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## Last Remnants of the French Wild West: Remembering *Colorado* (1990)

**Abstract:** Few settings are as quintessentially American as the Wild West. In games, the myth of the American frontier is the myth of American expansion. This myth explores, sometimes with enthusiasm, at other times with a tinge of regret, the conquest of the “wilderness” with its Native inhabitants and wildlife, and its replacement by “civilization” represented by settlers and railroads. Yet, European expansion on the frontier is not exclusively an Anglo-American story. It was the French explorers, traders, and trappers that first set out westward (and southward) along the rivers from Canada and the Great Lakes. The French experience of the frontier was radically different: for them, with the limited resources of their soon-to-be-sold colonial empire, the wilderness was effectively untameable, its Native inhabitants unconquerable: it was thus a place of permanent danger, where one might, with equal probability, eke out a living, earn a fortune, or simply perish. Only once has the French West appeared in a digital game, in Silmarils’s *Colorado* (1990). This paper examines *Colorado* as an artefact of French game development in the 16-bit era, as a unique depiction of the forgotten French West, and, finally, as a 2D predecessor of today’s sprawling 3D open-world games.

**Keywords:** historical fiction, Louisiana, French America, fur trapping, side-view perspective, wilderness, exploration, Native Americans

### 1. Introduction

Studies in American literature (and games), with their understandable preoccupation with the United States of America, can at times eclipse an important substrate of American soil: the colonial, but non-Anglo-American history of today’s United States. This paper seeks to excavate and bring to light one case study of this pre-American history: *Colorado* (1990), a video game set in the West prior to its acquisition by the nascent United States.

*Colorado* is neither well known nor influential: to be blunt, the game is mostly forgotten. What, then, is the value of analyzing a game of seemingly little consequence and significance? Firstly, though the limitations of game storytelling *circa* 1990 prevented *Colorado* from engaging deeply in its topic, it is nonetheless the only game that attempted to depict the territories west of the Mississippi River before these lands became the American Wild West. *Colorado* thus evokes the Western genre in some ways, but, at the same time, it pre-dates the Wild West, and therefore must inevitably reject key tropes of this genre. In some ways, the game's setting has more in common with the geographically and chronologically distinct setting of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–1841) depicting an earlier stage of Anglo-American westward expansion from upstate New York to the Mississippi. Despite its relative narrative shallowness, *Colorado* seems to evoke the quintessential American themes of Cooper's work, thus forming a sort of bridge between the French historical perspective of its creators, and the American setting it depicts. Finally, a close examination of *Colorado* reveals what might be jokingly called an evolutionary "missing link": here is a game that, constrained to depict its action in two dimensions, still strives to build a 3D world open to exploration. *Colorado* thus doubly fits the definition of what Janet Murray (89–90) calls an incunabular game, once in the general sense of early digital games, and then more specifically as an incunabular precursor to later first-person open-world games.

Each of the arguments made above will be discussed here in the context of a textual analysis (cf. Fernández-Vara) of *Colorado*. However, given the game's connection to the Western genre, there is a need to provide at least a brief history of Western-themed video games. Additionally, the older, pre-Western narratives of James Fenimore Cooper need to be introduced.

## 2. The Wild West in games

As a genre, the Western has been perceived as quintessentially American, both in the sense of being the most American of genres, and the most expressive of American myth (Kitses 1). The thematic composition of early Westerns was characterized by messages of taming the frontier by subjugating nature (and the Native Americans), by settlement and the building of railroads, and, finally, by imposing control on the rough outlaws living on the frontier of civilization (cf. Slotkin 29–62). The classic Western involved dichotomic values: good vs evil, law vs crime, civilization vs untamed nature, white Americans vs Native Americans. There was little doubt which option was to be preferred and which must ultimately triumph, even if in some cases, such as nature and the Native Americans, there was a more wistful tone, reflecting the sense that while conquest was good, something admirable was also being lost in this process (Kitses 13; see also Simmon 3–98).

With the rise of digital games, Western-themed games were quick to emerge, starting with *The Oregon Trail* (1971), a game that would launch a series continuing until today. *The Oregon Trail*, as an educational game (Caruso), aimed to expose players to the wide variety of hardships faced by American pioneers as they travelled in wagons from Missouri, across the landscape of the Wild West into Oregon on the west coast. Here were the clear themes of the early Western: the unambiguous positiveness of the expansion of civilization, and the depiction of nature as a hostile barrier to overcome.

Western games in the 1980s and 1990s were dominated by a focus on the gunfighter—by far the easiest form of Western-inspired action to convert into gameplay—only rarely touching other aspects of the genre. While some of these titles well warrant a closer look, especially given the interesting Japanese arcade forays into the genre in games like *Gun Smoke* (1985) or *Sunset Riders* (1991), for the purposes of this paper, these early gunfighter titles will be set aside due to their narrow thematic focus. Even so, and additionally setting aside the continued sequels and remakes in the *Oregon Trail* series, the Western genre is too abundantly represented across multiple genres to allow a listing of all relevant titles. A key early title with complex narrative is the adventure game *Gold Rush!* (1988), which invokes the *Oregon Trail* tradition by having the players spend a significant part of the game on a journey from New York to California. Subsequently, *Lost Dutchman Mine* (1989) again depicts the life of a gold miner; notably, like *Colorado*, this title is effectively an early open-world game, and, like *Colorado*, it invokes the myth of fabled lost gold mines, though its approach to the search for gold is far more simulation oriented. The next two games would be *Mad Dog McCree* (1990) and its 1992 sequel, *Mad Dog II: The Lost Gold*, both of which were in fact typical action-based “shooters”, whose claim to complexity stemmed from the use of live-action video recordings used to strongly affix these titles to the cinematic Western genre. Then, there were two adventure games: *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist* (1993), a comedy title that was more parody than Western, and the richer, much more narratively complex *Dust: A Tale of the Wired West* (1995), again featuring live actors. Finally, the first-person shooter *Outlaws* (1997) concentrated on gunfights, drawing inspiration extensively from the so-called spaghetti Western (Hudak).

Progression in computer hardware in the next two decades led to increasingly sophisticated, though somewhat less numerous titles—excepting the simple gunfighter games, which found a revival on mobile and VR platforms. The most prominent titles of the 21st century included the *Red Dead* series (2004–2018), especially the acclaimed *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and its 2018 sequel. Other notable Western-themed games included *Gun* (2005), the *Call of Juarez* (2006–2018) series, a 2014 remake of *Gold Rush!* and its 2017 sequel, and, finally, *This Land Is My Land* (2021). Although gunfighters continue to be the dominant topic of these games, they depict a much broader range of Western-derived thematic ele-

ments, as well as embracing the moral complexity and ambivalent portrayal of the classical Western heroes. Apart from the *Gold Rush!* series and *This Land Is My Land*, every title listed here depicts a gunfighter lead character as an anti-hero. In the context of *Red Dead Redemption* and its sequel, the Wild West is depicted in its terminal stages, stressing the violence of the dying frontier, and the ruthlessness with which its representatives, whether white or Native, were being subsumed by encroaching civilization.

Aside from the increased ambivalence about the expansion of American settlements, perhaps the most notable evolutionary trend in the Western, both cinematic and game-based, has been the elevation of the Native Americans from the status of non-characters, almost a hostile force of nature, to fully realized actors with complex values. Native American characters have been present in Western games from the beginning, but their depictions ranged from positive but incidental in *The Oregon Trail* to the disturbing “object of rape” portrayal in the controversial *Custer’s Revenge* (1982) (Plunkett). The complexity of these depictions grows in the 1990s and in the later decades, with *Colorado* again an early example of more nuanced, though stilted representation. Increasingly, the land’s Indigenous inhabitants gain agency *vis-à-vis* their white interactors. This progression seems to culminate with *This Land Is My Land*, a game in which the player, as a Native American warrior, takes up arms against white settlers; the caveat must be made, however, that the game has been criticized for depicting a generic, undefined tribe and thus possibly reinforcing some stereotypes (Giroux).

In the same way Western cinema, originally quintessentially American, was eventually greatly influenced by European cinema in the form of the spaghetti Western, so game Westerns were also frequently non-American. Aside from the already mentioned Japanese arcade games, there were numerous European intrusions, which include the French *Colorado*, the Polish *Call of Juarez* series, the half-American, half-British *Red Dead* series, the German remake and sequel for *Gold Rush!*, and, finally, the Ukrainian *This Land Is My Land*. Significantly, the European-made games seem to more frequently depict Native Americans in a sympathetic light, a fact that some journalists connect to a longer European tradition of the Indian “Noble Savage”, tracing back to the writings of many writers across Europe: Karl May in Germany, who is indeed invoked by the designer of *This Land Is My Land* (Campbell), Gustave Aimard in France, Alfred Szklarski in Poland, and at least several others. It is unknown whether the French designers of *Colorado* were familiar with any of these writers, but the possibility of especially Aimard or May influencing the game is open.

This summary of the Western genre in games highlights *Colorado* as an early outlier of the genre. At the same time *Colorado* is not a Western at all. Though sharing some themes, it belongs to an earlier tradition, which we will now examine.

### 3. Cooper's Wild West *avant la lettre*

English settlements in today's United States began on the east coast of the continent. Thus, there had always been a western frontier of American settlement, a land that was not always called the Wild West, but was surely perceived as such by American colonists. This frontier leaped far westward when the thirteen colonies of the United States became independent, acquiring the Northwest Territory up to the Mississippi from Britain as part of the peace settlement. The true "Wild West" would then be acquired as part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, which expanded American territory across the Mississippi all the way to the Rocky Mountains in the west. The final act of expansion would be the seizure of California and the south-west from Mexico in 1848. However, borders on a map outpaced actual control: always to the west of the towns and settlements was an "untamed" wilderness inhabited by Native Americans. These early westward movements were perhaps best represented in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–1841). Cooper's novels mostly track the tumultuous expansion of civilization in upstate New York from 1740 onwards, but with the chronologically last novel, *The Prairie* (1827), set in 1804 immediately after the Louisiana Purchase, the area of interest shifts westward into this newly acquired territory—which would later come to be known as the Old West, but which, from Cooper's perspective, was a New West (Kelly 85–128).

Cooper's novels are a key reference for American cultural identity (Kelly vii–viii). His most famous book, *The Last of the Mohicans*, saw no fewer than eleven film or TV adaptations in the United States alone, starting as early as 1909. However, Cooper's works are definitely not seen as part of the Western genre and are more typically considered historical novels (Lukács 64–65), even if, in the case of *The Prairie*, Cooper was describing near-contemporaneous events.

Thematically, Cooper's works are notable for the greater complexity of the depiction of both the wilderness and its Native inhabitants. Cooper's portrayal of the latter is not uncritical, and Georg Lukács (64) notes it is the *decline*, both physical and moral, of the Native Americans that is a key theme in his works, with the depths of moral decline being highlighted in the depictions of those tribes hostile to the heroes. Their decline is seen as inevitable—the demise of the primitive in the face of progress—but also tragic. The same is the perception of the novels' hero, the trapper Natty Bumppo. He is the pioneer and pathfinder (notably, both words show up in titles of Cooper's books), who paves the way for civilization to advance, and then moves on. The chronologically final novel, *The Prairie*, highlights Bumppo running away from civilization, whose onset is expressed by the clearing of the forests the trapper relies on. He is not hostile to civilization, however; indeed, the plot of the novel involves him paradoxically assisting those very

same settlers whose efforts gradually efface his own habitat. This relationship with civilization, which Bumpo runs away from, but at the same time paves the way for, could be interpreted as tragic, but also, in the modern postcolonial tradition (cf. Jayanth), it could be seen as hypocritical and deceitful. In this latter perspective, one might note Bumpo befriends Native Americans, while simultaneously knowingly assisting the settlers who will dispossess them. Indeed, Bumpo fits closely in the concept of the frontiersman, essential to what Theodore Roosevelt somewhat nostalgically described as “winning the West” in the multiple stages of American expansion (Slotkin 29–36).

Given the numerous films—not to mention radio, opera, and comic-book adaptations—produced based on *The Last of the Mohicans*, the book clearly is influential, even if its impact has somewhat diminished recently (Kelly vii); one might therefore reasonably expect it to show up also in video games, either adapted directly, or providing looser inspiration—particularly since, as Daniel Vella notes, “the lone individual in the untamed wilderness” is a trope that very naturally transitioned into digital games. This is where *Colorado* steps in: the story of a trapper, a “lone individual” indeed, setting out into Indian territory deep in the West, an “untamed wilderness”, using, like Bumpo, a long barrel-loaded rifle, and navigating rivers via canoe, not only builds on a longstanding trope, but also more specifically makes clear references to the *Leatherstocking Tales*.

#### 4. *Colorado*: An analysis

Released in 1990 by the French game development house Silmarils, *Colorado* is a computer game released on the PC, Commodore Amiga, and Atari ST. Although the studio’s founders had significant earlier experience, Silmarils had only been established in 1987 (Kralka 1), making *Colorado* one of its first titles. Additionally, *Colorado* came at a time when Silmarils had just abandoned making games for the Amstrad CPC, an 8-bit computer popular in Europe, and with which Silmarils’s founders had worked extensively. The new target machines featured mixed 16-bit and 32-bit architecture, which, without delving into technological details, afforded radically larger and more complex games, a difference especially prominent in audiovisual quality (see Fig. 1). The visual quality of Silmarils’s 2D art would be repeatedly highlighted in this era (Nagórski).

*Colorado* tells the story of fur trapper David O’Brian, as he sets out westward from St. Louis in the spring of 1801. The timeframe established here seems significant: France had previously ceded the territories of Louisiana, including St. Louis, to Spain in 1762, then briefly recovered them in 1800, only to sell them to the United States in 1803. It seems probable that the developers specifically chose this year to highlight the brief return of France’s colonial empire. Conversely, France is never mentioned in the game, and the name chosen for the hero is clearly not French,



Figure 1: Different versions of Silmarils’s *Targhan* (1989): (A) Amstrad CPC; (B) Amiga

Source: (A) “Targhan (Amstrad CPC) Screenshot: Let Us Go Forth!” *MobyGames*. Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/6172/targhan/screenshots/cpc/344483/>. 5 May 2023. (B) “Targhan (Amiga) Screenshot: Starting Point.” *MobyGames*. Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/6172/targhan/screenshots/amiga/33049/>. 5 May 2023.

but Irish; this ambiguity might have perhaps been intended as a compromise, allowing French players to see the game in the context of French colonial history, while international audiences would perceive it in the more accessible tradition of the American Western.

The game’s narrative is mostly—and sparsely—told in text, perhaps because for a French developer oriented towards European markets, excessive text would bring localization challenges. Digitized speech, while available, was only rarely used at this time in game history. Thus, the story and its hero are established in the game’s manual through the conceit of an extract from O’Brien’s memoirs. Subsequently, when the player would speak to characters in the game, the initial greeting would be vocalized with the stereotypical, monosyllabic “how” drawn from the novels of Cooper and May, but the rest of the conversation was limited to textual communication: the other character would drop a paper letter, which the player could pick up to read. The game’s ending was also told in a text screen. One of the consequences of this approach is that the name O’Brien seems to be divorced from its bearer: players could easily forget the name, or even not know it if they ignored the manual. For players, their character was simply “the trapper”, easily recognizable through strong visual codes, such as tasselled clothes and a racoon-tail hat, reminiscent of the depictions of American explorers Lewis and Clark (compare Figs. 2 and 3).

As the manual explains, O’Brien sets out from St. Louis towards the titular lands of Colorado. Somewhere along the South Platte River, he aids an old Cheyenne warrior fighting against a group of Pawnees. In return for a promise of proper burial, the mortally wounded warrior gives the trapper a map to the legendary mine of Pocahontas (a peculiar intrusion of a character from an entirely different age and area). O’Brien follows the map along several rivers; the game begins as he nears his goal and ends with the finding of the mine.

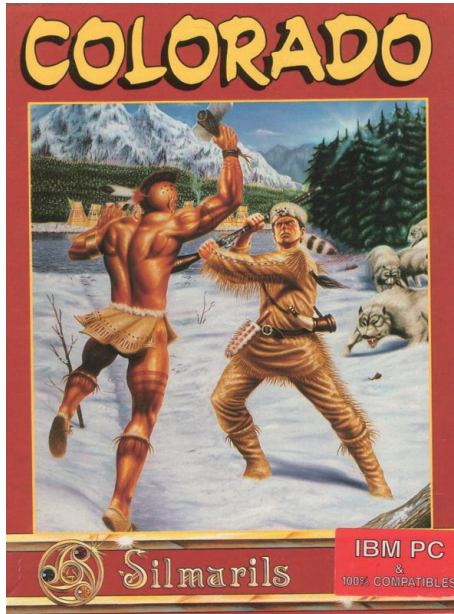


Figure 2: *Colorado* box art

Source: “Front Cover for Colorado (DOS).” *MobyGames*. Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/cover/group-24629/cover-62552/>. 5 May 2023.



Figure 3: *Lewis and Clark at Three Forks* by Edgar Samuel Paxson

Source: *Lewis and Clark at Three Forks* by Edgar S. Paxson, 1912, Public Domain. Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lewis\\_and\\_Clark\\_at\\_Three\\_Forks\\_by\\_Edgar\\_S.\\_Paxson,\\_1912.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lewis_and_Clark_at_Three_Forks_by_Edgar_S._Paxson,_1912.jpg). 2 Nov. 2023.



In terms of gameplay, *Colorado* is an action–adventure hybrid (Kralka 2), where the bulk of the player’s actions involve either combat or, less frequently, simplified problem-solving by using items to manipulate the environment. Silmarils as a company had a diverse output, but the bulk of their titles in the 1988–1991 period were action games based around a side-view perspective exemplified by *Targhan* (1989; Fig. 1 above), where the player controls the hero character looking from the side, with the implication that the hero could typically only move sideways across the screen, or navigate the screen vertically by climbing ladders, jumping, falling, and so on, moving across the screen from left to right. The focus on 2D side-view games was primarily a technological limitation faced by most action-game developers, and though limited use of first-person perspective was available for slower-paced role-playing games, such as *Dungeon Master* (1987; see Barton 234–36), the difficulties of implementing a convincingly fast-paced first-person experience would not be resolved until 1992 (King and Borland 106–10; for a fuller discussion of the technical and historical context, see Mäyrä 101–15; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 61–150). Nonetheless, *Colorado* and the slightly earlier *Le Fétiche Maya* (1989) showed Silmarils was searching for technical means to enact, if not a full transition into 3D space, then at least a more complex perspective facilitating a more complex use of game space. In *Colorado*, this search manifested in two ways. Firstly, the side-view perspective adopted in most of the game was slightly distorted in a manner similar to many adventure games of the time (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 85–89). While the hero was still seen fully from the side, the landscape was frequently shown from a tilted view, as if slightly elevated relative to the player, allowing a wider landscape that could be navigated not only sideways, but also diagonally. Secondly, a sort of “fake” 3D view was implemented for those sections of the game where the player would canoe down the river. These two basic views of *Colorado* are shown in Figure 4.

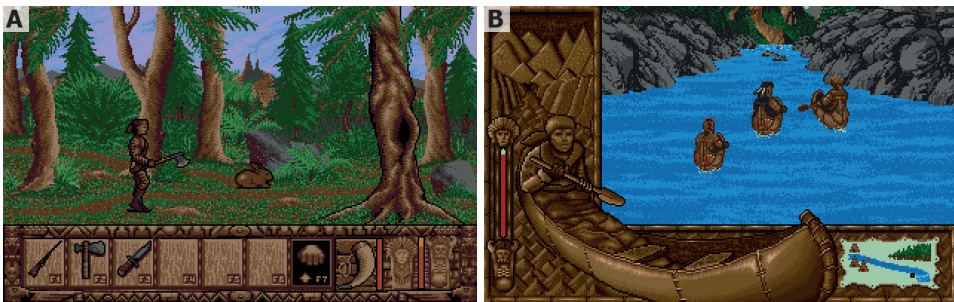


Figure 4: Selected views from *Colorado*: (A) tilted side-view; (B) behind-the-player canoe view

Source: (A) “Colorado (DOS) Screenshot: C’mere Little Rabbit.” *MobyGames*. Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/dos/341609/>. 5 May 2023. (B) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: ... When You Can Also Encounter Enemies.” *MobyGames*. Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/808037/>. 5 May 2023.

Both solutions were significant in allowing *Colorado*'s game mechanics to match its narrative themes. Within Michael Nitsche's typography of game spaces (171–89), *Colorado*, while requiring the player to navigate the game space from start to end, provided sufficient branching to qualify as a multicursal maze rather than a unicursal labyrinth. By depicting the landscape in a way that facilitated branching paths leading to multiple exit points from the screen, the game could include a more expansive and complex environment. Unlike the typical side-view action game, but appropriately to the search quest assigned to O'Brian, the player now had to explore the environment to find all possible paths, and, at least hypothetically, could even get lost by taking the wrong exit off a given screen, or by not finding the right exit. Visually, the game environments were constructed from repetitive graphical elements, combined into subtly unique landscapes, which often required multiple experiences both to yield all their secrets, and also simply to be recognized or internalized. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes the process of the human being entering a new space, and gradually coming to understand it sufficiently to internalize its image and structure, to the point where a vaguely understood space becomes a concrete place in the person's mind (67–84). This is what *Colorado* accomplished: instead of the player passing through the game's landscapes just once in a linear manner, the player would circle around, return, re-walk, re-navigate, until the landscape was internalized as place.

Central to navigating the game landscape was the river, which O'Brian navigates along a linear track (Nitsche 172–76). The river provides a spine for the game, with key indicators of progress: the canoe sections allow only forward movement on the rapid-flowing, rocky river, with the player only allowed to exit the canoe at rare beaching locations, with a deadly waterfall awaiting if the player misses the final beaching location. The ground-exploration side-view sections of the game are divided into four main areas; of these, three are positioned at beaching points along the first river, with the final, fourth area being accessed likewise, after traversing the land to another river.

The inevitable forward movement along the river could be reversed by the player by opening overland, or rather underground, connections between the playing areas, through the tunnels of a gold mine: by using dynamite to clear obstacles, O'Brian could unblock passages exiting in an area further up the river. This was unlikely to be achieved in the player's first playthrough; consequently, although *Colorado* may be played from start to finish in about an hour by a player familiar with the game (readers may find such playthroughs on YouTube—e.g., *Le Fétiche Micro*), the game is intended to require multiple attempts and many hours of exploration. The game thus leverages the digital medium's spatial quality (Murray 79–82), resulting in an experience radically different to its literary predecessors: Bumpo could lose his way in the linear narrative of the book, but still always moved forward with that narrative, but O'Brian could *actually* become lost, searching and backtracking until the player found the way again. In this sense, the game also dif-

fers in its use of space from later open-world games, and even more so from the walking simulators that Melissa Kagen (23–28) describes as a combination of explicit avant-garde tendencies and the playfulness of the adventure game that allows players to enjoy freely walking anywhere. *Colorado* can be seen as a precursor to open worlds, but it is decidedly not open; the clear barriers and paths of the landscape combine into a maze rather than merely a dense but open forest. Equally, the carefully designed structure of its world, which requires the player to make the correct moves and use the correct items in the correct locations in order to progress through the maze, abjures the leisurly, post-conflictual (cf. Majewski and Siuda 227–38) form of the walking simulator.

The river, whose traversal seems to allow players to rapidly move many miles forward, is central to a landscape of multiple distinct environments joined together in what Espen Aarseth (133–34) defines as ludo-compression. This technique, which game designer Shane Liesegang elsewhere discusses under the name of impressionist gameplay (Liesegang), involves designing the gameworld in such a way as to create the impression of far larger spaces, while keeping travel times short by effectively compressing the spaces “in-between” key sites.

Apart from the river, which serves as both a highway and as an obstacle to be overcome when attempting to reverse the direction of travel, the player’s progress is blocked by enemies. These come in two forms: animals—wolves, bears and eagles—and people. In the latter case, the enemies are mostly coded as Indians, whose garb loosely evokes historical tribes, but who are generally not strictly labelled in the narrative. However, while most people the player encounters in the game are hostile, there are individual characters and even whole groupings, specifically the Cheyenne village, who are friendly, providing information or material assistance in exchange for the player performing set tasks, such as rescuing a Cheyenne chief’s baby, who had been kidnapped by an eagle (*sic*).

Whether friendly or hostile, the Native characters the player encounters are connected to different cultures, in turn attached to specific environments. There are thus forests whose inhabitants are presumably the same Pawnee we encounter in the manual, desert highlands with a pueblo, presumably inhabited by Puebloans, and the open plains dominated by a Cheyenne settlement. The hostile denizens of the mines are not defined, but are dressed like Europeans. A final area is a frozen mountain forest inhabited only by wolves, whose central feature is a burial ground with numerous elevated platforms, such as those used by some Great Plains tribes (Polony). Of the identifiable tribes, only the Cheyenne are friendly, with their village providing a resting point after the player defeats one warrior in a duel; among others, one character in the pueblo area provides the player with assistance, after being given a peace pipe. A selection of these locations, Indians, and animal encounters is shown in Figure 5. No explanation is ever offered concerning the immediate hostility between O’Brian and most other characters. Viewed from the perspective of colonial studies, certainly this hostility may be understood as part of

the standard trope of the all-conquering white protagonist (cf. Jayanth). However, the caveat should be made that across Silmaril's oeuvre, the inexplicable hostility of other characters regardless of location and ethnicity is standard, with combat simply constituting a core gameplay component of their side-view action games. Indeed, compared to *Manhattan Dealers* (1987), *Targhan*, and *Star Blade* (1990), *Colorado* may be noted for the unusual presence of many *friendly* characters, who both aid O'Brian and must also be aided by him.



Figure 5: A selection of situations from *Colorado*

Source: (A) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Nice Bear, Nice Shot.” Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/368769/>. (B) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Hugh Yourself!” Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/88092/>. (C) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: The Trader.” Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/88089/>. (D) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Be Zen, Kill Indians.” Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/368770/>. (E) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Hmm, a Sign?” Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/368771/>. (F) “Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: It’s Winter Time.” Retrieved from <https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/808034/>. All screenshots are from *MobyGames*, retrieved on 5 May 2023.

The visually diverse (for 1990), and relatively historical, if still rather flat and stereotypical, Indian tribes are among the strongest markers of *Colorado*'s Western connections. However, the nature of combat in *Colorado* connects the overall experience to something rather different: unlike in most Westerns, where progress to some extent equals the white subjugation of the continent and its inhabitants, here is a vision of a permanent wilderness, to be traversed, never to be subjugated. This is highlighted by the weaponry available to the player, limited to a hand axe, a knife, and a front-loaded rifle. The rifle affords only one shot before it needs to be slowly reloaded, making it not so much useless as indeed dangerous to use against many opponents: if the player misses, or if the enemy is tough enough to endure a shot, the opponent may close the gap before the player can reload. Most of the combat against Indians is thus hand-to-hand, placing the player on even footing. To further emphasize the player's vulnerable position not only *vis-à-vis* the Natives, but also against nature, bears are one of the toughest combatants, capable of enduring multiple rifle hits, or of inflicting heavy damage on the player in close quarters. Nonetheless, while O'Brian is seemingly as powerless *vis-à-vis* the wilderness as Cooper's Bumppo, just like the latter, O'Brian is a signifier of the approach of white civilization, and, in the game's conclusion, uses his new-found gold to establish "the most famous trading post in the region", and thus clearly also contributes to the ongoing "taming" of the frontier.

Key resources for the player are health and gunpowder: the former constantly whittled down in close combat, the latter significantly reduced with every shot. The need to restock these resources, and to obtain dynamite, is resolved by the game through the introduction of an itinerant trader, MacBiggle, whose wagon can be encountered at various locations. No explanation is given as to his presumably friendly relations with the otherwise hostile Indians, but certainly such trade did occur. MacBiggle provides the player with healing potions, gunpowder and dynamite in exchange for resources found by exploring the gameworld or by combat: animal hides, gold nuggets and Indian necklaces. All these resources are pre-determined by the designer, and thus strictly limited: if the player fails to progress through the game efficiently enough, O'Brian will run out of gunpowder or simply be overcome in combat. *Colorado*'s gameplay is thus designed to highlight the player's precarious role as an explorer trying to get through the territory, rather than a conqueror capable of subjugating it: precisely the experience of the dying French colonial empire, which had struggled to attract mass settlement, and relied on a precarious system of fur trapping and trade (Fernández-Armesto 84).

## 5. Conclusion

The complexity of navigation with the possibility of getting lost or simply drowning in unexpected river rapids, the paucity of resources, and the strange combination

of power and vulnerability granted in combat by the cumbersome barrel-loaded rifle, combine together into a sense that it is the experience of *being* a vulnerable fur trapper in unknown lands that is central here, rather than *conquering* the land or *beating* the game. Arguably, the game thus fits the definition of what Adam Chapman describes as game-based historical reenactment (198–230), bearing also all the limitations of such reenactment, such as the unwillingness to engage with complex and morally challenging aspects of the reenacted history, and the sanitization of violence. Nonetheless, *Colorado* provides a rare glimpse into the French West before it was subsumed into the American Wild West; though seemingly casting the player as an Anglo-Saxon (or Anglo-Irish?) character, and playing mainly with motifs borrowed from Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*—possibly also Aimard's and May's novels—there is a sense that O'Brian lives in a different world to that of the Western hero, a world in which the white man is only an intruder, not an inevitable conqueror. This is the world of France's colonial empire, where traders and fur trappers, largely deprived of military support, would often seek to establish friendly relations with the Native inhabitants of the land.

Apart from its unique setting and narrative convention, what is notable about *Colorado* is how—typically for a Silmarils game—the relatively uncomplicated gameplay is tailored to expand on the game's narrative themes. In the case of *Colorado*, this results in something truly peculiar: a game that tries to build 3D spatial exploration into a game built around two dimensions. This mode of exploration, though clearly a technological compromise, is unexpectedly successful: when viewing the playing area from the side, it is possible for players to miss passages hidden behind trees or bushes, something that is harder to achieve in a fully 3D and first-person based game. Similarly, though the definition of an open gameworld is a wide, non-linear map structure, *Colorado*'s construction around the linear spine of the river did not prevent it from being open to exploration: instead, it simply provided a more directed, maze-like experience that made the player a traveller passing through the world rather than permanently inhabiting it. Yet, it is clear full open worlds were precisely the direction Silmarils wanted to take: four years later, they would produce *Robinson's Requiem* (1994), a first-person game far closer to modern open-world titles. Though this futuristic science-fiction game had a radically different setting to *Colorado*, as well as far more complex survival mechanics (Schreiber), a path of evolutionary development can be traced between these titles. *Colorado* was a transitional title, constrained by the technology and resources of its developers, but still establishing a prototypical open-world game oriented towards long and careful exploration.

As we conclude, it is worth noting *Colorado* is no longer the only game exploring this fragment of American history. There are two other games that in some ways relate to the timeframe and rough geographic area of the American colonial frontier: *Assassin's Creed III* (2012) and its spin-off *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). These titles, part of a series of fully open-world games that have repeatedly been cited by scholars as prominent case studies of historical reconstruction in games

(cf. Granström), and coming three decades after *Colorado*, are certainly impressive visual showcases, depicting the colonial architecture of Boston and New Orleans, their social milieux, as well as the wilderness of the colonial frontier, whether on the peripheries of Boston, the *bayoux* of New Orleans, or, indeed, sharing the up-state New York area and time period of *The Last of the Mohicans*. The connection between these titles and Cooper's works would be well worth exploring. However, given the games' status as part of a long-running series, they never have the liberty to truly explore the proto-Western themes visible in Cooper's work and in *Colorado*: they are always, first and foremost, *Assassin's Creed* games. The assassin, capable of dispatching several armed soldiers in seconds, easily capable of slaughtering bears and wolves in the colonial countryside, simply cannot evoke the setting, nor the Cooperian literary references of *Colorado*. Still, as open-world games made by a French company, they are perhaps *Colorado*'s distant descendants.

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