

INTO ALL THAT CIVILIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ATMOSPHERIC DESIGN  
AND CITY IMAGE OF *RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2*'S (2018) SAINT DENIS

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of Rockstar Games Studios as a designer of atmosphere in the player experience of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s (2018) Saint Denis. The atmosphere, city elements, and City Image of Saint Denis are sensed through gameplay and analyzed within the theoretical framework of atmospheric theory and Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960). This analysis is interpreted through an examination of the historical narrative of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. By analyzing the narrative and atmosphere of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, this thesis demonstrates the power of atmosphere as a narrative tool in video games.

Keywords: Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018), Rockstar Games Studios, atmosphere, video game atmosphere, video games, City Image, Kevin Lynch, Western history, Frederick Turner.

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**Abbreviations:**

NPC            Non-player character

PC             Personal Computer

*RDR*           *Red Dead Redemption* (2010)

*RDR2*         *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)

*RDO*           *Red Dead Online* (2019)

RPG            Roleplaying Game

Rockstar      Rockstar Games Studios

## Introduction

*Red Dead Redemption 2* released in the fall of 2018, but the active community and enthusiasm surrounding the game still today might make someone think it released just last year. One of the most powerful things a video game can do is last, and *RDR2*'s Western atmosphere and charm have undoubtedly left a lasting mark in video game history. Ever since the game's release, it has received praise for its memorable story and technological prowess, but where the game truly shines is in its atmospheric and immersive world. The world of *RDR2* is filled with a variety of interesting towns and locations, each with its own unique atmosphere and story. However, one location that truly stands out from the rest is the city of Saint Denis, which is unlike any other town or location found in *RDR2*. Not only is it the biggest city on the map, but it is also the *only* city on the map. Saint Denis was designed by *RDR2*'s developer, Rockstar Games Studios, with a purpose, and its atmosphere plays a significant role in how it fulfils this purpose.

Atmosphere is a crucial aspect of creating immersion in video games. It is atmosphere that makes players feel a certain way whilst playing a game through stimulating their senses, and as such, a strong atmosphere can both support and enrich the narrative of a game. Seeing that it is such a powerful tool, it is surprising how little coverage video game atmosphere has received in academia. However, it is not only atmosphere that has suffered neglect in video game studies. Cities in video games are also rarely covered, despite the steady increase of academic interest in video games over the past few decades. This is a gap I aim to fill.

In this thesis, I will examine how Rockstar Games Studio uses atmosphere to influence the player's City Image of Saint Denis. For this research, I will utilize atmospheric and urban theory and apply it to *RDR2*. I will also investigate Rockstar's interpretation of Western history to establish the narrative they have created for *RDR2*, which I will use in tandem with

the atmospheric and urban theories to determine Rockstar's intended City Image of Saint Denis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis will build off of several notable sources on the topics of atmosphere, Western history, City Image, and *RDR2*. As of 2025, academic interest in video game analysis has grown significantly; however, a solid theory surrounding the concepts of atmosphere and City Image in video games remains lacking. There have been a few published theories, such as Andrea Andiloro's "'This must be the place': Understanding video game placeness through atmosphere and the refrain in *Dark Souls*" (*Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 2022), but these have not explored atmosphere in the same manner this thesis aims to. As such, this research will require a new theory. For this, I will adopt Kevin Lynch's theory on the City Image as put forward in *The Image of the City* (1960), for my analysis of the experience of Saint Denis. Lynch discusses how people form their image of a city, which will form the basis of my research. Noteworthy is that I have decided to omit some of his arguments regarding automobiles and highways, as they are not relevant to this research. Working off Lynch's theory, I will then utilize two sources on atmospheric theory: "Urban Atmospheres" by Niels Albertsen (1999) and "Designing Atmospheres: Introduction to Special Issue" by Tim Edensor and Shanti Sumartojo (2015). Albertsen's paper, originally published in 1999, has been translated into English by Bülent Diken in 2019 for the French journal *Ambiances*. In this paper, Albertsen discusses atmosphere and applies it to the urban environment. It is therefore a helpful source for this research. However, as the subject of this research, Saint Denis, is a nineteenth-century city, Albertsen's arguments on modern cities will weigh less on my interpretation. Edensor and Sumartojo's paper was published in *Visual Communication* in 2015. As its title suggests, this paper discusses how atmospheres are designed. This paper is

especially of interest to this thesis, as video games are artificial and their atmospheres are thus fully designed. Whilst they mainly cover designed atmospheres for events or commerciality, this theory can equally be applied to the subject of this paper.

As I will discuss further later, the experience of atmosphere calls for social, cultural, political, or historical context (Edensor and Sumartojo 252). To gain an understanding of these contexts, I have utilized three sources. These are *Red Dead's History* by Dr. Tore C. Olsson (2024), the chapter "Speaking for the Past" by Dr. Charles S. Peterson from the book *The Oxford History of the American West* (1994, chapter 21, 743-770) and "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" as published in 1920 by Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner's thesis is crucial for this thesis, as I will argue that Rockstar's depiction of the American West in *RDR2* is heavily inspired by Turner. His thesis is pivotal to understanding the popular culture surrounding the American West. I will explain Turner's relation to popular culture with Peterson and Olsson. Peterson's chapter highlights the way in which historians mythologized the idea of the American 'Frontier,' and Olsson's book illustrates how this mythologization is reflected in *RDR2*.

Lastly, to understand Rockstar's role in this thesis, I will utilize *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity* by Dr. Esther Wright (2024). This work examines the portrayal of American history in Rockstar's games. It mainly covers the games *Red Dead Redemption*, *RDR2*'s predecessor, and *L.A. Noire*; however, the content within can still be applied to *RDR2*, as Rockstar's approach to adapting history has changed rather little, if at all. *RDR2* is discussed in the epilogue, where Wright argues this very point.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question of this thesis is as follows: How does Rockstar Games Studios use atmosphere to influence the player's City Image of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s Saint Denis? I have divided this question into two sub-questions. The first of which pertains to the way Rockstar has decided to approach *RDR2*, and asks the following: What is the cultural context through which the player-subject will experience *RDR2* and subsequently Saint Denis? The second sub-question pertains to the player's experience of atmosphere in Saint Denis: How does the player form their City Image of Saint Denis through its atmosphere?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To answer these questions, I will utilize three theories regarding the City Image and atmosphere. I will explain these theories and concepts in this section, which will form the framework for my analysis of Saint Denis in chapter two. My first and primary theory will be Kevin Lynch's "The City Image and Its Elements." He theorizes that a city is perceived through a combination of various elements of said city. He differentiates five elements: Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes, and Landmarks. I will briefly explain the concept of these elements before linking them to my next theories on atmosphere. For my theory on atmosphere, I will use the following two theories: Niels Albertsen's "Urban Atmospheres" and Tim Edensor and Shanti Sumartojo's "Designing Atmospheres: Introduction to Special Issue." I will start with Albertsen's theories to explain the general concept of atmosphere and go on to discuss the design of atmosphere with Edensor and Sumartojo. Then, I will apply these theories to form my argument on video game atmospheres.

We must start with Saint Denis as a city. According to Lynch, every city is perceived by its subjects through a City Image. This City Image is constructed through the five elements

I mentioned earlier: Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes, and Landmarks. For the sake of clarity, I will capitalize these elements throughout this thesis. I will use these elements to analyze Saint Denis and what City Image they might invoke in its subjects. I will further explain how I achieved this in the methodology section. However, I must first explain these five elements themselves.

Paths form the infrastructure that lead travelers through the city, often in the form of streets or roads, and are the most important element in the forming of a City Image according to Lynch (49). Paths require a distinct identity to contribute to the City Image, which can be formed through façades, proximity to distinctive features or other elements, and the style of the Path (50-52).

Aside from Paths, streets can also be regarded as Edges in the perceived City Image. Edges are the boundaries between two distinct kinds of areas (62). Examples of Edges include walls, rivers, and notable streets.

Often, the perceived Edges separate various Districts in the City Image. When people perceive a city, they will often do so not as a whole, but as an amalgamation of various Districts (67). Districts are distinct areas inside the city, each having its own recognizable features and characteristics (66). Such features might include class, ethnicity, architecture, function, or theme (67-8).

Another key element in the perception of the City Image is Nodes. However, the meaning of a Node varies on scale (72). Typically, Nodes are junctions of transport channels, such as intersections of roads, or thematic concentrations, such as plazas or squares (72, 75). Nodes are crucial to the way a subject perceives the city, as they require the subject to decide on where to go, forcing them to pause and pay attention to their surroundings (72-3).

However, physical form is of importance to the recognition of the last of Lynch's elements, the Landmark. Landmarks are buildings or locations within a city that capture the

observer's attention, thereby becoming a part of the City Image. They are often used by locals and familiar visitors to map the city (78). In addition to contrast and spatial prominence, association with an activity, location near or on a junction, sounds, smells, and a history or meaning attached to the landmark also influence Landmark recognition (81).

According to Lynch, it is through the combination of these five elements that people form their City Image. Together, these elements can reinforce or detract from one another, making it crucial to examine them in relation to each other (83-4). It is important to note that Lynch argues that most individuals have multiple images of a city, and that these images can change. The image of a city is dependent on the experiences of each individual, such as whether they are a local or a visitor, whether they are familiar with the city or unfamiliar, their social background, and their personal beliefs. Other factors that influence one's City Image may include the time of day, weather, season, or viewpoint (86). Thus, the image of the city, or how one experiences the city, is a subjective experience.

Though Lynch does not name it as such, he does discuss the influence of atmosphere on the perception of the city. Aspects he attributes to boosting an element's recognizability, such as sound, emotion, and smell, as well as settings that might change one's image of the city, such as weather, time, and season, all relate to the experience of atmosphere. Atmosphere is more of an experience, rather than a tangible, perceivable thing. It is, therefore, a difficult subject to explain.

Like the City Image, the experience of atmosphere is subjective. As such, there is no singular way to experience the atmosphere of a particular city. As Albertsen describes: "Atmosphere is something we perceive with all senses, something that affects us emotionally. Sensory observation is not limited to the observation of facts but includes everything we understand about being in an environment. To sense an atmosphere is to be aware of how I, as a body, *feel* in an environment" (3). Atmosphere exists between us and our surroundings; it is

imperceivable, but it is sensed (Albertsen 2-3). Similar to forming a City Image, we use all our senses to sense atmosphere: movement, sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch (Albertsen 4).

The ability to influence our perception shows the great power that atmosphere possesses. However, the amount of power an atmosphere has over subjects can vary greatly. One of the variables that might impact an atmosphere's power, Edensor and Sumartojo argue, is the ability of their designer to attune the atmosphere to the political, cultural, historical, and social settings in which they are formed (252). Whilst atmospheres can form naturally, they can also be purposefully designed by outside powers (Edensor and Sumartojo 253). These outside powers are often architects and urban planners, who aim to use or manipulate elements that make up atmosphere to achieve a certain goal. The elements we discussed previously, such as smell, touch, sound, and movement, can all be altered by these 'designers' to create a particular atmosphere (Edensor and Sumartojo 259). However, there will always be elements of atmosphere that we as humans will never be able to influence. Whilst designers can attempt to alter the element of lighting in atmosphere by creating their own artificial lighting, they will not be able to control the impact of the weather (Edensor and Sumartojo 252). Perhaps the most important element of atmosphere that the designer cannot control is the subject's experience of the atmosphere (Edensor and Sumartojo 252). Atmosphere, whether designed or not, will always be at the mercy of the subjects within them; they are not merely observers, but active participants in the creation of the atmosphere (Edensor and Sumartojo 257). The subjects can influence the atmosphere by responding to it based on their personal background, prior experience, and cultural values, but can also reject a badly designed atmosphere (Edensor and Sumartojo 257).

Now that we understand what atmosphere is and the power it holds over its subjects, we can understand its importance in the forming of a City Image. As Lynch claims, the City Image is susceptible to change (86), and as we learned from Edensor and Sumartojo,

atmosphere has the power to make that change, and that a designed atmosphere has the potential to be stronger than naturally occurring atmospheres (252-3). So, if all the atmospheres in a city were well-designed, it could be argued that the City Image could be influenced by this design.

This is where I want to discuss atmosphere and the City Image in relation to video games. Although these theories on atmosphere are all related to our real-life environment, I would argue that atmospheres can and do exist in the digital world. As of 2025, video games have become more lifelike in terms of graphics and narrative than ever before, making it easier for the subject, or the player, to recognize the various elements that make up an atmosphere when discussing video games. Because as Duff claims in his 2010 paper “On the role of affect and practice in the production of place” (*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, 881-895), cited by Edensor and Sumartojo, “[b]eing receptive to a particular atmosphere [...] ‘is largely an expression of the social ties that form its foundation’, by previous experience, and familiar emotions and sensations that produce feelings of belongingness or otherwise” (258). Familiarity is therefore required for the subject to recognize and respond to an atmosphere, and the graphical and narrative strides in game design would allow for player-subjects to better sense atmosphere in video games. In the case of *RDR2*, we can see on internet forums such as Reddit that players are able to sense its atmosphere (ThatOldClapTrap, Wellhellohno).

These graphical and narrative developments in video games also make it so that the atmospheres that are created for video games have the potential to be particularly powerful. Because video games are created from the very ground up, their designers have power over everything that is a part of their game. Whilst real-life atmosphere designers are dependent on certain elements of their atmosphere, such as weather and time of day (Edensor and Sumartojo 252), video game atmosphere designers are not. In the digital world, designers

have control over every element of their atmosphere, with the exception of the player.

Therefore, depending on the designer's skill, video game atmospheres possess the innate ability to create strong atmospheres.

This is the theoretical framework that I will use for my analysis of the atmosphere(s) of Saint Denis, to establish its City Image. The methods I employed for this analysis will be covered in the next section.

## METHODOLOGY

As *RDR2* is a video game meant to be experienced through play, and atmosphere is meant to be experienced personally, it is significantly more difficult to understand and interpret the atmosphere of Saint Denis through mere text. That is why I have chosen to research this game by playing it myself. Gameplay is the main method I have used for this research, although I have framed my findings within Lynch's theory of the City Image. I have explored the entire city of Saint Denis to identify notable paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks that could be of interest to the player, and documented these in several maps (figures 8, 12, 15, 19, and 21). I have based these maps on both Lynch's theory and my own experience. The theoretical framework explained that the experience of atmosphere and, thereby, our City Image is subjective; a slight personal bias is therefore unavoidable, as it is in all atmospheric research. However, since Saint Denis is a video game city, whatever atmosphere and City Image it evokes is artificially designed by its developers. So aside from my own experience, there are elements of Saint Denis that are designed to influence the player's experience. This is how I approached my research of Saint Denis, and I will now discuss the boundaries of said research.

Further, I have much personal experience with *RDR2*. As of the time of writing this thesis, I have sunk over 800 hours into playing this game, which means that I cannot be

entirely objective. However, I believe that my experience in this game enables me to give a more elaborate and informed interpretation of its atmosphere. This thesis aims to explore the atmospheric qualities of Saint Denis and what these qualities reveal about Saint Denis' place in the overall narrative of *RDR2*, which requires a thorough understanding of the game itself, as well as the experience of playing it. Personal experience is crucial to the sensing of atmosphere, as atmosphere is inherently subjective.

For this research, Chapter 4 and the end of Chapter 3 are of primary interest, as the missions in these Chapters first introduce and heavily feature Saint Denis. I will also consider Saint Denis' random encounters; these are events that the player can interact with or witness inside or around the city, which occur randomly.

Additionally, I have spent much time exploring Saint Denis outside of the Main Missions. I have done so both on foot and horseback. Aside from these mainly used modes of transportation in the game, I have also traversed Saint Denis by carriage and taken the two trolley lines, which are unique to the city and cannot be found elsewhere in the game. During my exploration, I have spent multiple in-game days in Saint Denis, experiencing the city under different weather conditions, lighting, and time of day. To further diversify my exploration and impression of Saint Denis, I have also tried various play styles for my traversal. However, as the player would most likely traverse the world of *RDR2* on horseback, I have decided to weigh this experience heavier than the experience on foot.

As the visual experience plays a crucial role in the forming of a City Image and the experience of its atmosphere, I have also taken a substantial number of in-game screenshots. All these screenshots have been taken from my own gameplay, unless stated otherwise. I will differentiate between two types of screenshots for this research: illustrative and experiencing screenshots. The illustrative screenshots have been made with the help of the mod "Rampage Trainer" by RampageDev. The scenes shown in these screenshots have been altered by

manipulating the weather, time of day, and/or perspective to better display their subject.

Which element has been altered is mentioned in the description. The experiencing screenshots have been made without the use of any modifications and depict their subjects in unaltered settings. It is important for this research to stress the difference between these two types, as the illustrative screenshots do not properly convey the atmosphere and image of Saint Denis; however, they help illustrate the cityscape when not referring to its atmosphere.

These are the methods I have used to conduct the analysis of Saint Denis' atmosphere and City Image, which will be applied in the second chapter of this thesis.

## STRUCTURE

The structure of this thesis is as follows. I have divided my main research question into two sub-questions, which I will answer in two chapters. The first chapter will address my first sub-question regarding the cultural context of *RDR2*'s world, beginning with a brief examination of *RDR2* itself. I will discuss its basic plot as well as the praise it has received for its historical authenticity, which I will then delve deeper into. I will examine how Rockstar approaches history in their Red Dead series and conclude with the historical perspective they have chosen to portray. The second chapter will answer my sub-question regarding how the player experiences Saint Denis. I will start by examining the Main Mission that introduces the city to the player, and continue by analyzing five examples of Lynch's elements that make up the City Image. I will analyze these examples in relation to atmosphere and conclude with how the player might form their City Image. I will then answer my research question in the conclusion, where I will combine the information presented in both chapters.

## Chapter One: The Rockstar Flavor of Western History

To properly examine and understand the experience and atmosphere of Saint Denis, it is crucial to understand the game in which it exists. As we covered in the theoretical framework, cultural and historical background play a major part in the experience of atmosphere and the creation of a City Image. Besides, for an atmosphere to be successful, the subject needs to recognize it in some aspect. In this first chapter, I will go into the context of *RDR2* itself to answer the first sub-question: What is the cultural context through which the player-subject will experience *RDR2* and subsequently Saint Denis?

I aim to answer this question in two parts. First, we will examine the game itself. I will discuss the basic plot of *RDR2*, as well as its reception by critics and players alike, to gain a better understanding of how the game is perceived. The following subsection will then take a critical look at how Rockstar has crafted this perception. Here, I will discuss the supposed realism of *RDR2* by examining its historical references and inspirations, as well as the practices of its developer, Rockstar. In particular, the Frontier Thesis by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) and the perception of the West in popular culture will be discussed, as well as Rockstar's adaptation.

### RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

In the fall of 2018, the highly acclaimed video game developer Rockstar released the sequel to their popular game, *Red Dead Redemption*, aptly named *Red Dead Redemption 2*. It tells the story of the English American outlaw Arthur Morgan, played by Irish American actor Roger Clark. Portrayed as a weathered outdoorsman, Arthur is one of the key members of the notorious Van der Linde gang, led by Dutch van der Linde (Benjamin Byron Davis). The player takes on the role of Arthur Morgan and, through his eyes, the player experiences the life of a gang of outlaws on the run; a dying breed at the dawn of civilization, as the opening

screen proclaims (RDR2, Chapter I, “Outlaws from the West”). The game tells the story of the Van der Linde gang in a 60+ hour, six-chapter epic. After a robbery gone awry in the city of Blackwater, the gang flees from the Pinkertons, a detective agency that has put a significant bounty on their heads. In their attempt to escape the agency, the gang continues to move further East towards the civilization they are trying to escape. Throughout the story, things continue to deteriorate, with distrust and deceit ravaging the gang, resulting in the deaths of multiple members and the inevitable division of the remaining few, in which Arthur takes a stance against the morally deteriorating Dutch. The story closes with the disbanding of the gang as they face one final fight with the Pinkertons. In this last mission, Arthur Morgan lays his life atop a mountain, left to die by his leader.

The game became an instant success, both financially (Dring) and culturally (Metacritic). Since its release in 2018, *RDR2* has garnered a lot of praise and attention for its well-written and impactful story and the realism of its game world. This realism applies to both its historical authenticity and the way it depicts wildlife, characters, and landscapes (Jones 677). Aside from video game enthusiasts and critics, historians have also been vocal in their support for *RDR2*. In a 2021 review for the *Journal of American History*, historian Jeffrey McClurken writes that although the game gives a “mythologized and fictionalized” portrayal of American history, it “also marks a clear evolution in the content of historical video games [...]” (“Red Dead Redemption 2,” 677). McClurken, amongst others, notes that *RDR2* is a significant improvement on previous video games depicting American history, as it implements stories and narratives of those often overlooked in popular history, such as women and Native Americans (677-8).

## THE IDEALIZED WEST

From the many praising reviews of critics to the very first moments of the game itself, it becomes clear that *RDR2* is supposed to be a relatively realistic portrayal of the American West. This interpretation is perpetuated by *RDR2*'s developer, Rockstar Games Studios (Wright 32).

*RDR2* is the latest entry in Rockstar's *Red Dead* series and builds further upon the themes and characterization of its predecessor, *RDR*. During and after the release of *RDR* Rockstar put in special effort to show their audience that their interpretation of the American West was authentic (Wright 3). The studio published several blog posts claiming this authenticity in a series called 'The True West – History that Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption' (Wright 53-60). In these blog posts, Rockstar provided their audience insight into the historical research conducted by their "Internal Research Department" while developing the game and presented this history as factual (Wright 54-5). The arguments for their 'truth,' however, were frequently underpinned by popular media, and overall lacked academic merit (Wright 56-9). However, despite this lack, these posts did work as intended and helped establish Rockstar as a studio that produces historically authentic games.

Rockstar did not publish a similar series of blog posts upon the release of *RDR2* (Wright 222). Since their reputation of being 'historically authentic' had already been established with *RDR*, they would not have to prove themselves a second time. Instead of arguing their case through blog posts, the historical influences of *RDR2* present themselves in the game itself. *RDR2* references several well-known pieces of Western media in both their advertising and in the game's story. For example, Rockstar released a promotional image in 2016 to tease their audience with their upcoming game (figure 2), which bears a strong resemblance to John Sturges' 1960 Western *The Magnificent Seven* (Figure 2, Wright 221). In the game itself, multiple references to the works of American author Mark Twain have also

been noted, particularly in Chapter III (Kyle Kringle, “What’s the Point of Clemens Point? | Red Dead Redemption 2”). Aside from popular media, references to specific figures in American history can also be found. Multiple locations have been named after historical figures, such as Clemens Point in Scarlet Meadows after Mark Twain’s real name, Samuel Clemens (Kyle Kringle, “What’s the Point of Clemens Point? | Red Dead Redemption 2”), and the abandoned town of Colter in Grizzlies West after the American frontiersman John Colter (Kyle Kringle, “The Allegory of the Abandoned Mining Town | Red Dead Redemption 2”). By referencing these pieces of popular media and history, Rockstar aims to prove their understanding of history and their ability to portray it authentically (Wright 23-4).

This shows that Rockstar relies heavily on popular media for their interpretation of the American West in both *RDR* and *RDR2*. Even when referencing historical figures, their role in American culture is often mythologized. Therefore, it can be argued that Rockstar’s interpretation of the American West in *RDR2* is not so much rooted in ‘true’ academic American history, but rather in a specific depiction of the West as seen in American popular media. Scholars such as Jeffrey McClurken, Tore C. Olsson, and Esther Wright argue that the way Rockstar approaches history in *RDR2* closely resembles that of the popular Western perspective. Specifically, the Western perspective as coined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, better known as the ‘Old West’, or the ‘Frontier’ (Olsson 9-19; Wright 31-39).

It is essential to highlight this perspective, and even more so to discuss the man who started it all: Frederick Jackson Turner. It was Turner, who by releasing his 1893 paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” changed the way we perceive the American West even to this day (Peterson 743-5). In this paper, he argues that it is the Frontier that has shaped the history of the United States. It is the pioneering of this Frontier that differentiates the Western American from the European—and even from the Eastern American (Turner 2-4). Turner also presents an image of the pioneer that is not far removed from the typical

American Hero formed in American literature throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Davy Crockett (Butler 741-4). Turner's pioneer is a man who thrives in the wilderness and forges not only his own home but his destiny (Turner 18-22). It is immediately apparent that Turner's Frontier Thesis revolves around the white man's experience. Notably missing are mentions of other classes, races, or genders; individuals and themes that played a significant role in the Western expansion. This male-centric view of Western history is therein not just flawed, but it is also, as Olsson puts it: "[not] correct, coherent, or anything but hot air" (16).

Nevertheless, Turner's Frontier Thesis has since become widely influential. Though it has had its critics from the very start, these critiques have never been able to overshadow its appeal. In his chapter "The Idea of the West," Olsson claims that this can be attributed to what he calls the 'great American identity crisis' during the turn of the twentieth century (16-17). The ideas presented by Turner about American exceptionalism and the glory of pioneering through the Great Outdoors heavily resonated with a growing crowd of white men who thought they were not only losing their worth, but their masculinity due to the rapid urbanization in their time (Olsson 16-17; Peterson 744-5, 751). As the majority, if not all, of the power in the United States lay in the hands of these middle-class white men during the turn of the twentieth century, it is then perhaps no great surprise that they perpetuated the ideas that affirmed their own, being Turner's.

It has taken until around the 1980s, with scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick and Donald Worster, who pointed out the many faults of Turner and his followers, that the perspective on Western history and the 'Frontier' started to shift (Peterson 767). That does not mean, however, that this 'Turnerian' perspective does not still linger in contemporary popular culture. Such is the case with *RDR2*, which at its very base level still holds some Turnerian ideals. In his chapter, Olsson claims that perhaps Turner's name ought to be displayed

amongst the game's credits, and when taking a good look at *RDR2*'s visuals, narratives, and atmospheres, one will understand why (16).



Fig. 1. Promotional poster for the 1960 film *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges). Source:

<https://www.vintagemovieposters.co.uk/shop/the-magnificent-seven-movie-poster/>.



Fig. 2. Promotional image for *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018, Rockstar Games Studios).

Source: <https://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2/downloads>

## CONCLUSION

This examination of *RDR2*'s cultural context has shown that its portrayal of American Western History is heavily inspired by Turner's Frontier Thesis, which makes *RDR2* a portrayal of popular rather than academic history. *RDR2* is therefore not as historically authentic as Rockstar claims to be. Instead, the player will experience the world of *RDR2* through Rockstar's carefully designed mythology of the West. *RDR2* therein idealizes the frontier, exploration, and nature, whilst rejecting modernity and urbanization.

## Chapter Two: The Eighth Wonder of the Civilized World

In this chapter, we finally turn to Saint Denis itself. With the understanding of how atmosphere is designed and experienced in relation to the City Image, this chapter will answer the second sub-question: How does the player form their City Image of Saint Denis through its atmosphere?

The first sub-section will discuss the player's intended first impression of Saint Denis. This will be done through an analysis of the last objective of the Chapter III Main Mission "The Battle of Shady Belle". Then, in the next section, I will apply my theoretical framework to the city of Saint Denis and explore five examples of Lynch's elements. For each example, I will examine how the player senses its (relation to) atmosphere. This chapter will conclude with the City Image that the player forms based on these findings.

### A REAL CITY, THE FUTURE

If strictly following the Main Missions of *RDR2*, the player first encounters Saint Denis during the final mission of Chapter III "The Battle of Shady Belle". For the last objective of this mission, Arthur must travel with Dutch, the leader of his gang, to Saint Denis to find a man named Angelo Bronte. Bronte has kidnapped the son of gang member John Marston, Jack, and is holding him at his house in Saint Denis.

For this mission, the player must first ride to Saint Denis during which they can overhear a conversation between Arthur and Dutch. In this conversation, Dutch refers to Saint Denis as "the eighth wonder of the civilized world" in a slightly mocking tone. Once the player reaches the city, a cutscene (a cinematic scene in which the player has no control) will play. In this cutscene, several shots of Saint Denis are shown to the player, accompanied by a somber soundtrack (figures 3-5). During these shots, Arthur and Dutch have a short exchange. Arthur starts with a soft sigh before he says, "Big cities..." he sighs again before continuing,

“They’re...” Dutch will then interject with the suggestion, “Always repellent?” The cinematic camera will show Arthur nodding in agreement as he says, “Exactly.” Dutch gives a small nod, indicating that both men agree on the matter. The cutscene then shows both men going their separate ways to find Bronte, and ends with the title card for Chapter IV, as seen in figure 6.

Once the cutscene starts, the player immediately notices the somber tone. The soundtrack, composed by Mario Batkovic (“There She Is...A Real City, The Future,” 2019), features brass instruments and is deep and droning, with a sinister underlying tone. The music reaches its climax during the first cinematic shot of Saint Denis (figure 3). In this shot, the player sees the skyline of Saint Denis, featuring industrial buildings and smokestacks releasing black smoke into the air (figure 3). The second shot shows a closer view of the industry under the same darkened sky (figure 4). This shot also displays signs with company names (figure 4). In another shot, the player sees Arthur and Dutch from behind, looking toward Saint Denis (figure 5), their ‘Western-ness’ visually clashing with the city’s industrial scene. The cutscene ends with Chapter IV’s title card, which shows Saint Denis’ industry in the background (figure 6).

The music paired with the dialogue, visuals, and cultural context discussed in chapter one makes the atmosphere of this cutscene unmistakably bleak. As this presentation of Saint Denis comes in the form of a cutscene, the player has no agency in this instance; they cannot respond or influence the designed atmosphere, leaving them only with the information the game has provided. As such, the player’s first introduction to Saint Denis is dark and somber, as the game forces the player’s attention primarily to the polluting industry of the city. This cutscene and title card form the player’s first impression of Saint Denis and will influence the player’s perception of the city going forward.



Fig. 3. The first cinematic shot of Saint Denis shown during the last cutscene of “The Battle of Shady Bell” (Chapter III). Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).



Fig. 4. The second cinematic shot of Saint Denis shown during the last cutscene of “The Battle of Shady Bell” (Chapter III). Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).



Fig. 5. The last cinematic shot of Saint Denis shown during the last cutscene of “The Battle of Shady Bell” (Chapter III). Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).



Fig. 6. Title card for Chapter IV, shown upon finishing “The Battle of Shady Bell” (Chapter III). Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).

## THE ELEMENTS OF A CITY

Upon finishing “The Battle of Shady Belle,” the player is left in Saint Denis. They have the choice to either continue playing the next Main Mission, “The Joys of Civilization,” or to explore the city. Though, of course, the player is free to explore the city at any time. Whilst exploring the city, the player will form their own City Image of Saint Denis based on the various elements they encounter.

Saint Denis is the biggest city in *RDR2*. It is significantly larger than any of the other towns in the game and has a large number of Paths the player can use to navigate the city. Whereas most of *RDR2*'s towns feature dirt roads, Saint Denis has several cobbled roads, amongst which is its broad main street, named Frontier Street. Most of Saint Denis' streets are named, which cannot be said for other towns in *RDR2* (Figures 7 and 8). Paths are a crucial element in how the player-subject forms City Images (Lynch 49). An example of such a Path is the previously mentioned Frontier Street (figure 9-11). Frontier Street is Saint Denis' main road, along which players can find impressive architecture and modern amenities. It is also one of the busiest streets in Saint Denis, and the player will find many NPCs traversing this Path that they have to pay attention to. The sounds heard around Frontier Street also add to this ‘busy’ feeling. As such, the player might find Frontier Street to be more stimulating than they are used to in other *RDR2* towns. At night, the player might notice that Frontier Street is lit with white, electrical lighting (figure 10), which is rarely found outside Saint Denis. All of these elements create an atmosphere of unfamiliarity for the player, who has never experienced anything similar in the game.

In addition to Paths, the player will also use Edges to shape their City Image. They might find several Edges in Saint Denis, one of which is the bayou branching from the Kamassa River north of the Mansion District (Figure 12-14). This Edge separates the wealthiest area of Saint Denis from the wilderness of Bayou Nwa, creating two vastly

different atmospheres. As such, it lacks its own unique atmosphere. Instead, this Edge enhances the atmosphere of both areas by showcasing the stark difference between Saint Denis and the surrounding land.

The player can sense these different areas and subdivide them into districts. As mentioned, Saint Denis has several of these districts, as can be seen in the map in figure 15. The smallest, yet perhaps most introverted, is the Chinatown district along Courtenay Street (figures 16-18). In this District, the player can notice how it differs from its immediate surroundings. Whilst the District consists of only a few buildings, the ornamentation of these buildings is unlike any other in Saint Denis. Similarly, this is the only District in which the player can find unnaturally colored lighting at night (figure 18). This District also contains a large number of Chinese immigrant NPCs, who speak Cantonese amongst themselves. Whilst traversing the Chinatown District, the player will also hear ambient classical music. These elements set Chinatown apart from the other Districts of Saint Denis, but also from the player. The player may experience a sense of otherness in this District, as it represents a culture that Arthur has not yet encountered in *RDR2*.

The player will also be able to sense various Nodes throughout Saint Denis (figure 19). One of these is the junction of Milyonne Avenue and Rue de la Diligent, which gives the player the choice between four Paths (figure 20). No matter which direction the player arrives from, this Node allows for four different experiences: the player might go north into the Rural District, west into the Mansion District, east into The Old Quarter, Market District, and St. Francis, or south into the Commercial District. It is therefore one of the most important Nodes in Saint Denis. The atmosphere of this Node is therefore difficult to describe, as it is the junction of several distinct atmospheres. However, it is not the atmosphere that forms this Node, but its function. The player needs to decide where they want to go and what they want to experience.

When visiting Saint Denis, the player may have some difficulty navigating it for the first (few) times. Those unfamiliar with a city tend to use Landmarks to navigate the cityscape (Lynch 78), and players new to Saint Denis can find several Landmarks to orient themselves (figure 21). An example of a Landmark players might use is Saloon La Bastille (figures 22-25), number 40 on the map in figure 21. This building is situated at the corner of Frontier and St. Nicolas Street and is most likely one of the first buildings the player will visit, as it is the starting location for “The Joys of Civilization” (Chapter IV). La Bastille is the wealthier saloon out of the two present in Saint Denis, which is reflected in both its interior and exterior. The clientele of La Bastille is well-dressed, and the furniture is equally luxurious (figure 25). Inside the saloon, the player can rent a room, take a bath, buy drinks or food, and play poker. Outside, the saloon can be easily recognized by its Creole architecture and red metal gallery, which is illuminated at night. Similarly, the player can hear music and chatter coming from inside the saloon at night. The combination of these elements can make the player feel at odds with themselves; whilst it is a nicely decorated saloon, the experience of La Bastille could be sensed as too ‘highbrow’ for Arthur to enjoy. Like Chinatown, La Bastille can give the player a feeling of otherness.

To analyze the City Image of Saint Denis, it is crucial to examine the five elements in relation to one another (Lynch 83-4). It is the combination of these elements that decides how the player forms their City Image, even if they contradict one another. Whilst the player might enjoy the atmosphere of some elements, they may find unease in others. It is this interplay, however, that grounds the City Image in reality. If the player were to experience all atmospheres in the same manner, there would be no Edges, Districts, or Nodes, and therefore would not be able to form a City Image.

As discussed in the previous sections, the player *is* able to sense diverse types of atmospheres in Saint Denis. The examples I provided are just a few of many, and all these

elements interact with each other in various ways. As sensing and interpreting of atmospheres is subjective, players' experiences of these elements may vary.



Fig. 7. Tiling on the sidewalk to indicate street names, corner of Saint Nicolas Street and Rue de la Diligent. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (weather and time of day).

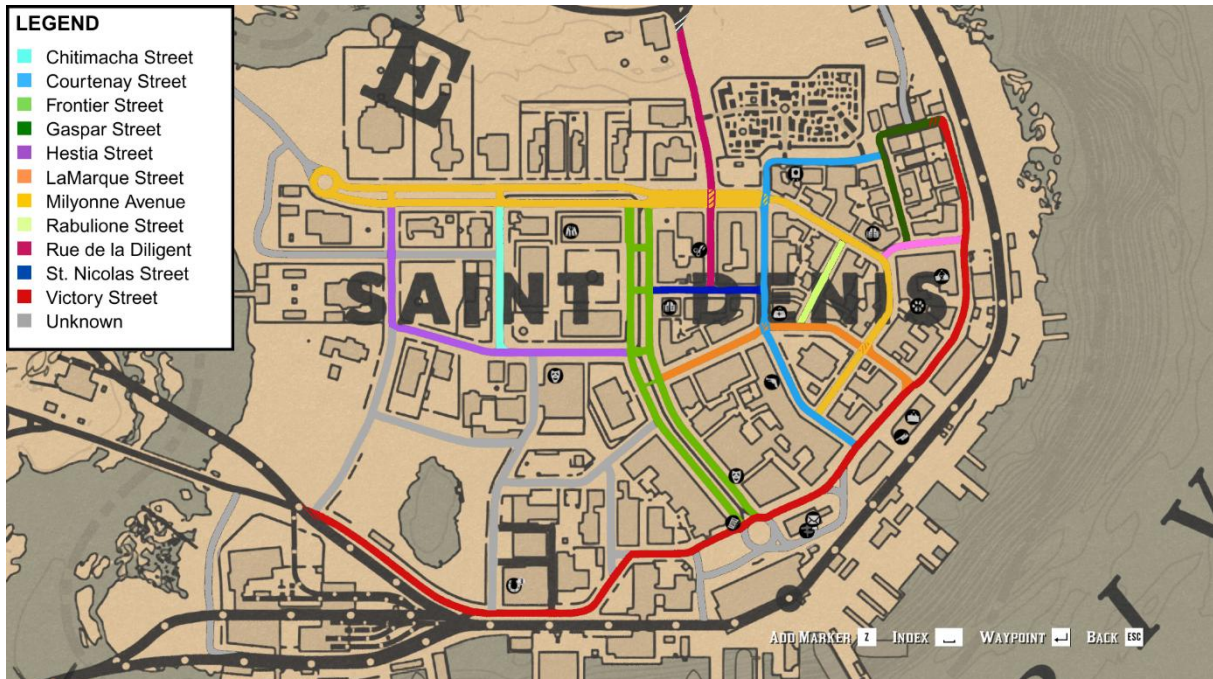


Fig. 8. Street map of Saint Denis with identifying legend. Own work on personal screenshot.



Fig. 9. Sight on Frontier Street as seen from Milyonne Avenue. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (weather and time of day).



Fig. 10. Frontier Street at night as seen from Milyonne Avenue. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Experiencing.



Fig. 11. Sight on Frontier Street as seen from the north. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Experiencing.



Fig. 12. Map with Edges of Saint Denis. Own work on personal screenshot.



Fig. 13. The bayou north of the Mansion District. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (perspective).



Fig. 14. The bayou north of the Mansion District. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Experiencing.

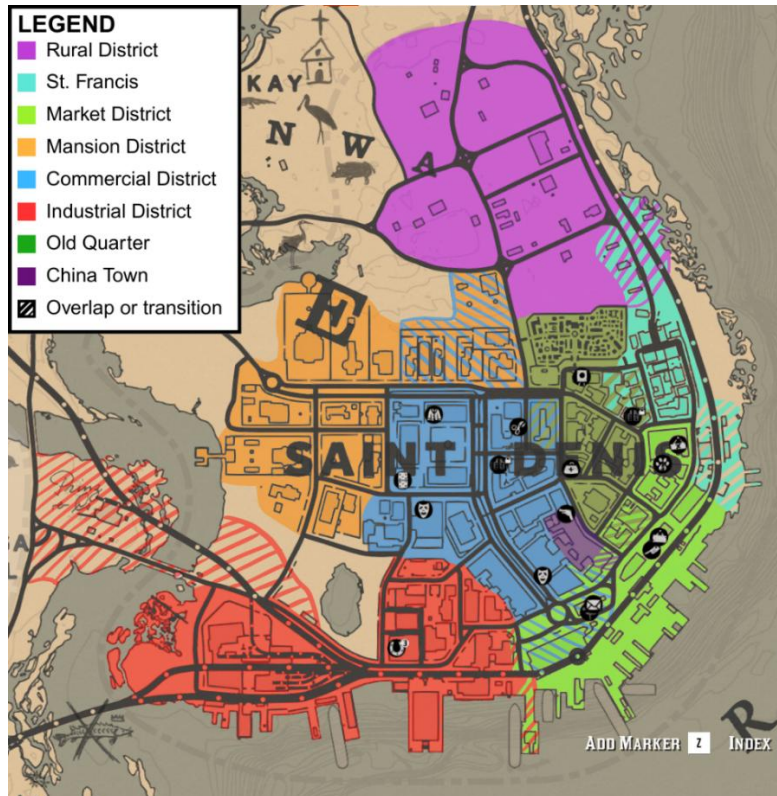


Fig. 15. District map of Saint Denis with identifying legend. Own work on personal screenshot.



Fig. 16. The Lushunkou restaurant along Courtenay Street. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (weather and time of day).



Fig. 17. The Gunsmith along Courtenay Street. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (weather and time of day).



Fig. 18. Chinatown at night. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).

Experiencing.



Fig. 19. Node map of Saint Denis. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).



Fig. 20. Junction of Milyonne Avenue and Rue de la Diligent. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (perspective).

- LEGEND**
- |                           |                                    |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Mayor's mansion         | 25 Fontana Theatre                 |
| 2 Stone decorative bridge | 26 Lushunkou Restaurant            |
| 3 Hotel la Licorne        | 27 Sign                            |
| 4 Welcome sign            | 28 General store and Butcher       |
| 5 Angelo Bronte's mansion | 29 Worksite                        |
| 6 Park                    | 30 Church o.t. Holy Blessed Virgin |
| 7 City Hall               | 31 Gunsmith                        |
| 8 Q. Harris Memorial Hall | 32 Doctor                          |
| 9 Pink mansion            | 33 Market                          |
| 10 Empty park             | 34 Doyle's Tavern                  |
| 11 Garbage patch          | 35 Small church                    |
| 12 Entrance bridge        | 36 Photo studio                    |
| 13 Prinze & Co. Meat      | 37 Gallows                         |
| 14 Cornwall               | 38 Cemetary                        |
| 15 Horse stables          | 39 Barber                          |
| 16 Théâtre Râleur         | 40 Saloon La Bastille              |
| 17 Police station         | 41 Statue of Guincy Harris         |
| 18 Courthouse             | 42 Tailor                          |
| 19 Metal gate             | 43 Sugar factory                   |
| 20 Metal gate             | 44 Sign                            |
| 21 Train station          | 45 Gazebo with dominoes            |
| 22 Spaldings              | ■ Gameplay related                 |
| 23 Statue                 | ■ Environmental                    |
| 24 Post office            | ■ Architectural                    |



Fig. 21. Landmark map of Saint Denis with identifying legend. Own work on personal screenshot.



Fig. 22. Saloon La Bastille along Frontier Street. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Illustrative (perspective, weather, and time of day).



Fig. 23. Saloon La Bastille at night, along Frontier Street. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Experiencing.



Fig. 24. Saloon La Bastille along Frontier Street. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Experiencing.



Fig. 25. Interior of Saloon La Bastille during the day. Personal screenshot of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). Experiencing.

## CONCLUSION

The end of “The Battle of Shady Belle” and the subsequent elements and atmospheres the player encounters form their City Image of Saint Denis. The atmospheres the player experiences in Saint Denis are often othering or otherwise disorienting. The city is busy, diverse, and commercial, which contrasts sharply with the rest of the *RDR2* world both visually and in terms of gameplay. The experience of Saint Denis is different from that of other towns the player has come across so far. The player will sense the hostile atmosphere of industrialism, the overstimulating atmosphere of the commercial district, and the great social disparity between the various sides of town. As such, the player will form a City Image of Saint Denis that reflects this: a city unfamiliar to them, in which they do not belong and do not want to belong.

### Conclusion: The Very Image of Civilization

This thesis has explored how *RDR2* approaches Western history and how the player senses the City Image of Saint Denis. It asked how Rockstar uses atmosphere to influence the player's perception of Saint Denis. This question will be answered in this concluding chapter by linking the findings of the preceding two chapters.

In the first chapter, research has shown that, whilst Rockstar claims historical authenticity, *RDR2* is based upon mythologized Western history as popularized by Turner. The narrative of *RDR2* follows Turner's ideals of masculinity, exceptionalism, and the rejection of urban life. The second chapter shows that the player senses atmospheres in Saint Denis that are disorienting or othering. These atmospheres affect the elements through which the player forms their City Image of Saint Denis, leading them to sense the city as a place they do not belong.

By combining these findings, it can be concluded that the othering experience of Saint Denis is intentional. By the time the player reaches Saint Denis at the end of Chapter III, they will have been exposed to *RDR2*'s narrative and Turnerian ideals for long enough to accept its presented atmosphere as is. With the cutscene at the end of "The Battle of Shady Bell," the game presents Saint Denis in line with the narrative it has pushed up until that moment: that urbanization and modern civilization are dangerous, and that man should turn to nature instead. This narrative is perpetuated by the designed atmosphere of Saint Denis, as the player senses its atmosphere as othering and disorienting. The player uses the atmosphere to sense the elements of a city, to in turn shape their City Image. As the player senses these atmospheres based on cultural and historical context, they will draw upon the narrative presented in *RDR2* for this context. The narrative of *RDR2* rejects modern civilization; the player senses this in the atmosphere of Saint Denis and forms their City Image accordingly.

In video games, the only element of atmosphere that the designer cannot control is the player; however, as this research has shown, designers of video game atmospheres can influence the player's perception of atmosphere through narrative. Thus, it can be concluded that Rockstar uses atmosphere in Saint Denis to support the narrative of *RDR2*.

This thesis has covered only a snippet of *RDR2*, and to fully understand its atmosphere and narrative would require more research. However, this research has shown that atmosphere can be a powerful narrative tool in video games. Atmosphere can support video game narratives and shape players' perceptions of locations and events in the game, which makes it a shame that the subject is often overlooked. Currently, the available theory on video game atmosphere makes researching it more difficult than it needs to be. It requires a good understanding of and personal experience with the video game in question, as well as a strong theoretical framework. Whilst it is difficult to approach a topic as subjective and under-researched as video game atmosphere, this thesis shows that it is not impossible to do so. *RDR2* exemplifies how atmosphere can be designed to support a narrative, showing not only the skill of its designers but also the impact of its narrative on players.

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