

Reviews (Games)

Deus Lo Vult: The Board Game of Rampage, Betrayal, and Agony [board game].

Designer: Michael Badelin. Kiev, Ukraine: Hiatus Games, 2020.

Hiatus Games saw the difficulty of obtaining the interest of customers in a prosperous yet replete board game market and answered by practicing their blackletter script, taking out their bagpipes, donning chaperons, and going on a Crusade. The Kickstarter campaign asked the public to help fund the initial development and printing of *Deus Lo Vult*, a game for “two to four treacherous and greedy marauders and murderers” and inspired by medieval European manuscripts and drawing from “military games played by the medieval aristocracy all over the world” such as *shogi* and *xianqi*. The campaign featured demonstration videos with music from Vox Vulgaris’s neo-medieval album *The Shape of Medieval Music to Come*, the illustrators’ hand-painting mockups of the final pieces, and livestreams of the creators dressed in medieval re-enactors’ costumes. The developers even explained that their chosen name, *Deus Lo Vult*, derives from the vulgar Latin that people in Western Christendom were more familiar with than the classical Latin *Deus vult* of the pope that has since been associated with the First Crusade. The creators promised an easily learned rule set with language-independent assets and an adjustable gameplay complexity. The passion of the artists and designers shone through their frequent written and video updates during the two years of setbacks and a pandemic that seemed to come straight from the game’s “Divine Will” mechanic. The game finally reached customers at the height of the worldwide Coronavirus lockdowns. It succeeded with its aims to be approachable and artistically beautiful, but the product was delivered with deep flaws, likely due to pandemic-related woes.

The artwork and aesthetics drew me and many others to this game, standing out from the many medieval fantasy and historically inspired games through its pastiche of illuminated manuscripts. The creators filled the initial campaign and their website’s purchasing platform with bold illustrations of vibrant reds and blues atop fields of aged parchment and the stark, thick typeface reminiscent of Gothic texts. The designers showed the respect and admiration for the medieval style, even though the final product would be created entirely through digital means. They promised the game would be delivered with gilded accents in homage to the illuminated manuscripts that served as inspiration. The stylistic choice of emulating long-ago mastered artforms genuinely shows in the delivered game. The board and pieces are not intended to be admired merely when the game is played but, rather, are designed to be displayed. The creators knew many would purchase the game just for the artwork, so the backside of the game board also serves as a 22-inch by 29-inch gold-foil-laminated art piece with the names of the first thousand Kickstarter backers and four resplendent battle scenes depicting every unit in the game.

Outside of the display-worthy game board, the artists designed each unit token and game piece with incomparable attention to detail. The illustrators ornamented almost everything, even in places where they could have gotten away with simpler designs. The colored backgrounds of the tokens and square-pattered board all contain accents: quatrefoils for the Crusaders, hatching reminiscent of plowed fields for the Popular Crusade, and crescent moons for the Saracen forces—to name just a few of the many small details. Many tokens even contain nods to their historical origins within the artwork. The mounted knight of the Templar army shows two soldiers on horseback, referencing the Order’s seal and the contemporary legend of the poverty of the first Templars, that there was only one steed for every two members. The weakened side of El Cid shows the dead knight held upright and tied to his horse with rope. Both sides of Philip IV of France’s token are unique, his undamaged side showing Templars burning at the stake, in reference to his suppression of the Order, and his weakened side depicting the hunting accident from the weeks preceding his death. The Assassin tile also contains a subtle reference to the etymological background of the unit’s name. The background does not show the crescent moon like other Saracen units, but rather marijuana leaves referencing the Arabic word *hashshashin*, a user of hashish. Looking for the small details or playful interpretation of historical accounts and legend makes for an extremely enjoyable medieval Easter egg hunt.

The artwork for *Deus Lo Vult* draws its inspiration from twelfth- through fifteenth-century manuscripts. The game heavily borrows from the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, a text specified by the creators, which is imitated wonderfully. However, the artists’ style carries a touch of irreverent Terry Gilliam cartooning and Monty Python surreal humor. Thankfully this diffuses worries that the game glorifies the Crusades or condones the recent White nationalist co-option of “Deus vult.” The game’s art provides a platform for an aesthetically pleasing game that gives players the occasional chuckle at the somewhat sophomoric humor so lovingly illustrated on a gilded board. Each Crusader and Saracen warrior token has two sides: the front shows the unit intact and ready for battle, while the reverse shows its wounded state, often with cheeky depictions of how the unit has suffered their injuries. The wounded states on the Popular-Crusade tiles are especially humorous. Some units seem to have suffered their wounds not from enemies but, rather, from their own drunken looting. Unlike other armies with proper war elephants, the Popular Crusaders have constructed their own straw monster with a trumpet for a trunk and manned by foolhardy peasants. For those who have seen the angelic trumpeters from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, you can guess where the instrument ends up on the unit’s weakened side. During the Coronavirus lockdowns, Hiatus Games released a free print-and-play version of the game with all the soldiers wearing blue surgical masks, even over the knights’ great helms. The company’s social media pages have even gone “meme-dieval,” illustrating popular memes as if they can be found in an ancient text. This

conglomeration of ancient inspiration and modern sensibilities creates a gorgeous pastiche of medieval manuscript art.

However, some issues remain with the artwork. Ironically, the beautiful and bright graphics can make the game difficult to play. The amount of small detail in every aspect of the board and tokens creates an environment where each individual element demands attention, creating a chaotic arena where it is difficult to comprehend the board's state at a glance. Though ambitious, the playability suffers due to just how much each piece is designed. Additionally, of the four armies that come in the box, all the Crusader units are color-changed clones of the other kingdoms. The artwork between knights, soldiers, and ruffians remains largely the same, except for some minor differences such as the color of and elements on the soldiers' livery. The optional armies of the Popular Crusade, the Knights Templar, and Outremer (the Crusader states) receive unique units and artwork, but they must be purchased separately. On all these units, the laminated metal foil colors of bronze, silver, and gold can be hard to differentiate under some lighting conditions. If the gilded areas had been used merely for accents, this would not be an issue. However, some areas decorated in foil differentiate the unit's in-game point cost. The gold and bronze colors both have a reddish hue, so they are especially hard to differentiate. To make matters worse, the special abilities of some units are hidden on the wounded side, meaning players often have to look on both sides of a token to use their armies most efficiently. Additionally, the Purgatory board space is genuinely disturbing. While not inherently negative—as the depictions of infernal torture remain appropriate for the theme, the illustrations may put the players in an uncomfortable spot if the tokens are going to be used as a learning tool or conversation starter on the Crusades. Appropriately, Purgatory may cause discomfort.

Deus Lo Vult gameplay can be learned in just a few minutes. Over three rounds, up to four players control the Crusading armies of France, England, Castile, and the Holy Roman Empire as they loot the coins from the four City Quarters located at the center of the board. For every turn, players have seven actions they can use with their Crusader armies around the board or utilize the non-player Saracen defenders. Players may choose as many actions between their Crusader units or the shared Saracens as they want, but they cannot return to their Crusader army during that turn, once an action with a Saracen unit is taken. Attacking a City Quarter yields one of its coins to the sacking unit, which the unit must then return to its army treasury. Soldiers may not kill or wound other Crusaders, but they are encouraged to rob one another.

Players may only move "armies" of two or more tokens who touch orthogonally. A lone token cannot be moved until it touches one or more allies. Armies move by "leap-frogging" one unit from one end of the connected tokens to the other, but players must be careful where they put a soldier. Each token cannot touch more than two allies. If it does, it is caught in a stampede and sent to Purgatory.

Units that are sent to Purgatory, both Saracen and Crusader, are unavailable to be fielded by the player until the realm fills. Each new unit slides the old ones along the track until there is no more space. The unit pushed off the track by a fresh soul arriving in Purgatory is replaced in its owner's reserves pile and can return to its owner's army camp. Players are limited in the size of their armies by a unit's point cost (for example, knights are three points, pavisers and archers are two points, and untrained soldiers are one point) until a previously agreed-upon limit is reached. Though the four basic Crusader armies are symmetric and contain the same units, allowing players to choose their army composition creates flexibility and interesting asymmetric playing styles: one player might use expensive elite troops to assault the city, another might try to overwhelm by using a large number of peasants, and another might forego movement to make use of the Saracens to harass opponents. Each token depicts its possible actions which depend on its orientation. Each orthogonal edge shows what it may do on that side. Players must pay close attention to unit placement, as units cannot change their orientation, and if a friendly unit is accidentally overcrowded by allies, it will be sent to Purgatory.

The base game is relatively simple and engaging, leaving the players to make tough tactical decisions. Players are given tools to use more complicated armies, a campaign to string games together in a metanarrative, or thematic Divine-Will cards to represent the waxing and waning of luck through the injection of random events. Outremer, Knights-Templar, and Popular-Crusade factions introduce thematic asymmetric armies with new abilities. For example, the units of the Popular Crusade are generally less trained and armored, however, their units are less expensive and more eager to loot the Holy Land. Therefore, they can carry two or more coins after ransacking a City Quarter, while most units can only carry one. Each of the add-ons contributes more complexity to the base game and creates gripping asymmetric battles. This especially holds true in four-player games when each player has a unique army composition with its own strengths and weaknesses. Though playable with other player counts, the game is best with four Crusaders. Two-player games are satisfactory, but the players rarely clash with each other, leaving the board feeling somewhat empty. Three players could be interesting, but I have yet to find a method of ensuring that two players do not simply ally against the third.

Despite the simplicity of the rules, the rulebook contains several glaring issues. While not the worst of the games I have played, *Deus Lo Vult's* rulebook causes some frustrating moments. Foremost among these is the level of ambiguity in the wording for key parts of the gameplay. Set-up is especially confusing. While the orthogonal orientation of some tokens is easy to figure out, the placement of the Saracen and City Quarter tokens is not explained well. Most simply use a picture to demonstrate, but that leaves a lot to interpretation. Other sections, such as that for movement, are equally irritating. The game omits certain elements, such as that Saracens can move across the City Quarter tokens while Crusaders cannot, or an

explanation how Crusader tokens enter the board once play has begun. These important rules are left for a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) document on a third-party website. While not difficult to find, I would deem this document to be mandatory as it also corrects errors in the rulebook’s explanatory pictures. Several egregious oversights have managed to find their way into the final printed version. While some of these errors could be due to translation or complications with working in the creators’ and printers’ respective languages, it remains uncertain how these large oversights could have made it to print. The FAQ document makes frequent mention of “house rules,” which are rules not printed in the rulebook but which players agree to follow. It seems that the creators intended to produce a highly customizable game with groups able to pick between a multitude of optional rules. The full blank lined page labeled “Home Rules” is evidence of this. Unfortunately, this creates confusion. Instead, the game should have defined the base rules and then included a section outlining alternate or optional directions the designers wished to include.

The price of the game remains its most difficult aspect to justify, but there are some workarounds. Hiatus Games currently lists *Deus Lo Vult* for \$99 on its website, and the bundle containing the game and all current add-ons (including Outremer, Popular-Crusade, and Templar armies, among others) costs \$150. If the optional additions are purchased (for example, after first acquiring the base game to see if the extras are worth the cost), each costs \$20 individually or \$80 as a package deal. Even if one desires the game just for its artwork, the price tag is not exorbitant for the material, but it remains unaffordable for a majority of those who would be interested. Although *Deus Lo Vult* is rare for its art style and theme, there are less expensive and more polished historically-inspired medieval-themed board games produced by reputable publishers on an already glutted board game market (*A Feast for Odin*, *878 Vikings: Invasions of England*, and *Blood Rage* are just a few of these). Additionally, as the first customers were receiving their boxes, Hiatus Games announced that a second edition would arrive to Kickstarter in the following months. This suggests that the new game they had just delivered was already out-of-date and that customers had fronted the money for a prototype rather than a finished product. The creators later explained (in a forum on a third-party website) that this new edition would not be the grand gilded Crusade of the first, but a lighter and less expensive version with a more substantial rulebook. The recession and lockdowns caused by the Coronavirus placed the company in a tough situation when their reserves were depleted. They could not lower the price of the box, and many who had previously been interested in the product could no longer afford such a luxury during the apogee of a pandemic. However, for those who are interested, there are less expensive ways to play the game. The print-and-play version is available for free on the Hiatus Games website and will only require an investment of time and printing costs to set up. Additionally, *Deus Lo Vult* can be downloaded as a mod on *Tabletop Simulator* for PC. Not only is its \$20

price tag more affordable, but Crusaders can play together in the safety of their own respective homes without fear of a twenty-first-century Plague.

As much as I love *Deus Lo Vult*, there is a fair number of negatives. If approached from the perspective that the product is to be played in competition against others as a game, it would be difficult to justify any hearty recommendation except to those deeply into board-gaming as a hobby. Thankfully, the print-and-play version is easily found on the publisher's website and costs only paper, ink, and time. If consideration of the game elements is removed, and it is approached as a collection of art, *Deus Lo Vult* succeeds to an exceptional degree. No amount of detail has been spared in the creation of an opulent gilded Crusade. Even the cardboard box containing the game is covered in characterful illustrations and its remaining negative space decorated in gold and silver-foil-accented intertwining vines. Its appearance makes it obvious that thousands of hours went into imagining, planning, illustrating, and publishing a loving yet irreverent tribute to a long lost artform. Even though I may not play the game frequently, its box will have a spot on my shelves for years to come.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Gareth O'Neal of Anaheim, California, earned his two B.A. degrees in French and Comparative Literature (2015), as well as his M.A. in English (2018) and his M.A. in History (2020), at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He also served as an editor for the 2019 volume of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History."

A Plague Tale: Innocence [single-player action-adventure horror stealth video game].

Developer: Asobo Studio. Platforms: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Microsoft Windows/PC; Amazon Luna. Release date: May 14, 2019.

You are fifteen years old in the fourteenth century, hunting with your father in the woods of Aquitaine. Crouching down in your short red tunic, you sneak up on the unsuspecting animal and pull out your slingshot. The boar darts away, with your dog in hot pursuit, but a darkness covers the forest, forcing you to flee to your manor. Could it be the invading English, the Black Plague, or something worse? This is the scenario in which players find themselves in this seventeen-chapter game. Developed by the French Asobo Studio, known for turning Pixar movies like *Ratatouille* (2007) and *Wall-E* (2008) into games and for teaming up with Ubisoft Entertainment to create *The Crew* (2014), *The Crew 2* (2018), and *Monopoly Plus* (2014), *A Plague Tale: Innocence* portrays terror and juxtaposes the shadows of death with the light of fire. The game is rated "M" (mature) for this reason, but also for blood, violence, and strong language.

The player, Amicia de Rune, journeys back home with her father. Amicia is the primary protagonist of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, a teenage noble who is living a relatively peaceful life in southwestern France. Her family inhabits a grand château, accurate for the later Middle Ages. Amicia's servants are friendly, her parents fair, but her mother, while working meticulously on her alchemy, keeps Amicia away from her sick little brother Hugo. The Inquisition arrives suddenly, killing without mercy. Lord Nicolas, encased in thick black and gold armor and

wearing spiked steel boots, draws his extra-large sword from his back, slays Amicia's father, Robert de Rune and captures her mother. Amicia quickly needs to unite with her brother before the same fate befalls them. She runs into Hugo's room and finds him, scared, cowering in a corner. Amicia takes his hand and lunges behind a desk. It is here that the player begins what will continue throughout the rest of the game: stealth and puzzle missions, accompanied by a little brother. It will be smart of the player to traverse the world by sneaking around enemies, because being caught will result in a quick death. You must be witty rather than strong to master the successive levels.

The characters have to face the ultimate challenge, namely the zombie rats of the Black Plague! This transforms the game from a simple medieval fantasy to a game of alternate history. After discovering a town that is infected, full of scared citizens and quarantined houses with a white "X" plastered on their doors, we flee, eventually making it into the town's Church, and this apparently starts the spread of "the Black Thing." This thing is actually a swarm of black rats, appearing from the caverns with piercing red eyes, engulfing all living beings, and chewing them down to their bones. Amicia clutches Hugo close to her, but she notices that the lit torch keeps the swarm away. In fact, the player can trap clusters of these rats between torches, which causes them to evaporate in puffs of green flames. This is where the real tribulations and puzzles begin. Amicia's alchemy skills give the player a wide array of options to overcome obstacles, such as launching *ignifer*, essentially fireballs, from her slingshot to light torches and pyres. Later in the game, as more alchemy options become unlocked, features like *odoris* can be used to attract swarms of rats to a specific location, or *exstinguis* to extinguish the torches of patrolling Inquisition guards, thus baiting the rats to eat the unsuspecting soldiers while distracting them long enough for you, Amicia, and Hugo to sneak past them unharmed.

Now, why would the Inquisition raid your family's estate and then continuously hunt you and your brother, when there are literally fields of dead English and French who have succumbed to battle and rats? As the player discovers in the course of the game, Hugo has been sick since birth, but not with the Plague: he is actually the *prima macula*. Once he focuses his powers and is given the right medicine, he becomes almost like a rat king, immune to the rats and able to give orders to them. By the game's last two missions, Hugo can even control the rats with a simple raising of his arm. This becomes useful, particularly because the rats before this tend to get out of control, forming into zombie rat tornadoes that are capable of knocking over torches and putting out fires. When we finally face the Grand Inquisitor, he assembles an army of white Plague rats that are obedient only to him because he has injected himself with the blood of Hugo and Plague victims. They have opposing powers to your rats, thus are resistant to fire, and the final showdown between two rat armies culminates in the death of the Grand Inquisitor and the banishment of these swarms—for now. It simply gets too ridiculous to take seriously as a fourteenth-century French event at this point, but

it is fun in a fantasy realm. While I first thought it was just silly, I do appreciate a good alternate history that links these demonic rats not just to the actual Black Plague but also to the Justinian Plague of the sixth century. The rats thus become an embodiment of the Plague and the physical interpretation of an (at least for medieval contemporaries) invisible disease (until it manifests itself on the human body, of course), transforming this element of history into a meaningful obstacle that must be overcome and yielding something more fantastic. Together with a combination of darkness and haunting music, it makes this game memorable.

What first enticed me to play this game was its appealing world, enriched atmosphere, and original setting. Yet the game rapidly transforms itself into a fantasy puzzle quest with the dramatic backdrop of the beginning of the Hundred Years' War and the Black Death. Players must navigate this dangerous world with the added burden of protecting their little brother. The game feels fresh and new since this time period and concept are rarely explored in games. Hugo can even climb through windows or go to hard-to-reach spots to gain the player access to rooms that would otherwise not be reachable. Yet, there is an always present danger when running from enemies. This is when you, the player, can almost feel the weight of this little five-year-old drag behind you, as you do not simply fear for your own life but also for the life of this last member of your family. This last link to normalcy is almost directly depicted through his fears and transformations.

Stealth puzzle games are not new. Besides the notorious *Assassin's Creed* (2007) franchise, *The Last of Us* (2013) or *Thief* (2014) would be the most similar titles with regard to movement and aesthetics. In *Thief*, it is even an achievement to make it through the entire game without killing anyone. This is unfortunately not possible in *A Plague's Tale: Innocence*, for there are three boss battles (fighting an enemy that is far stronger and more complicated than other enemies), and it is necessary to kill in order to survive. These key moments in the story are the only times you need to eliminate foes, because there is typically a way to sneak around enemies, which is much easier than trying to fight them, much like in the game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). Actually, Amicia—to me—appears to have the same appearance as the protagonist from that game, Aloy. The game's overall aesthetic is drastically different, but the movement during fight scenes and the detail in their faces are simply uncanny, especially with the use of Unreal Engine 4 as a graphics engine. However, the graphics for this game overall are roughly five years behind their time, with a stunning atmosphere and detail in building and nature designs, while movement and character dialogue appear too clunky to be considered modern. It is hard to fault Asobo Studio, considering they are an independent development team working on a game with a unique plot and characters.

The composer for this videogame is Olivier Derivière, a Frenchman best known for his work on the *Obscure* (2004), *Alone in the Dark* (2008), and *Remember Me* (2013) soundtracks. The last of these notably won the 2013 International Film Music Critics Award for best original score in a video game or interactive media. Derivière's score for this game is the best musical composition for a horror game

that I have personally experienced. The violins chirp rapidly. When an enemy can almost spot you and your brother, the music actually makes the player panic, as if an Inquisition guard is creeping up behind you in your bedroom. I sometimes even found myself lifting my legs, as if the rats had poured into my own room. And, thankfully, the ambiance of the composition is neither modern nor over the top epic. It almost feels like a small group of musical bards following you, ready to create fear. This sets the bar of what a horror game soundtrack, especially for this time period, should sound like.

A Plague Tale: Innocence has a unique game mechanic that yields a variety of options to sneak around the world but at the same time can feel unearned. This linear story game holds your hand, reminiscent of how you must hold your little brother's hand. While some of the puzzles and even the final boss fight did stump me, generally all the ingredients required to create a certain alchemy potion are lying haphazardly on the floor or neatly in nearby crates. It quickly becomes obvious which slingshots Amicia needs to use and in what order she needs to continue. The way certain antagonist characters are facing you, blocked off streets, or the shape of hedges determine the routes you need to take. Despite this, I never felt bored. Each level brings new puzzles and challenges, and I was so captivated by the growing relationship between Amicia and Hugo that I simply could not stop playing. Hugo acts like a little boy during this mess, playing hide and seek in the orchard, trying to find his mommy, and even stopping to collect a rare flower in areas devoid of life to place it in Amicia's hair for good luck. The voice-acting and character development is phenomenal, which cannot be said for the fellow minor characters that join your party in the quest to defeat the Grand Inquisitor.

Obviously, I cannot nitpick this game to death with how accurate it might be or could have been. I will warn you that this game is not for a history fanatic or anyone anticipating a clever and realistic game on the theme of the Black Plague. However, at the end of the day, it is a brief, linear game with a well-developed narrative and a musical score that anyone should be able to enjoy. It is an ideal choice for people who want to experience a range of conflicting emotions with clever dialogues and puzzles, especially with their sibling.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Josh Kreeger of Corona, California, earned his B.A. in History at the University of California, Riverside (UCR) (2016). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He also served as an editor for volume 47 of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History" (2020). He is working in the Corona-Norco Unified School District.*

Red Dead Redemption 2 [single-player/multi-player action-adventure video game].

Developer: Rockstar Games. Platforms: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Google Stadia, Microsoft Windows/PC. Release date: October 26, 2018.

As they discuss their plan to leave the gang that has offered them protection, friendship, and family at the most crucial points of their lives, outlaw Arthur Morgan tells Sadie Adler, "You know, you and me ... we're more ghosts than

people.” Rockstar Games’ 2018 title *Red Dead Redemption 2* deals with the downfall of the criminal Van der Linde gang due to internal clashes and the onset of America’s modernization in the late nineteenth century. Rockstar Games is perhaps best known for controversial titles such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Manhunt*, and *Bully*, all of which deal in one form or another with the subjects of sex, drugs, and violence. What can be said of all games made by Rockstar—apart from their divisive reputation—is their mastery of recreating settings for players to roam freely. Considering the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, Rockstar’s works have allowed players to explore satirical portrayals of iconic American periods, be it 1980s neon-lit Miami, early 1990s gangsta-influenced Los Angeles, or post-9/11 New York. *Red Dead Redemption 2* continues this design philosophy, albeit in a more serious manner than its precursors. In this review, I argue that this work of fiction should be of interest to those engaged in the Humanities in that it provides an immersive experience with regard to both story and gameplay not just about the last days of the Old West but also about the environment and attitudes at its periphery.

The main story outfits the player as Arthur Morgan, the ambiguously moral rough muscle of the outlaw gang, as he and the fugitive members attempt to escape the pursuit by government officials after a botched ferry robbery. At the start of the game, set in 1899, players get a swift sense of the constant endangerment that this character and his posse face as they run from the Pinkerton Detective Agency in a snow-blazing wilderness; this department is based on the real-life nineteenth-century bureau of the same name, which specialized in private security and can be considered a predecessor of the FBI. Over the course of months, represented in the game by six chapters, Arthur is tasked by the leader of the gang, the charismatic and idealistic Dutch van der Linde, to escape their predicament by generating funds to flee to the remote South Pacific island of Tahiti. To create capital, Arthur has to participate in various types of “scores,” such as train and bank robberies and helping other members of the posse in their side activities. Crude in their objectives, the Van der Linde gang becomes involved in affairs that include a feud among two prominent ex-slaveholding families, betrayals and deaths within the gang, surprise visits by the Pinkertons, contact with a threatened tribe, and the change of character and life for Arthur Morgan.

As one interacts with Dutch van der Linde—both in the story and in the game—through dialogue options, one gets a sense of his frame of mind as a Robin-Hood persona who wants to rob the “Great Uncle Sam” and as an individual who detests the loss of the American frontier and its quality of liberty to capitalist-bureaucracies and urbanized technologies. Benjamin Byron Davis, the voice actor for Dutch, gives a top performance that allows the player to become fully absorbed by the character and witness his gradual shift from a cherished leader to a paranoid man. The same can be said of Roger Clark who voices Arthur, in that players through both gameplay and story can become engulfed by the protagonist’s desires, attitudes, and actions. Apart from these two, the gang includes equally fleshed-out characters such as the young and fractured Marston

family, the farm-wife-widow-turned-vengeful Sadie Adler, and Uncle, a comical lazy drunkard, along with a whole slew of uniquely developed individuals from the Van der Linde gang that complement the protagonist.

The game's final chapter embodies the game's name: Redemption. As the story progresses, Arthur develops severe sickness caused by being infected with tuberculosis from a victim he has assaulted over debt-collection, a terminal consequence of his outlaw life. Mirroring historically the real-life high fatality rate for many in the nineteenth century, Arthur recognizes his coming demise and attempts to vindicate himself. He sets out to do this by helping the public and those he has affected along with saving those he considers redeemable from the Van der Linde gang which, he realizes, has strayed from their original libertarian values and essentially been reduced to only a handful of immoral members.

The "domestication" of the West that is depicted and explored as one is being chased by agency officials also includes the end of the American-Indian Wars. As Arthur, you help complete jobs for a fictional Native American tribe, the Wapitis, based on the actual tribes of the Lakota and Nez Perce who fought in historic conflicts against the U.S. Army. In the game, the army has separated the Wapitis from their lands and moved them to a small, unincorporated area near mountains. As one completes missions for the Wapitis, the dialogue and cutscenes convey a sense of hopelessness with regard to reclaiming lands and the destruction of the tribe's body and soul, reflecting the real-life outcome of most clashes.

The story has the cinematic quality one can also find in the frontier and Western media that inspired the game. Various camera angles that appear in story missions offer a bird's eye view of the traversing posse and surrounding landscape, as well as close-ups of a character's face that convey realistic emotional expressions, a testament to Rockstar's quality game engine. One can see natural sadness in Arthur's eyes when he shares with a nun about his life or the anger on Dutch's face when he learns about a shocking betrayal from his lover.

A great moving story requires a great moving soundtrack, and here, too, the game does not disappoint. The music is predominantly crafted from sounds and styles appropriate for the era, and is played at major plot points and during free-roam gameplay, either in the form of slow and calming sounds when carelessly exploring the environment, or as an intense, upbeat guitar theme when gunning down rival bandits or law enforcement. Part of the game's value is its soundscape. For instance, walking across settlements like Saint Denis, the game's version of New Orleans, one can hear a multitude of languages used by various pedestrians, including Spanish, French, and Mandarin, echoing the late nineteenth century's heavy immigration to urban sites. While this game is a prequel to Rockstar's 2010 award-winning title, *Red Dead Redemption*, this game's story is easily accommodating to first-time players of the series in that they will not feel left out of the story's characters or narrative arc for not playing the first installment.

While the story may be intriguing to some, most people play video games for their interactivity. Gameplay-wise, players will get a sense of realism, a

characteristic of recent Rockstar games that showcases how the American setting may have looked like as one navigates the character across a sprawling environment filled with fascinating terrains on a physical level and through the game's hidden values. In open-world sandbox games such as these, when players are not taking part in the main storyline, they can freely travel across the game's immense map which is an assemblage of America's real-life Wild West and frontier locations, including *New Hanover*, based on the lush plains and thick forests of central U.S. states; *Ambarino*, referencing multiple mountain states; and *Lemoyne*, the game's recreation of Southern states with deep swamps and unsettling bayous. These environments look inspired by nineteenth-century American landscape paintings from the Hudson River School, reflecting an impression of openness and the beauty of the natural world and how the West was envisioned during this era. Over time, in the surroundings and reinforcing the game's theme, one can see the gradual modernization of the wild in certain places. Near eastern *Ambarino*, for example, one can encounter a railroad camp populated by Chinese laborers, which later turns into finished train tracks; the deforestation of a section of the wild by a timber company; and the construction of new settlements in both the wilderness and small towns—all of which occur once the player waits a certain amount of time while in the game.

A potential issue with the game for a first-time player and especially one new to the *Red Dead* series may be getting used to the controls in the gameplay itself. Initially, one may find oneself overwhelmed with the multitude of buttons and interfaces at one's disposal where the absurd situation of trying to feed a carrot to one's traveling horse may result in accidentally punching the animal, which can certainly happen. However, navigation of the controls becomes familiar over time as one either plays through the story campaign or ventures on one's own in the breath-taking environment offered by the game's developers.

Red Dead Redemption 2 features a series of small interactions that reflect what a historical actor in this period might have experienced. Players can fish and hunt animals common in these habitats, including the American bison which, during this period, was on the verge of extinction due to overhunting. They can play familiar table games of the time, including dominos and poker, or collect cigarette cards that were part of the era's commercial culture. The mechanics of gunplay also reflect the age. Arthur has an arsenal of period-appropriate weapons, including revolvers and repeating rifles with slow-fire rates, a direct contrast to some of the standard shooter games one can find on the market today. There are also various documents and newspapers one can acquire that reflect common subjects of the day, including talks of racial sciences, breakthroughs in new appliances and inventions, and discourse on Manifest Destiny. These items function as a way to provide extra lore and, consequently, immersion into the gateway world of a re-created American open frontier and Wild West.

I recommend this game to those interested in examining this era in American history. The game allows them to re-enact a character's life from the period in both

its engaging presentation of the storyline and the gameplay itself. However, it must be noted that, just like in other Rockstar games, this video game contains mature themes such as graphic violence depicted through both human and animal disembowelment and strong language. For those who are as of yet indifferent or have a disinterest in this particular historical period, the extraordinary and life-like instrument of *Red Dead Redemption 2* may cause a change of mind.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Emanuel Ayala of Anaheim, California, earned his A.A. in History at Fullerton College (2018) and his B.A. in History "magna cum laude" at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2020). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF, where he is a member and the 2020/2021 president of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He also served as an editor for this volume of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History."*

The Sinking City [single-player action-adventure video game].

Developer: Frogwares. Platforms: Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox One. Release date: June 27, 2019.

As our hero, Charles Winfield Reed, nears the end of his journey, he is reminded of how far he has come and the weight of the decision on his shoulders: "Destiny waits for no man, Charles. Decide now whether this ends in salvation—or blood." *The Sinking City*, directed by Jeremie Monedero and Justin Villiers and developed by Frogwares, is a game that takes place in the fictionalized town of Oakmont, Massachusetts, in the 1920s. Frogwares has previously adapted the stories of Sherlock Holmes into various successful action-adventure and puzzle games in which players explore London as the titular character in order to solve various crimes and mysteries. This project was apparently one of anxiety for the developers who had never dived too deeply into the horror genre of video games. Surprisingly, the game has performed better than expected, with Frogwares stating that it has surpassed all sales expectations. Averaging review scores of 7.5/10, critics have praised the game's environment, storytelling, and puzzle mechanics (archival research and investigation) but criticized its mediocre combat and graphical presentation with a fair share of glitches later patched out as updated versions and downloadable content (DLC) have been added.

The Sinking City contains many Lovecraftian elements (fear of the unknown and vast cosmic mysteries) but embraces darker themes surrounding the problematic aspects of American culture during the time period in which it takes place and the existential dread of Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. The game's purposeful exploration of these darker aspects is one of its greatest strengths—in addition to its detailed dive into archival research.

Oakmont, Massachusetts, serves as the backdrop for the vast majority of our adventure and as a character of its own. It feels alive with its own secrets, emotions, and actions. Located offshore on an island unmarked on any known map, Oakmont's history is introduced to players right from the start. It has long been associated with the occult, with the townspeople being described as "unabashed eccentrics." The sight of cultists in bloody robes or abandoned rituals

sites strewn with artifacts and candles is considered unremarkable by most, with local fishermen, town merchants, and others simply passing them on their daily errands. After this introduction to the town, players are given their first glimpse at what makes this game stand out among its peers in terms of Lovecraftian adaptations. It is no secret that Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) was an unabashed racist. In almost all of his stories those of mixed or non-European ancestry are viewed as untrustworthy, dangerous, or delusional. When adapting his popular Cthulhu mythos, many artists, filmmakers, and writers omit these problematic aspects of Lovecraft's views. *The Sinking City*, however, exposes these hard truths for all to see. Oakmont is home to a variety of individuals from multiple cultural backgrounds, European immigrants, former slaves, and refugees from the city of Insmouth who have fish-like qualities to their appearance. Equally bizarre is the physical appearance of the Throgmorton family who resemble gorillas and large apes but are proud of their blood purity to a point that borders on eugenics. Members of the Ku Klux Klan can also be found in the city, and players can even choose how to respond to their actions, whether by interrupting an attempted lynching of Insmouthers or breaking up a Klan rally. Additionally, advocates for eugenics and pamphlets discussing selective breeding can be found in this environment. When asked why these elements were included in the game, the directors and staff responded that they needed to be acknowledged, and that history can be painful, embarrassing, and difficult to look at. There are many aspects of American culture that we as a society actively choose to ignore because they clash with the ideals on which this country was supposedly founded. Lovecraft himself, in many ways, was a product of his time. His belief in bloody purity and his vehement opposition to the "mixing of the races" were views not uncommon for the era, even if he took them to new extremes in his work.

Six months before the start of the game's story, Oakmont has been struck with a devastating flood that has brought about unparalleled destruction. Sections of the city remain inaccessible, and many residents claim that the flood has also brought about a sinister dark force which plagues all who are touched by it with madness, visions, and hysteria. This is where we are introduced to the game's protagonist, Charles Winfield Reed, a World War I navy veteran turned private investigator working in Boston. At the behest of a client by the name of Johannes van der Berg, Reed travels to Oakmont and is quickly instructed by Robert Throgmorton, the highly influential head of Oakmont's leading family, to discover what has been causing the mass hysteria and disappearances in the town since the time of the flood. Choosing to begin his investigation across town the following morning, Reed takes shelter at a local inn, and in the middle of the night he is plagued by terrible visions of the USS Cyclops, the ship he had served on during the war, sinking and vanishing without a trace. Upon conducting interviews with the locals, Reed discovers that his vision from the previous night is similar in structure to what others have been experiencing.

At this point, the prologue ends, players are given a large world to explore, they are introduced to the three distinct aspects of *The Sinking City's* gameplay. First and foremost, there is the exploration mode in which players can guide Reed across Oakmont and the surrounding landscapes in order to discover new leads in his case, or several side cases which further draw out the lore surrounding this strange locale. When new leads are found, players must guide Reed to the various historical archives located throughout the city. Whether these are archives in the local library, city hall, or university, players must cross-reference the information they gain throughout these cases in order to progress forward with their investigations. This is the key aspect which makes this game shine for historians and those interested in archival research. With the exception of the aforementioned Sherlock Holmes titles, adventure games of this type rarely require such investigative input from their players. The act of having players examine primary-source documents such as newspapers, personal diaries, business records, and letters in a game is rare to say the least. For those interested in history, it may serve as an introduction to interacting with archival materials in order to further one's own research into a given subject, or in the case of Reed, a crime or mystery. Without the archives, Reed is helpless, and the player can wander aimlessly without progressing in the story. In a fashion similar to Lovecraft's own works, the game requires players to piece information together themselves, rather than simply have it spelled out for them. It is this aspect of the gameplay that makes progress feel rewarding and earned.

Similar to other games in the genre, there are aspects of physical combat and battles to be fought. Reed is equipped with various firearms from the era, as well as the unexplained ability to use extrasensory powers of observation in order to fight strange alien-like creatures known as Wylebeasts. The supernatural elements found in these smaller sections of the gameplay can be jarring for those who want to focus on the game's much more highly emphasized detective and archival research, but those who are fans of horror games, action-adventure titles, or Lovecraft's various stories will feel right at home.

As Reed's journey for answers leads him deeper and deeper into the conspiracies and lore surrounding the town and its inhabitants, he ultimately discovers that beings known as the Great Old Ones (cosmic entities older than the universe, often destructive, existing at a higher level and therefore inexplicable or incomprehensible to mankind) are plotting to purge humanity. Johannes van der Berg is revealed to be an avatar of the deity Hastur, known in the Cthulhu mythos as the King in Yellow. He has invited Reed to Oakmont because of the potential he sees within him. Beneath the town, it is revealed, a temple called Cthygonnaar houses Cthylla, the daughter of Cthulhu, and it is this entity that has caused the flood and is attempting to purge humanity through chosen avatars.

Upon learning the truth, players can choose one of the three endings. They can have Reed flee Oakmont and return to Boston, in which case the visions eventually drive him to the point of suicide, but the apocalyptic purge is delayed. The second

ending sees Reed accept his “destiny,” allowing the deity to surface and destroy mankind. In the third ending (considered the secret ending because it requires various checkpoints and tasks to have been completed), Reed can actively defy the deity by destroying an important artifact found in its temple. In this ending, Reed can be seen returning to Boston and living out the remainder of his life in relative peace. However, players are then shown a vision of Johannes waiting at the Oakmont docks, seemingly finding another chosen one to fulfill their destiny. The sheer dread and helplessness experienced by Reed at these rather unfulfilling conclusions to his journey can also be felt by the player. It perfectly encapsulates the themes of Lovecraft’s writing, the fear of the unknown and a feeling of insignificance in an ever-expanding universe.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Christopher Dean Robbins of Brea, California, earned his B.A. in History (2018) and his M.A. in History (2021) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member and former vice president of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society).