

# The class where video games meet history

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Tore Olsson put his students in touch with American history through his popular and award-winning class "Red Dead America: Exploring America's Violent Past Through the Hit Video Games." Now this engagement has reached beyond the classroom—[the \*American Historical Review\* \(AHR\)](#), has published a major feature on the class as an example

of creative and innovative history teaching.

Olsson is an associate professor and director of graduate studies in UT's Department of History. His focus as a historian is the United States since the Civil War, with a particular interest in the US South, rural [history](#), and transnational history. His December 2023 *AHR* article, "Teaching History with Video Games," explores his inspiration to channel this focus into a college course.

While playing the [video game](#) "Red Dead Redemption II" during the pandemic, he realized that he could apply interest in the wildly popular game toward teaching the real US history.

"My epiphany, therefore, was simple," wrote Olsson. "Why not try teaching an undergraduate class that uses the fictional content of the game as a gateway to exploring some of the thorniest dilemmas that wracked the United States between the 1870s and 1920s?"

A February 2021 [social media](#) post announcing the new course went viral. By August of the same year, the class launched with 60 students—double the usual size for such a class. His innovative success with the class earned him a James R. and Nell W. Cunningham Outstanding Teaching Award at the College of Arts and Sciences Annual Awards Banquet in February 2023.

Olsson's article details how his class examines the American history presented in the game with assigned readings and written assignments exploring the varied historical contexts, chronology, and repercussions of historical events.

"It was a tremendous honor and thrill to be invited by the *AHR*'s editor to write about my class in the pages of the journal," said Olsson. "This is a big affirmation from the academy that what's going on at UT is the most

ground-breaking [teaching](#) and research work in the profession."

Olsson enjoyed the class so much that he wrote a book based on it aimed at a wider audience of video gamers and history buffs. "Red Dead's History: A Video Game, An Obsession, and America's Violent Past," to be published by St. Martin's Press in August 2024. It examines how well the game's scenarios fare as recreations of history, exploring the real violence and political turbulence between 1870 and 1920, and what can be learned to understand contemporary American culture.

Olsson will teach the course again in spring 2024.

**More information:** Tore Olsson, Teaching History with Video Games, *The American Historical Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/ahr/rhad488](https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhad488)

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