¹³⁵, Circe Sturm, and Angela Saini have variously argued, white settlers genetically identifying with forms of Indigeneity is a re-inscription of the colonial race science that validated settler elimination of Indigenous peoples. Whereas race science was once mobilized to prove the inferiority of Indigenous peoples (and thus invalidate their claim to land), it now acts as both exclusionary “definitional authority” (Alfred and Corntassel, 600) to define Indigenous peoples out of existence by limiting legal recognition and sovereignty, *and* acts as an inclusionary metric by which white settlers can access the perceived legal, economic, or “spiritual” benefits of an assumed Indigeneity. Tallbear’s book *Native American DNA* studies multiple companies that have “prominently targeted the Native American-ancestry market” (69), and highlights how their scientific practices—and the cultural interpretations of the results of those practices—are deeply flawed and contradictory¹³⁶. Tallbear notes that for Indigenous communities, “it has been common to joke about the ‘Cherokee’ or ‘Indian Princess’ phenomenon, in which stories of a long-ago Native American ancestor—confirmed or not—lead individuals to

¹³⁵ Kauanui’s book *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* is particularly relevant here.

¹³⁶ To put it as simply as possible, genetic “markers are not ‘unique to specific populations.’ Rather, ancestry markers of interest are found at higher frequencies in some populations and at lower frequencies in others . . . [The] claim that markers are unique to populations oversimplifies the relationship between genetics and human sociality” (82). As Tallbear repeatedly highlights, these genetic ancestry testing practices often cannot tell the difference between “Native American ancestry” and “Asian ancestry” (134).

(re)script their identities as Native American, most often Cherokee” (135). Lacina poked fun at Aloy as a character that draws from the “Indian princess” settler stereotype, and indeed the character appears to combine tribal authenticity with the status of a *sovereign*: Gonzalez says “the riddle of her birth and her origins are essentially the riddle of how this entire world came to be” (*NoClip*). As Vine Deloria Jr. argues, the settler claims of lineage to an Indian princess is “royalty for the taking” (*Custer Died* 4), but here that royalty is actually the result not of her artificial Indigeneity, but her white genius genetics. The inversion is, much like the different applications of race science and the emerging obsession with genetic Indigeneity among settlers, coherent with “playing Indian” and living as settler.

Sturm’s *Becoming Indian* highlights “race-shifting” whites adopting Indigeneity as a retreat from guilt over foundational genocides of settler identity, and fulfilling a desire for authentic, spiritual connections to the land on which they live. Tallbear also notes some adoptions of “Native American” identity are motivated by what one DNA ancestry company’s marketing called “the new economic opportunities afforded Native Americans” (85), and there is anecdotal evidence some claim this genetic heritage for “an affirmative-action leg up in competitive admissions processes” at Ivy League schools (68). White settlers armed with specious scientific “knowledge” diluting opportunities meant for Indigenous people is itself one of the many uses of this “knowledge” that “mirror the kinds of claims that whites have made to other forms of Native American patrimony—whether land, resources, remains, or cultural artifacts” (136). As Tallbear sums it up, “in addition to the law, the biological technosciences are becoming increasingly important in the exercise of property claims that sustain our racial

formations” (136). However, these claims are not the full force of what Donna Haraway calls (and Tallbear cites) “gene fetishism.” As mentioned in the dissertation introduction, Indigeneity is less about racialized genetic markers, and much more about relationality, forms of kinship and sovereignty (such as the Oglala communalism of *tiospaye* described in the first chapter) that are as dynamic and culturally determined as whiteness and neoliberal post-racialism. Unlike whiteness and neoliberal post-racialism, however, Indigeneity is more akin to Coulthard’s aforementioned “*grounded normativity*”: the dynamic “modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge” are more important expressions of this identity category as it exists in the world. Proclaiming genetic markers as indicative of Indigeneity can be thought of as an expression of “gene fetishism,” which Haraway claims “is about mistaking heterogeneous relationality for a fixed, seemingly objective thing” (142). That such an objective thing can be utilized in different but connected ways is demonstrated by Tallbear’s study of a community of genetic ancestry company consumers in the early-mid 2000s, “comprised largely [of] self-identified whites” (128).

Tallbear’s study of those whites doing “native American-ancestor searching” (132) highlights that many whose ancestry results showed “recent Native American ancestry” would “still identify as white” (133). These consumers, “with white racial identities intact . . . had little trouble reconciling the possibility of Native American ancestry with their whiteness” (134). Tallbear argues that while she was surprised not to find more “race shifting” as in Sturm’s study, it is still a gene fetishism similar to race-shifting: both styles of identity formations rest on the pre-existing “social power” afforded by their whiteness (139). What Sturm’s race-shifters and Tallbear’s “Native

American DNA” whites “share is a ‘language of choice that they use to describe their racial becoming—without realizing that choice itself is a subtle marker of whiteness” (Tallbear 139). Having the choice of *how* to racially identify is a privilege only of whiteness in the neoliberal settler context. Importantly for the gene fetishists, writes Tallbear, by locating Indigeneity in genetics, they “seek the benefits of the modern, neoliberal age. They actively build their subjectivities and visibly derive fulfillment as rational and rigorous thinkers within a broader genealogical and scientific community” (135). The connection between “rational thinkers,” knowledgeable about personal scientific genetic “truth,” to both race-shifting and “intact whiteness” is critical to my reading of Aloy’s white Indigeneity. Important for her white technological genius genetics *and* her tribal unreality, Aloy—and the increasing obsession with genetics in the *AC* series—represents that neoliberal technologically endowed knowledge of settlers central to modern settler identity. This post-racial neoliberal construction, “a new form of whiteness—constituted through the enactment of a scientific subjectivity” (141)—nevertheless keeps white settlers as the “pinnacle” in the “history of all humankind,” and simultaneously makes room for the race-shifters who are living embodiments of the same notion Aloy fictionally represents: Indigeneity was “actually white(r) all along” (140). That Aloy and *HZD*’s plot are made whole through her scientific knowledge of her genetic ancestry merges her artificial Indigeneity with her whiteness, and makes her as narratively powerful as the player has made her through gameplay. The cacophonous signifiers of identity and culture are thus subordinated to the neoliberal human of technological/scientific knowledge. Knowledge is power in the Western settler teleology, and that power can access, adopt, and dispense with Indigeneity at will.

Neoliberal Sovereign Consumers of Spectacle, and the Fascist Nomos of the Magic Circle

As I will now argue these open world games demonstrate settler cultural production's comfort with fascist ideology, I would be remiss not to point out that gene fetishism (in both game narrative and real world "Native American DNA"-seeking) is coherent with Nazi ideology rather than distinct from it. As Angela Saini notes, Nazi archaeology was motivated by a desire to find Germanic/Nordic ethnic history everywhere, including among the Ancient Greeks (139), whose mythology *HZD* nominally uses as the technology interrupted in its task to bring *modern* humans into the New World instead of backwards primitives. A recent entry of the *AC* series, *Odyssey*, takes place in a carefully de-racialized Ancient Greece, and even suggests the Ancient Greek pantheon is a direct representation of the "First Civilization" godhood origin story of humankind—yet again making the history of the world "white(r) all along" (Tallbear 140). Saini quotes Bettina Arnold, who argues the Nazis were committed to "'proving that there was some kind of [. . .] genetic racial [. . .] commonality' in service of expanding the boundaries of the traditional homeland using race as a rationale" (137). Even the specific contradiction of Indianness as simultaneously "inviting" and "repulsive" was intact in the Nazi German context. Hitler and other Nazis were fans of the cowboy-and-Indian novels of Karl May¹³⁷; Hitler specifically liked May's invented and stereotypical Indian chief character Winnetou for his "tactical skills and cunning," which Hitler believed his generals should study (Ryback 180). The embrace of the tribal unreal is not a contradiction of, but rather coherent with his admiration for the American

¹³⁷ See Morton (1987).

genocide of Indigenous peoples, and with the Nazi genocidal structure's partial inspiration by the settler colonial structure's eliminative Manifest Destiny.¹³⁸ Just as the Nazis would seek archaeological precedent for Germanic/Nordic heritage existing around the globe and validating Nazi dominance, modern day neoliberal cacophony and gene fetishism—and its historical and current frontierism—subsumes Indigeneity for continued dominance as well. As Byrd writes,

It is nothing new within American Indian studies now to point to the ways in which the US colonial culture continually underwrites its mastery by subsuming and assuming Indigenous markers to define itself. As the United States progresses toward an imperial “new era of peace,” the story it seeks to create about itself is an appropriative version—a playing Indian narratology . . . with that first- person obsession that inserts its own interests to maintain the illusion that new and improved American tribal interests have superseded if not entirely replaced Indigenous peoples. (“Tribal 2.0” 59)

HZD is precisely this form of playing Indian narratology, one that replaces Indigenous histories with technological—and white-accessible—mythology, and does so in such a way that displays the congruence of Nazi and neoliberal worldviews and their coherent contradictions.

In the first chapter, I cited the Indian figure as part of Lloyd and Wolfe's characterization of neoliberal culture existing in a “deadly if preposterous situation” where “the most highly armed states in the world assure their populations that they (or

¹³⁸ James Whitman's *Hitler's American Model* makes this connection to Manifest Destiny clear, defends against claims to the contrary, supplies a list of scholarship that validates this historical consensus (167), and at points highlights the references to settler genocide in the Americas in *Mein Kampf*.

their interests) are under a permanent state of siege” (110). The Nazi state inhabited a similar situation with its racial ideology, where “Nordic peoples were represented as simultaneously the most superior and the most vulnerable of the world's races” (Arnold 9). The perpetual state of siege, as I argued at the end of that chapter, is a hallmark of neoliberal settler ideology and, consequently, western big budget open world games. *HZD*'s threatened narrative apocalypse (both past and future) fits into this sieged formula of cultural production, born of and catering to settler anxiety. If the hypertopia is a utopia of cultural compensation for a fear of genocidal retribution, it makes sense that these open world narratives and gameplay structures would veer towards playing Indian rather than simple elimination of the Indian alone, or even avoidance. As Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) says, “the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place” (8), and though the frontier's invitation is for extraction and dominance, the invitation of Indianness is at least partially for inhabiting the underdog who can triumph over threatened extermination. In all games studied heretofore, playing Indian must still nevertheless find its full, ethical fruition in settler neoliberal developments, be it homesteading or genetic tech-knowledge destiny. Indigeneity and signifiers of alternative forms of sovereignty not subsumable under the logic of Empire are simply cast as civilizational nascence, and/or a tragically vanishing impossibility.

Fascism, as Aimé Césaire and others have famously argued, sees the logics of colonialism turned inward. Western subjects' horror about Nazi barbarism is the product of, Césaire argued, not just that barbarism's infliction upon those very same subjects, but also from their complicity in that barbarism in the Western colonial context: “that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices” at home and abroad (14). Similarly,

neoliberalism's collapsing prosperity in the settler states, which outsourced and exported the system's most pernicious violence and exploitation, results in state violence and exploitation intensifying in those same states. This collapse has only accelerated the fascist tendencies of neoliberalism, both in the success of political fascism in Western states and in the cultural reinvestment into the kinds of exculpatory narratives delineated by Tuck and Yang, Byrd, and others. The Western big-budget open world genre, being a thoroughly neoliberal productive context, is a premier example of just such a cultural reinvestment. Turner's frontier, as a founding mythology of settler culture, gains renewed traction in artificial frontiers of the multi-billion dollar video game industry, itself dependent upon the neoliberal frontier of globalized supply chains and exploited surplus populations of labour. Salves for the anxieties and guilt of settlers, propaganda for settler technological relationships with the world, and eminently neoliberal in production and content, it is of little surprise that these games are remarkably uniform in their treatments of Indigeneity even in all their nuanced particularities, and the marketed allures of the non-physical space on which gamers are meant to settle.

The modern connection of neoliberalism to fascism has been demonstrated in multiple disciplines; William E. Connolly points to the fertile ground neoliberal privatization policy has tilled for modern fascist politics to flourish in Western states, a view buttressed by studies like Germà Bel's, which show privatization's origins in Nazi economic policy, important for strengthening capitalist industrialism and thus securing a top-down powerbase of elites against labour. The first chapter argued neoliberalism's faltering promises of prosperity display the colonial logics (and material processes) embedded within the ideology; it also highlighted Sassen's critique of the ways the

burgeoning surplus populations in neoliberalism has led to its most common current expressions existing not in spatial liberty, but containment (“Expelled” 198). The second chapter emphasized Bargh’s argument that the neoliberal equivocation of “free” with “voluntary” creates a political, economic, and moral landscape that subsumes all into the hegemony of “the market,” which only “responds to money” rather than labour and life (9). Together, these theories and the study of fascist-neoliberal privatization suggest that the liberty available to subjects of Empire primarily frames individual subjectivity and autonomy strictly as consumption in a marketplace. The scholarly work on early neoliberal ideology, contemporary with the fascism of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, argues that ideology retains a structural belief in the “sovereign consumer,” and it remains a crucial part of neoliberal ideology today.

Niklas Olsen points out that “[v]irtually all proponents of neoliberal ideology, from Ludwig von Mises to Milton Friedman, have portrayed free consumer choice as the defining feature of a desirable market economy, and the sovereign consumer as an agent who is capable of dictating economic production and driving political activity” (n.p.). The “sovereign consumer,” Quinn Slobodian explains, was coined by William H. Hutt and quickly adopted by still-influential neoliberal Friedrich Hayek in the 1930s, a rhetorical flourish meant to describe the individualist belief that under market capitalism, “it was not the nation-state represented by legislatures that was sovereign but the individual within it” (118). This sovereignty, atomized into individual consumption, of course, is a false freedom in fascism as much as modern neoliberalism:

As national self-determination was becoming the buzzword worldwide, [Hayek] reasserted the notion of individual consumer self-determination. The apparent

dissolution of the state to the granular level of the sovereign consumer, however, was always an illusion. For Hayek, individual consumer sovereignty was only made possible by the superstructure of the federation. Attacking economic and monetary nationalism did not devolve power down to the individual. Instead it split sovereignty—down to the consumer and up to the superstate (118).

The superstate concept in neoliberal thought, most prominently used by von Mises, in effect presages the degradation of national sovereignty in favour of the global frontier of global capital. In other words, the superstate is the achievement of globalized Empire, developed into its current globalized neoliberal form as identified by Hardt and Negri. As Slobodian argues, the neoliberal doctrine of the superstate places national government sovereignties into “its proper limited—but intensive—role in safeguarding trade, investment, and migration” (108). The mobility of the individual, though loftily framed by neoliberal ideology, is important only insofar as it is labour and consumption in that matrix of trade, investment, and migration.

The second chapter argued that the particularly neoliberal illusion of freedom is microcosmically demonstrated by the vaunted “freedom” of open world games: a set of *voluntary* choices which promotes the *feeling* of autonomy (of being *free* to do as one chooses), but one that actually takes place under highly programmed circumstances. The illusion of political power for the sovereign consumer in their actual political circumstances is the real-world mirror of the ultimately pre-determined autonomy of big budget open world games. Furthermore, the illusory consumer sovereignty of the average gamer in their material political context is indicative of the limits of political expression within the production and content of the games themselves. Walter Benjamin famously

argued fascism relies on the aestheticization of political life to compensate for the lack of political autonomy in society at large, “giving [the] masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property” (*Mechanical Reproduction* 29). These games, and the popular reviews that praise the ubiquitous (or at least desired) feeling of immersive “freedom,” are exactly the kind of “illusion-promoting spectacles” (19) he saw as typifying the relationship of Nazi cultural production and the capitalist Hollywood film industry alike with the masses captured by both.

Though Benjamin was primarily describing the early developments of cinema, his analysis is only more relevant to video games broadly, and big-budget open world games specifically are even more demonstrative of Benjamin’s arguments about the technological and affective nature of Hollywood and fascist spectacle. For Benjamin, this form of spectacle was the “height of artifice” (20) because the process of editing and style of filmmaking under capitalism and fascism tends to use artifice—the technological equipment required to film and reproduce the fiction—to make media that appears as a kind of alternate, simultaneous reality. By hiding the apparatuses (the “mechanical equipment”) of film technology from the audience’s vision and consciousness (among other techniques), cinema “has penetrated so deeply into reality” that its “illusionary nature” is wholly constitutive of its experience, rather than partially so as with stage theater (20). The design of these open world games is even more heavily concerned with a “viewpoint” that hides its machinery from players (compared to the “spectators” of cinema), and of course targets the same affective experience of immersive alternate reality. Cinema’s great power as a medium of spectacle—and how that spectacle is both

informed by and informs the audience's relationship to their material reality—is a result of that technological penetration of reality. If, as Benjamin argues, cinema's techniques reproduce physical reality in new technological and mass-consumable form, then the open world game's commitment to completely virtualizing a new reality achieves similar spectacular result. Benjamin points out things like cinematic slow motion provide audiences the opportunity to make that which they unconsciously experience (every small iteration of experienced motion in normal space-time) into something technology refigures, represents, and reproduces as a different kind of spatial experience. Open world games, on the other hand, do not even need a physical space to be virtualized, and instead are spatial experiences of artifice from top to bottom.

If cinema provides spectacle where “an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man” (24), these video games are a higher order of intensity. The autonomy and “freedom” experienced by players of open world games is the heterotopian half-real, the spectacles that recreate the *experience* of a *spatial* reality for play. The technological (and labour) constraints of western big budget open world game production described in the previous two chapters—where staggering budgets for exploitative corporate supply chains produce increasingly large and formulaic worlds for desired return in mass consumption—is remarkably similar to how Benjamin characterized the early film industry's technological advances and business modelling to achieve the desired spectacle. In other words, the massive neoliberal infrastructure required for the technology of these games essentially necessitates its form and content, just as the “technological reproducibility of films is based directly on the technology of their production. This not only makes possible the mass dissemination” of these games

and films, “but actually compels it” within the economic context in which they are developed (“Technological Reproducibility” 17). Benjamin argues the “simultaneity of the two phenomena” of rising fascism and the business demands of technological cinematic spectacle “results from the economic crisis” that repeats in capitalism (17); I argue the proliferation of open world games arriving and accelerating at the same time explicit fascism again gains traction in capitalist democracies is an identical twinned development. The “same disorders” of exploitation which led to “an attempt to maintain existing property relations by brute force—that is, in fascist form—induced film” *and* video game “capital, under threat of crisis, to speed up the development” of the technology to create the appropriate spectacle (17). For film, Benjamin argues this particular development for film was the introduction of sound; for video games, it was the rendering techniques and globalized asset production described in the first chapter.

For video games, just as for film as argued by Benjamin, these developments “brought temporary relief” from the crisis of faltering prosperity and increasingly financialized economics, for “the masses” entranced by spectacle, *and* for “monopoly capital” broadly among the interrelated corporate interests that maintain globalized supply chains (17). The repeating crises of privatization and property under capitalism necessitate cultural production that maintains those relations economically *and* culturally in the particular forms and content of the spectacle to be consumed.

For Benjamin, the reason technological spectacle is so useful to capitalist and fascist cultural maintenance is precisely because of the aforementioned ability to summon new, controlled, *artificial* spatial experience for the masses. Open world games create a wholly virtual space where film virtualizes real space with the camera’s intervention and

editing. Benjamin's analysis of *playing* as human activity—and its relation to his analysis of film's spectacle—completes my extension of his argument to these games. Benjamin argued that *play* [*Spiel*] is often connected to an impulse for repetition. The previous chapter highlighted how open world games, increasingly dominated by the Ubisoft formula, are vast virtual spaces where actions are repeated over and over again in different locales, precisely catering to this impulse. This impulse (and its gratification in play) is not necessarily negative, of course. As Miriam Bratu Hansen puts it, “Benjamin attributes to repetition in play an at once therapeutic and pedagogic function: ‘the transformation of a shattering experience into habit’” (5); repetition in play alters experiences (from the traumatic to the dull) to be reformed and re-integrated as procedural, livable, or even *fun*. Hansen argues that for Benjamin, “repetition in play [is] a quasi-utopian quest for happiness and . . . a liberating and apotropaic function” (5). The issue with *play* is how its affects of liberation and apotropaism are, under capitalist and fascist cultural production, used to maintain their shared economic structure. The heterotopian (and hypertopian) half-real virtual frontiers of open world games, replete with *active* repetition and inviting beauty, are as such even more effectively positioned than film to provide a sense of liberation, warding off the anxiety produced by capitalist and fascist structure.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued these games salve settler neoliberal anxieties and validate the settler colonial structure's continuing inequities; Benjamin's analysis of spectacle and play in capitalism and fascism substantiate the same function. The technological nature of cinema—of greater intensity for video games—is part of its appeal as salve for the masses, because the narratives and forms produced by it re-asserts

humanity *with* that technology. Workers in settler states, even more so than in Benjamin's time, "have to relinquish their humanity in the face of the apparatus," technological implements and means of production that increase the worker's production, but does not increase their share in consequential profit (23). Thus gaming, just as cinema, allows the "masses . . . to experience" a "revenge . . . by asserting [their] humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph" (23). "The apparatus," then, can be understood as both the specific technologies used to produce and play these works, as well as the structure of capital that defines their use societally. This is why Benjamin argues the "social function" of film, and I argue for these games, is "to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus" (30); these open world games use spectacle and repetition to turn the alienating "shattering experience" of life under capitalism and fascism into experience of habit, normalizing both the structure and its technological means. The power fantasies of these artificial frontiers and their constant empowerment and victory is an echo of this social function. The player's active participation creates an even more powerful sense of victory, the illusion of empowerment in a disempowering societal context outside the magic circle. Benjamin, just as argued in the previous chapters, suggests capitalist and fascist societies are defined materially by containment, but their cultural production is defined by the illusion of freedom; spectacle of cinema and games maintains containment because it "assures us [the masses] of a vast" *Spielraum*, a room-for-play¹³⁹, "so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure" (30) which favourably reshapes the masses' experience of their real worlds as

¹³⁹ I am here using Hansen's translation rather than Jennings's.

subjects of capital. Sovereign consumer gamers, picking from a wide library of massive artificial frontiers, can experience empowered hypermobility, technology cathartically providing a sense of autonomy completely missing from the real material political context their consumer sovereignty is useless to affect.

Where Benjamin argues that cinema's "representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation" (23), he is echoed not only by my argument that open world games are salves for settlers, but also by a great many scholars that track neoliberal culture and policy. The masses subject to neoliberal economy, argues Byung-Chul Han, "do not constitute a *we* that is capable of collective action. The mounting egoization and atomization of society is shrinking the space for collective action" (13), and cultural production is so often geared towards that egoization and atomization. Alienation is not merely a consequence of the capital relation; it is perpetuated by monied cultural production and by the very subjects that are inculcated into neoliberal ideology, a no-exit prophecy perpetually fulfilled by the imaginary of which open world spectacles are a part. Big budget Hollywood film, for Benjamin, triggers "a therapeutic demolition of the unconscious" (31); this therapeutic demolition is similar for open world games as compensating heterotopian fantasies. The compensation in settler states (and their culture that empire has globalized), as previously argued, necessarily revolves around the unconscious anxieties and desires produced by a history and present built upon genocide which current neoliberal mores obfuscate. As Audra Simpson argues, "[s]pectacles do all sorts of political work in every society but are especially useful in settler societies because they continue to redirect emotions, histories, and possibilities away from the means of societal and historical production," which is the

logic of elimination exercised in foundational and continuing “Indigenous dispossession, disenfranchisement, and containment” (“Settlement’s Secret” 206-7). This is why open world gaming spectacle so often depends upon the figure of the Indian: a technologically represented fiction, borrowing Indian-ness’ association with freedom, atomizing gamers in non-physical space, with repetitive expression of violent accumulation that inverts the anxiety of a genocide that could turn inwards. The only difference between explicitly fascist cultural outlook and settler neoliberal outlook, in this regard, is whether the genocide is something to celebrate, or something to deny, a difference of discourse with significant consequences. After all, if fascism supplies an *expression* in maintaining capital rather than the material power to alter it, that expression can be located in the illusion of capital’s spectacles: the anxiety of colonial violence turning inward is replaced with a sense of victory, where the masses can believe no such inward turn is taking place, or that they themselves are part of the inward turn rather than subject to it. After all, the core economic structure of both fascism and neoliberalism sees no material change from one to the other: they share an eliminative and appropriative form of property relations (which, as argued in the first chapter, developed alongside colonialism’s founding appropriations).

As Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Asheri have argued, fascism is in fact fully consistent with the liberal capitalist structure’s “market economy” and its primary foundation in “private property” (7), the relation to land that was used to dismantle communalist Indigenous title as described in the first chapter. Benjamin’s claim that fascism offers an illusory power to its subjects is comparable to the illusion of gamers as “sovereign consumers” in the neoliberal market, and the highly successful

spectacles of open world games that provide an equally illusory affect of autonomy in *expression of play*. Prabhat Patnaik argues that the current wave of fascist rhetoric and political organization is so easily partnered with existing neoliberal states “not because it advances some alternative economic policy to the one being advanced by traditional bourgeois political formations, but by bringing about a discourse shift” (n.p.). That discourse shift, the allure of *expression* (be it in political sloganizing or open world gratification as *Spielraum*) is meant to replace the desire for material change. This explains why neoliberal political rhetoric increasingly resembles fascist rhetoric, and why influential neoliberal thinkers have historically praised even overt fascist dictators for their suppression of any attempts to alter these property relations (Slobodian 277). There is a wealth of literature that underscores the neoliberal-fascist connection in the confluence of the above factors and more.¹⁴⁰ Most simplistically, as Bonn Juego writes, the modern day neoliberal maxim of “free economy in a strong state” was first most clearly articulated by influential Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt (108). Schmitt’s more detailed fascist interpretations of political economy still find considerable traction in the neoliberal cultural and political programming endemic to settler states. To close this chapter, I argue Schmitt’s ideology is useful for examining how the settler cultural imaginary so often expresses neoliberal-fascist principles, and thus important to my concluding analysis of the Western big-budget open world game genre’s exemplification of settler neoliberal-fascist compatibility.

As Lloyd and Wolfe explain, Schmitt’s use of the word *nomos* indicated a people’s “ordering of the world” through “law and property” (113). Schmitt’s conception

¹⁴⁰ See Micocci & Di Mario (2017) and Patnaik & Patnaik (2019), for example.

is not dissimilar from Turner's view of American teleology, as Schmitt believed "every *nomos* . . . is instituted on the basis of a primary appropriation . . . which establishes a bounding line, or enclosure, and stands as 'a constitutive act of spatial ordering'" (113). The origins of America's settler colonial project, its logic of elimination and appropriation of Indigenous land into an America of borders, are the founding *nomos* for Turner. Indeed, Schmitt, after the Nazis failed to reorder global politics into its own *nomos*, believed the ascending world ordering of political power had its "very specific origin in the conquest of the Americas, 'the basic event in the history of European international law—the land-appropriation of the new world'" (113). Lloyd and Wolfe argue that the neoliberal-styled Empire today is thus "the consolidation of a new '*nomos* of the earth' . . . [a] colonial-capitalist *nomos*" (113) that is built upon both the mythology of settler civilizational progress, and on the necessary misremembering of the founding genocides that Schmitt understood as absolutely crucial to that civilizational development in the first place and in continuance.

The *nomos* of Schmitt (and retroactively applicable to Turner) is about reordering the world into "specific and recognized geographical marker[s]" that "divide the world spatially" (113)—necessitating the spatial illusion of spectacle to placate the masses. But more than a physical border-line, the *nomos* simultaneously spatially as well as "legally and morally" determines who is "subject to force" and who is "subject to law" (113). Like Turner's frontier, the *nomos* designates a "zone of free and empty space," which is "subject to a 'state of exception,' that is, 'a suspension of all law for a certain time and in a certain space'" (113) for violent appropriation—for Turner and Schmitt both—from an unfit people to a fit people. Though *nomos* is a juridical concept, it is also a sociological

one that structures the anxieties and desires of the settler colonial imaginary. Where my introduction highlighted the frontier as an inviting but anxious space for its porous danger, *nomos* is the colonial-capitalist ordering of that space into one of *containment*, where there are areas of “law” and areas of “exception” where law may be suspended for the continued maintenance of the *nomos* itself. Video games, taking place within their magic circles, necessarily inhabit such a space of exception from law and morality, one that is, in Schmitt’s phrasing, “beyond the line” (113) where people are subject to law. For video games, this is simply the result of the space’s unreality, the nature of a game as a voluntary fiction, where murdering thousands of people has no material effect on the world on the other side of the line. These magic circles then can contain the desires and anxieties, the fantasies and horrors of the settler colonial imaginary, and articulate them in ways that are meant to aid *play*, pure *expression* without materiality. Again, that these artificial frontiers beyond the line so often rely upon an illusion of Indigeneity for its consumers gives away the connection between fascism and settler neoliberalism in their genocidal logics. The virtual Indian, be it in the imagination of Hitler and his beloved Winnetou, in the Hollywood Western, or in big budget open world games, represents a desire for freedom, for authenticity, and communally held relationships to land, all of which are fundamentally dismantled by fascist genocide and settler colonialism’s logic of elimination, both of which are motivated by capital’s infinite expansion. If the *nomos* in current globalized neoliberalism is a colonial-capitalist empire, it is only natural that its spectacle salves would so often provide the illusion of triumph against the inward turn of genocide and appropriation that fascism represents and inevitably threatens amidst faltering neoliberal norms.

HZD's obsession with apocalypse, Indigenous inauthentic authenticity, extraction, accumulation, and neoliberal-styled individualist triumph via technology and violence are all elements that turn up in Western big-budget open world games in some combination (or altogether) repeatedly. That I have neglected *HZD*'s specificity in this final section is largely a result of its formulaic nature. The artificial frontier and its coherence with fascist spectacle and ideology highlights exactly what settler desires and anxieties these game *replay*, and have been exhibited in many media forms since Turner's thesis, and marketed worldwide. The artificial frontier's non-physical containment is merely an intensification of previous methods. These open worlds represent an economic and cultural strategy, where artificial space for settlement contains consumers in immateriality. In the first chapter I stressed the importance of "settling on empty space" to both neoliberal finance in the real world and to the open world game production that is impossible without that finance. Immateriality is precisely what makes these frontiers expressive of neoliberal *nomos*, the exception beyond-the-line of the magic circle. Immateriality is also what makes these hetero- and hyper-topian gamescapes, as mentioned, a containment for signifiers of exception. That exception is required to provide the parameters of the bordered and lawed whole, symbolically represented, and meant to be broadly relatable and understandable outside the magic circle in the neoliberal social contexts in which they are consumed. The simulated Indigeneity of these games is an important, contradictory, and flexible category for that containment's specificity. Whereas for Turner Indigeneity is that antithesis by which settler identity is formed in opposition, for open world games and the settler colonial imaginary of which they are emblematic, Indigeneity can function as exception: both opposition and addition.

These various forms of simulated Indigeneity are how neoliberalism's atomizing individualism and ("post-")racial capitalism updates and reintegrates the principles of Turner's frontier thesis.

It is thus eminently predictable that these frontiers increasingly feature depictions of Indigeneity, real and unreal, and of states of apocalyptic siege, both along formulaic lines, and always subject to that moral and legal exception of video gaming *and* of settler ideology. After all, as the first chapter cited Byrd arguing, zombie apocalypse and the figure of the Indian are compelling concepts for the settler colonial imaginary because they are both living and dead, they "exist in the no-man's-land that constitutes the states of nature and exception" (*Transit of Empire* 225). The exception of the magic circle reveals that the Indian—and the Indigenous life and sovereignty of which that figure is a reduced invention of spectacle—is still prominently beyond-the-line in the settler cultural imaginary *and* settler states. The unreal space of video games provides the ludic expression that compensates for both colonial guilt (over foundational genocide) and neoliberal failure (to provide the "sovereignty" of consumers in real political power, or economic prosperity to those consumers). Meanwhile, the games and their gamescapes monetarily compensate the companies that produce them, everywhere from Rockstar's casino to the post-apocalyptic New World of *HZD*.

These fantasy containments and salves for anxiety are thus all similarly motivated, and also similarly demonstrative of the priorities of the settler colonial imaginary. The fissures between settler cosmopolitan neoliberal post-racialism and real Indigenous sovereignty become all the more apparent: these games cannot actually attend to the Indigenous real and their disruptive sovereignties and alternate forms of relations

to land (be it *tiospaye* or *hózhóǵí*). Instead, they necessarily cater to assuaging (at least massaging) the fear of retributive apocalypse (figured as the disappearance of the rancher/outlaw/Native, or outright global extinction as in *HZD* or the metanarrative of the entire *AC* series): this compensation is accomplished via gameplay of constant power-accrual and eventual narrative victory. These artificial frontiers attend to and demonstrate the guilt and fear of the apocalypses inextricable from neoliberal property relations' history, present, and future. They do this with equivocating mythology, where settlers are Indigenized through multiple narrative formulas (settler-as-Indian in *RDR*, Indian-as-settler in *ACIII*, Indian-as-technological-white-all-along in *HZD*) and gameplay formulas that recapture the playing Indian Americans have engaged before the frontier's genocidal violence closed into the American *nomos*.

The allure of these games is visible in the way they play Indian in various oblique and explicit ways, and represent an "invitation of access" and illusory freedom: they allow gamers to taste the promise and dominance of the frontier while savouring the antipodal innocence and authenticity of Indigeneity. The Western big-budget open world games here studied—and the many examples that follow their patterns—are all playing Indian and/or against the Indian on artificial frontiers that validate the settler colonial structure (and its neoliberal-fascist development) while invalidating Indigenous sovereignty on the lands that structure has appropriated. These Western big-budget open world game frontiers show that the colonial-capitalist structure, and the settler colonial imaginary exercised in the billion-dollar industry of *play*, revels in the same genocidal logics along the *lines* of Schmitt's *nomos* and global neoliberal Empire.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the previous chapter I noted that even with the specificity of the genre I analyze, with all of its modifiers, there is no lack of Western big budget open world games that exhibit traits identical to the games I do cite. As I bring this dissertation to a close, I would like to highlight just a few more examples, and note how their particularities are fungible with the games I spent so many pages on. For example, the latest entry of the open world series *Infamous*, called *Infamous Second Son* [ISS], was a flagship title for the PlayStation 4 console, releasing only a few months after the console came out, and was developed alongside the hardware itself (Kuchera). The game features an Indigenous protagonist from an ersatz tribe; unlike Rockstar's Wapitit, *ISS* appropriates from one very specific tribe in the real world: the Duwamish. *ISS* is set in Seattle, and its protagonist (a redface performance by white actor Troy Baker) is from the "Akomish" tribe nearby. Going so far as to recreate the sign of the Duwamish Longhouse and Cultural Center for the game's Akomish Longhouse and Cultural Center, the game's appropriations are far from subtle (Gravning). There is, of course, very little cultural information given about the Akomish. Instead, Indigenous lives are simply held at ransom for the game's central narrative, immobilized by superpowered stone shards, a rather literal depiction of static Indigeneity. As Jagger Gravning points out, the real Duwamish longhouse from the outside is an understated, contemporary wood paneled building with a slanted roof, whereas the Akomish longhouse is a vision of faux-Indigenous excess, flanked by no less than three totem poles, bright colours splashed on every surface, colored flags strung about its massive, animal-art façade. This over-commitment to a broadly Pacific Northwestern Indigenous "look" is visible in the

opening minutes of the game, and does legwork that the white actors cannot fulfill: a visual marker of authenticity for its played Indian-turned-superhero.

Infamous' similarities to the *RDR* series are plentiful: a "Karma" system similar to *RDR*'s "Honor" system alters the narrative outcome and gameplay. Just like the Honor system, *ISS*'s Karma system awards positive Karma for essentially acting as ultra-violent law enforcement: killing drug dealers makes the protagonist a good-guy, an emphasis on superhero interdiction on petty street crime that would later be echoed by the open world *Spider-Man* game released in 2018. Indeed, protagonist Delsin Rowe's moral guide is his brother, an Indigenous police officer (also played by a white actor). By the game's climax, if Rowe has more good karma than evil, he returns to the tribe and heals them. If he has more evil than good, he kills them all in a rage after an Elder tells him he has "disgraced our people, disgraced our ancestors."¹⁴¹ Apparently the player's level of ingratiation to a settler social status quo of Seattle and its law enforcement is one meaningful to his Indigenous "ancestors," here. In other words, Indigeneity serves to authenticate, symbolize, and provide affective depth for the Karma system's "goodness," similar to how *RDR2* uses Indigeneity for its Honor system. The gameplay otherwise is firmly within the parameters of the Ubisoft formula, the only difference being the more explicitly superhero nature of the protagonist's abilities, including his hypermobility.

The *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* series' recent open world entries also feature Indigeneity. *Wildlands* takes place in Bolivia, and players take the role of American special forces arriving in the country to counter an absurd depiction of a Mexican drug cartel having taken over the country. As Héctor Tobar points out, Hollywood's recent

¹⁴¹ From the mission "Expose Augustine."

obsession with Mexican drug cartels draws from American racialized siege mentality that Donald Trump's rhetoric hones in on: "the cartels are streaming across our undefended border, and into . . . our video streams" (n.p.). Mexican drug cartels are used to signal "inherent, pure evil" that can be the target of violence with no moral qualms. For *Wildlands*, the drug cartel fulfills that role and another sanitization: invasion has already taken place in Bolivia, so the players' overwhelming destruction is always already a lesser evil if not liberatory combat. From the very beginning of the game, the players aid and are aided by people identified as the real-world Indigenous Aymara people, yet again signaling the righteousness of the American military interdiction. Safehouses with gameplay benefits fly the Wiphala, "the flag of [I]ndigenous self-determination" (Ravindran) of multiple Indigenous groups in South America, easily imparting an Indigenous warrant to American violence. The game's climactic battle, however, vanishes the need for Indigeneity, and sees the Aymaran resistance turn on the player, who then leads an assault on a final location where Indigenous peoples can be killed at will on the way to the drug cartel boss. *Wildlands* was released a few years before the United States sponsored a coup in Bolivia, which led to protests by Indigenous groups, and violent backlash from "white-mestizo elites" and "paramilitary organisations" (Ravindran). Martha I. Chew Sánchez's work suggests the settler colonial history of Bolivia and the United States goes some way to explain neoliberal democracies' support of the coup and its regime, as well as its particular characteristics, which Bolivian journalist Fernando Molina calls "fascist ideology" (128). The sequel to *Wildlands*, *Breakpoint*, ejects the Indigenous real, and features only ruins of a fictional Indigenous culture. Instead, the game achieves the usual affect of authenticity by having players aid a

besieged group of settlers, Indigenized by living on a land empty of its actual (though fictional) Indigenous lives. That group is called the “Homesteaders,” the same word used to signal *ACIII*’s settlers-as-Indians (and vice versa) maneuver.

This dissertation’s arguments required rather broad foundation: analysis of settler colonialism and neoliberalism’s shared history and development, and the use of the enduring concept of the “frontier,” an invented spatiality in service of accumulative and eliminative impulse. Its primary target is a specific genre, its context, and function: Western big budget open world games as frontier-styled entertainment catering to the colonial-capital cultural anxieties and desires regarding identity and Indigeneity, land, freedom, exploitation, and extermination. My argument’s final expansion is also perhaps broad: the ways this entertainment assuages those anxieties and desires reveals the coherence with genocidal fascism just beneath the surface veneer of modern neoliberal mores, expertly quality assurance tested by billion-dollar companies. That implication of shared genocidal impulse under the auspices of capital (in settler states today as it was under Nazi fascism) is conceptual, but so too are the very concepts culturally recycled in this genre and elsewhere. The frontier has always been conceptual: the hard lines of borders and the porousness of frontiers have never been as materially consistent as they are psychologically important. That psychology is precisely what is given fullest representation by the *play* of these open world games, beyond-the-line of the magic circle. The sum total of these games’ use of Indigeneity and frontierism are all designed for and propagate what I dubbed in the dissertation introduction as settler neurosis. Taking place safely beyond-the-line of the magic circle, these open world spectacles assuage the compromised national- and Self-sovereignty produced by economic and

political structures of colonialism and capitalism. The inside/outside frontier's historical conditions, cultural legacy, and adoption by global capital produced this neurosis, and is both exploited by and compatible with neoliberalism and fascism. The Turnerian frontier symbolized a national identity built upon genocide and the misremembrance of a "fit people's" destiny in a land-to-be-privatized. The actual conditions of colonialism grew and translated into neoliberal accumulation, where the world functions as global capital's non-physical frontier. The surviving and thriving sovereignties of Indigenous peoples inside and between the borders of settler nation-states are necessarily problematic for settler national identities, imperial states, and corporate interests whose originary forms of sovereignty must dismantle all alternatives to continue. Indigeneity itself, for settler cultural production and cultural production inspired by it, must be excised from those problematic sovereignties, political frameworks, ways of being, and relations to land and community. That way, Indigeneity can merely serve as vanishing impediment to civilization, or savage warrior sieging the fort of settlement, or freely adoptable warrant to land. Oftentimes it serves as a combination of all three. Western big budget open world games, in their mechanics and uses of ersatz Indigeneity, highlight the frontier's primary conceptual use: space open for exploitation and resulting accumulation, and subject to extreme, racialized violence in service of that accumulation.

The frontier's spatiality is land coded for domination, which is why the artificial frontiers of open world games so often repeat its formulaic settler colonial equivocations and disavowals; the specific formulation of frontier domination in Western cultural production was birthed by the vast mythology that sanitized, equivocated, and inverted settler colonial history. Settler colonial structure is dependent on genocide, a fact Schmitt

identified through his fascist framework that applies so easily to settler colonialism *and* the empire of neoliberal global capital it developed alongside and into. Turner's narrativization of the frontier, a space of genocide, turns this logic of elimination into a story of dogged triumph, "contest" rather than slaughter, "defense" rather than extermination. Turner's formulation, still so relevant to the supportive uses of the "frontier" concept today by these videogames, is encoded with the rationalizations for and omissions of genocidal violence foundational to settler colonialism. Turner waxes on "that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil . . . that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" (37). Instead, the frontier's legacy is cultures of individualism easily *dominated* by hegemonic authority and fascist allure rather than *dominant*, societies defined by containments and racialized violence from inception to today. Like the vaunted freedom and autonomy of these frontier games, self-sovereign individualism is materially trapped in programmatic borders, be it the magic circle or the market. These video games may at times attempt to critique frontier mythology, but their narrative and mechanical forms, as well as their social and economic function, reveal the exploitation and violence inextricable from their colonial-capital context. Regardless of how settler colonialism's logic of elimination and capital's racist accumulation may be equivocated, avoided, critiqued, or massaged in any particular instance, genocide is in the heart of the Turnerian frontier. That heart beats in the power fantasies of Western big-budget open world games as it does in the global frontier of empire today.

In revulsion and desire for Indigeneity, the settler colonial imaginary manages the recognition of structural injustice. The continued existence, persistence, and resistance of Indigenous sovereignties in the face of the settler colonial logic of elimination (by

historical frontier violence as well as modern neoliberal gene fetishism, legislated containment, and corporate land exploitation, etc.) leads to the neurosis salved by the open world's repetitive patterns of representation and *play*. But the settler colonial imaginary cannot *cure* that neurosis by re-making Indigeneity, simulating it as either vanishing or assimilated into neoliberal and fascist futurities. These games are antithetical to the futurity of Indigenous sovereignties. That futurity cannot be *played* in the context and content of Western big-budget open world games. That futurity can be found in the lives and labours, communities and creations of Indigenous peoples around the world, and their contribution to what Vizenor in *Manifest Manners* calls "survivance": "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name . . . renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (vii).

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