

The Cult and Contemporary American Politics in Ubisoft's *Far Cry 5* (2018)

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Abstract: The existence of cults within North America is nothing new. However, when cults with an apocalyptic worldview are represented in contemporary North American fiction, something specific can be seen to occur. As Žižek (2010) argues, the four horsemen of the apocalypse are now embodied by global contemporary issues (for example: biogenetic concerns, ecological crises). Apocalyptic belief underpins not only fictional narratives but recognizable ideologies within religious, political and secular spheres, and has done so for centuries, specifically within the United States. However, a considerable number of post-/apocalyptic videogames have specifically turned toward the cult as a recurrent figure in their storytelling. Therefore, drawing upon philosophical, socio-political, and literary source materials (Foucault (1986); Thompson (1997); Sutton (2014); Introvigne (2014)), alongside narratives from novelistic, filmic, televisual and videogaming platforms, this article will explore the use of the cult in post-/apocalyptic fictions. Using Ubisoft's 2018 videogame, *Far Cry 5*, as a case study, this article highlights the use of a fictional cult known as The Project at Eden's Gate to critique contemporary American politics, aligning the violence of apocalyptic scenarios with the violence of President Donald J. Trump's own apocalyptic rhetoric. Ultimately, this article will posit the cult as a new trope within post-/apocalyptic fictions; one which seeks to challenge constructs of power.

Keywords: apocalypse, *Far Cry 5*, American politics, cult, Othering, resistance

Cults and Post-/Apocalyptic Videogames

Religion has seemingly re-entered public life and public (and thus *media*) discourse at a whole new level in the years since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. [...] It changed the landscape by altering frameworks and contexts within which religion and religious ideas seem to be active in history, culture and media. (Hoover 2006, 235)

Trends come and go throughout the videogaming industry, from the retelling of wartime eras as seen with the popularity of *Call of Duty* (2003-present) to intrigue in fantasy roleplaying, as seen with franchises such as *Dragon Age* (2009-present) and *The Witcher* (adapted from novels in 2007-2015). A recognisably popular trend, arising post-9/11 in the American gaming industry, and continuing to gain momentum, is that of the post-/apocalyptic videogame. The use of such eschatological scenarios recognisable in the beliefs of premillennial dispensationalism construct storylines justifying violent and thrilling narratives.¹ Whilst the initial aftermath of September 11, 2001 (9/11) saw recognisable American works paying homage to the event - Quesada's *Amazing Spiderman* (2001); Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004); Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2004); John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006); Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) – and scenes of destruction and emotional upheaval following the aftermath of 9/11 were popular throughout American

¹ Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, Keniston' and Quinn's *Literature after 9/11* and Versluys' *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* posit detailed research into the response of literature in post-9/11 America. Ryan Lizardi's "Repelling the Invasion of the "Other": Post-Apocalyptic Alien Shooter Videogames Addressing Contemporary Cultural Attitudes" looks more specifically at the relationship between first-person shooter videogames and 9/11. Of course, apocalyptic imagery is not new to American fiction or, in fact, the American psyche, with notions of end-time scenarios filtering through fictional accounts as far back as the 20th century (Matthew Avery Sutton's *American Apocalypse* provides examples of such developments within the American psyche; whilst Paul S. Fiddes' *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* provides evidence of fictional changes over time). However, the rise of consumerist interest with regards to videogames and the apocalyptic has seen a significant increase in post-9/11 America.

fictions, the trend amongst the videogaming industry did not dissipate, as is often the case. Instead, the interest in the apocalyptic continues, as does its profitability.

As philosopher Slavoj Žižek proposes:

[the] 'four riders of the apocalypse' [in our contemporary world] are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions. (2010, x)

The impending sense of the apocalyptic is not new – in fact, as addressed by Matthew Avery Sutton, from as far back as the late-nineteenth century growing numbers of radical evangelicals have preached of “an imminent apocalypse”, as dictated by the Book of Revelation, expanding this belief across “the nation’s major denominations, identifying as Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Pentecostals” (2014, 2-3). However, within America’s popular culture, apocalyptic belief has progressively underpinned both religious and secular thought (Gray 2007, 150). Post-/apocalyptic imagery not only allows narratives to engage with the consequences of life-altering events – as exemplified by the above responses to 9/11 – but exists as a recognisable influence across all public spheres – religious, political, secular. This appears to be the case in many contemporary American works, which often portray eschatological events as a means of challenging societal issues within the modern world.

This article seeks to consider a specific trope within the post-/apocalyptic genre of America’s contemporary videogaming industry. That of the “cult”. A pejorative term (Chryssides and Zeller 2014, 5), cults are considered “small, [...] inward-looking [...] and possibly threatening” (Beckford 1985, 12-13). Whilst I do not endorse the description of cult groups as threatening to society – nor does Beckford – with the tradition of anticult movements

creating an image of the cult as Other and dangerous, the relationship between “cult” and “threat” appears inescapable; particularly when considering cult movements with an apocalyptic worldview. As Eileen Barker identifies, after the Jonestown massacre of November 1978, “no new religion would be regarded in quite the same light or treated in quite the same way” (Barker 1986, 330). The inability for society to comprehend such behaviour – the apparent wilful suicide of over 900 men, women and children – led to anticult rhetoric defining cults as detailed above. It is this Othering, and this notion of the apocalyptic “cult”, that this article will analyse – considering why the cult trope has grown in popularity within the videogaming industry. For the purpose of this argument, therefore, I will be using the term “cult” to both acknowledge the anticult motif of the cult as threat and outside of society, whilst also seeking to challenge this pejorative understanding.

Using Ubisoft's *Far Cry 5* (2018) as a case study in an effort to address the above concern, this article will exemplify how fictional portrayals of cults – in this case, The Project at Eden's Gate (The Project), defined as a cult throughout the videogame's duration – subvert the expected demonisation of such movements. Whilst *Far Cry 5* was produced by a Canadian company, the representation of The Project directly engages with the representation of American cults and explores contemporary American politics. It directly references current political affairs within the United States and, in doing so, allows the videogame to use cult representation to challenge right-wing, Republican political views within America: by extension, considering those who believe in literalist interpretations of the bible². It will also consider the right-wing political views specifically embodied by the 45th President of the

² Whether this be the intention of the creative director – Dan Hay – is to be debated. As explained in an interview prior to the game's release, “Gone is the ‘global village’. [...] Now we're starting to hear words like ‘us’ and ‘them’. [...] And then in January 2016, a group of armed extremists occupied the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. [...] When I saw on television that a militia in Oregon had taken over a wildlife preserve and basically held the [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives] and the FBI at bay for 41 days [...] I was like, ‘Ok. Now this makes sense.’” (Charlie Hall 2017, n.p.). For Hay, whilst *Far Cry 5* was envisioned before the inauguration of Donald J. Trump – for example – the game still resonates with political and societal turmoil currently felt by those with an anti-governmental sway.

United States – Donald J. Trump – and the conservative right. This article will show that, through fictional representation, the cult can be seen to exist as a popular trope within contemporary post-/apocalyptic videogames to challenge contemporary ideologies and deconstruct the expectation of the cult as a danger to “normative” society.

The Cult as Resistance to Power

Cults are not new to fictional representations of the apocalypse, particularly in America: in fact, the existence of cults within America is itself not a new phenomenon, with the infamous Jonestown massacre in Guyana (as mentioned above), the Manson Family murders, and the Waco Siege piquing the consumer imaginary throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such movements have helped enforce the anticult stigmatisation of cults as Other and dangerous. However, it must also be considered that the circumstances under which these movements are created can help maintain the notion of the dangerous cult. The behaviours of Jonestown, Waco and the Manson Family, amongst others, have “inadvertently and indirectly helped to reinforce [...] major cultural and social boundaries between images of the normal and abnormal person” (Beckford 1985, 11). Charismatic leaders, brainwashing, and violence are all common terms heard throughout anticult discourse, particularly in relation to apocalyptic and/or millenarian cult groups. However, these criteria can also be products of societal mistreatment toward these movements: if cults are viewed as minority groups outside of “normative” society, then their movement from society to its peripheries must be a result of an inability to find a place within the contemporary climate.

With the rise of cult representation within post-/apocalyptic videogames, we can begin to observe interactions between anticult discourse and those who seek to problematize such negative stigmatisations. As previously discussed, the apocalyptic imaginary exists not only in the fictional, but in contemporary American religious and secular spheres, also. And, whilst Slavoj Žižek discusses the rise of the apocalyptic in the rhetoric of the ecological crisis,

imbalances within society and social inequalities, he also turns our attention toward what he perceives to be the biggest apocalyptic threat to contemporary life: “our struggle is [...] against those in power in general, against their authority, against the global order and the ideological mystification which sustains it” (Žižek 2010, xv). For Žižek, it is the imbalance of power that presents us with an apocalyptic end. And, as Žižek points out, we cannot conceive of the removal of such authority in contemporary society without an end-world, clean-slate scenario.

I propose, in analysing the use of cults as a trope within apocalyptic videogames, we can build a case wherein the cult exists as a mode of resistance to regimes of power. Arguably, Žižek's warning of our hierarchical struggle between those in power and those subjugated can be construed as an anticult versus cult dilemma; wherein the attempted Othering of cults is a means of silencing, to prevent resistance against regimes of power. The anticult approach to cult movements, for example, has instilled a reactionary fear into society when the term “cult” is employed to define a group of people perceived to deviate from normative behaviours. Why are cults Othered and subjected to prosecution, if not to silence those which are deemed a threat to the status quo of society? “We need to ask why public sentiment has been so hostile towards [cults] and why such an apparently marginal phenomenon has given rise to such energetic attempts at control” (Beckford 1985, 7).

The Cult as Deviant Space

Overtly, many contemporary videogames appear to abide by the anticult motif of cult as dangerous: the *Silent Hill* series (1999-2014) frames its narrative around The Order, whose eventual destruction shapes the fifteen-year franchise; *The Church in the Darkness* (2019) introduces the Collective Justice Mission, a cult the protagonist infiltrates in order to rescue their nephew; *Days Gone* (2019) portrays the Rest In Peace cult, who deform their bodies in honour of the walking dead. However, a noticeable shift should be noted in a growing number of cult representations across fiction. Narratives such as *Far Cry 5* and *Far Cry: New Dawn*

(2019), whilst overtly mirroring the anticult rhetoric of cults as dangerous and Other, are also beginning to challenge such stereotypical representations. The portrayal of The Project throughout *Far Cry 5* destabilizes the anticult Othering employed to silence those deemed a threat to societal normativity.

As academics recognize the need to challenge the control of cults through anticult rhetoric, “public opinion [has become] more sensitive to historical nuances” when considering the past treatment of these communities by federal agencies: for example, in examining the violent treatment of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, public opinion “recognized that the Mount Carmel community was less exotic and more typically American than the authorities and their advisers in the ‘anticult’ movement would have them believe” (Thompson 1997, 281). Further research has recognized how “[calmer] assessments by academics [of cult movements] were available [from] at least the late 1980s [...] [but instances of] academics accused of being ‘cult apologists’ were not surprising” (Introvigne 2014, xix). When academics attempt to explore the creation of cult movements or understand their ideologies in a less condemnatory manner than is to be expected, efforts are made to enforce the image of the cult as dangerous. The position of “us versus them” that dominates the relationship between society and cult movements continues to be propagated. But, understanding a close proximity exists between cult movements and society – as is the case for Koresh’s not so “exotic” community and The Project of *Far Cry 5* – allows us to question why such groups are feared and, furthermore, why sources of power seek to control such communities so violently.

The “Americanness” of the Branch Davidians – their lack of “exoticness” as described above – is mirrored in the representation of The Project throughout *Far Cry 5* and their charismatic leader, Joseph Seed: a white American male of Christian denomination who believes in the End of Time as dictated by a literalist interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

James R. Lewis highlights that “society will find groups or individuals within itself that it can construe as threatening and evil” (1994, xiii). *Far Cry 5* conforms to this expectation, seemingly supporting the anticult sentiment of the cult as Othered and dangerous, despite portraying Joseph Seed and The Project as similar to the videogame’s consumer base. The *Far Cry* franchise, which began in 2004, is renowned for its glorification of violent acts - with

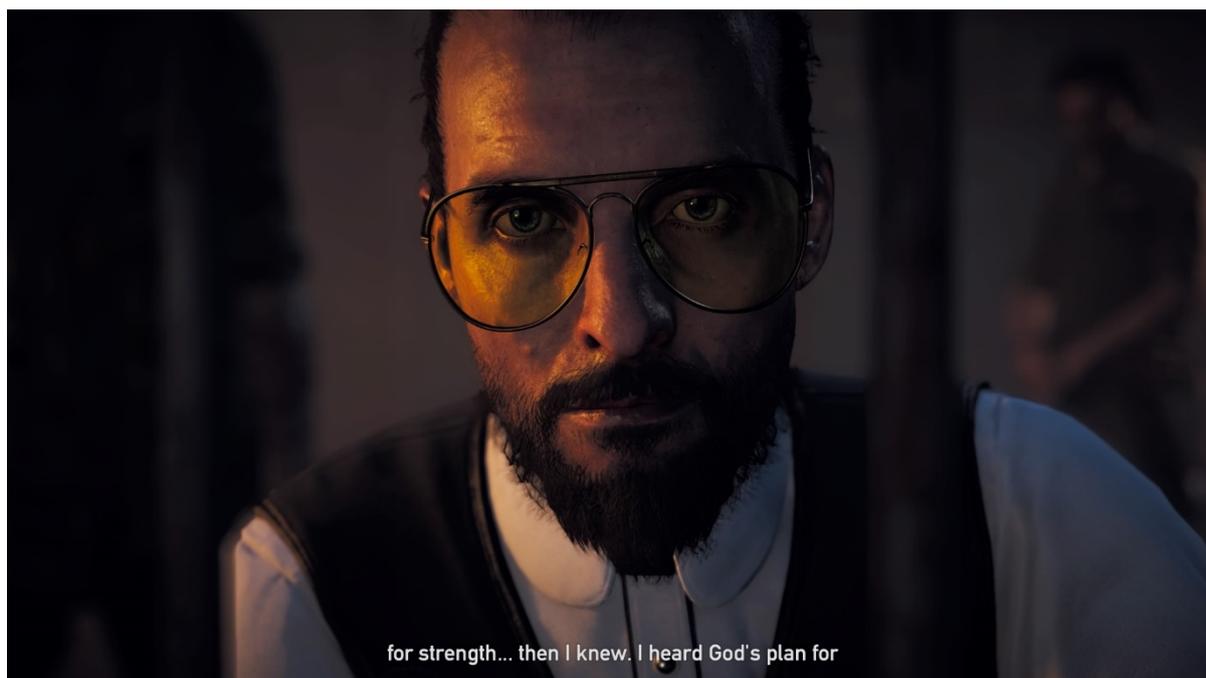


Figure 1 Source: *Far Cry 5* (2018) - Joseph Seed, mirroring David Koresh with aviators and long hair

headlines such as “*Far Cry 3* Delivers Violence With a Knowing Wink” (LeJacq 2012) celebrating such imagery³ – and the use of the foreign “Other” as the antagonist (“Exotic is the word Ubisoft uses, often unflinchingly” (Martin 2018)). In branching away from this tradition and setting the scene within a fictionalized county – Hope County – within Montana, USA, *Far Cry 5* shifts the foreign threat into an internal evil: categorically employing the trope of the foreign Other and casting it upon the trope of the cult. In doing so, the Other of the cult is

³ See also Phillips’ “Ubisoft: *Far Cry 3* violence justified by story”, Kaser’s “Violence in *Far Cry* is fine – until it hits too close to home”, and Stuart’s “*Far Cry 5*’s violent civil unrest is a much-needed reality check for games” to explore a variety of news reports produced to both condemn and celebrate the violence throughout the *Far Cry* franchise.

located to a demographic within America – the white American male with conservative, literalist Christian beliefs.

This white, male demographic mirrors the predominant consumerist market of the *Far Cry* franchise and the unease created by this familiarity is reflected in numerous audience responses. In fact, a Change.org petition created in response to pre-sale art released by Ubisoft demanded the alteration of the premise of *Far Cry 5* and the characterisation of The Project. Some choice arguments are as follows: “Change the villains [...] to something more realistic. Islam is on the rise in America, as is the violence of inner-city gangs. Are you so scared to do so?”; “[If] you insist on making the villains American Christians, consider mixing the races a bit to not target white people exclusively. There are plenty of nationalists of every stripe and every race and every creed.”; “[For] America, right now, Anti-Americanism is out. [...] [Play] to your market. Change the setting to Canada [...]. This way you don't turn away potential players due to offensiveness” (Gamers Unite 2018, n.p.). The violence enacted by antagonists of the *Far Cry* franchise were enjoyed by millions – many celebrated the characterisation of Vaas Montenegro, the pirate lord of the Pacific oceans throughout *Far Cry 3* (2012), for example. However, whilst the game averaged 89.6/100 on Metacritic, *Far Cry 5* averaged 80.3/100. The significant rise in criticism regarding the violent and often extreme behaviour the antagonists of the franchise are known for is a result of their proximity to the identity of many of their target audience: the whiteness and Americanness of The Project destabilizes the “us” versus “them” dichotomy of the videogames prior to *Far Cry 5*; feeding into this challenge toward anticult rhetoric.

So, what makes Joseph Seed so unsettling to so many? Fashioning Joseph as a caricature of David Koresh (Figure 1), the infamous leader of the Branch Davidians, *Far Cry 5* immediately associates The Project and its leadership with the destructive capabilities associated – justifiably or otherwise – with the Waco Siege (1993). Aside from the obvious

biblical connotations of naming The Project's leader "Joseph" – Joseph of the Old Testament, who was betrayed by his brothers but later became advisor to the Pharaoh, and Saint Joseph, the legal father of Jesus Christ – there is allusion here to the messianic: taking the nomenclature of "Joseph Seed" literally, the legal child (or "seed") of Saint Joseph was Jesus Christ. Therefore, Joseph's name directly links him to the Second Coming of Christ, casting him as the Messiah sent to bring change and usher in a new era for The Project. Joseph's messianic purpose is to lead the chosen through the apocalyptic end of Earth, before entering New Eden, as promised to the faithful by God. Cast as the antagonistic Other at the game's opening, the player – the deputy sheriff for Hope County – seeks to arrest Joseph Seed, to which The Project responds with violence. Despite such overtly violent behaviour, Thompson makes an important point in regards to cult movements and their interaction with society: it is "our image of millenarians as outsiders" which reinforces the "comforting and misleading impression that there is no common ground between fanatical millenarians and the rest of society" (1997, iv). It should be noted, the violence of The Project is a reactionary consequence of the threat posed upon them by the deputy and the Hope County resistance they lead. The "Otherness" of The Project exists, therefore, because it becomes easier to process the violent nature of the cult if they are perceived as alien and distanced from our own "civilized" society: the player's violence is justified in that it is directed toward said Othered individuals.

Despite their Othering, however, Joseph Seed is not as "exotic" as previous antagonists of the *Far Cry* franchise. As described above, Joseph is a white American male of Christian denomination. Through his use of phrases familiar to the videogame's audience – such as "take our guns, take our freedom" – and his political and societal views which resonate with the ideologies of contemporary society, *Far Cry 5* creates a jarring sense of familiarity in the portrayal of Joseph Seed, despite his apparent "outsider" status within Hope County. Although

reflecting the stereotypically conservative American ideals of firearms, freedom and faith⁴⁵, the overt representation of the cult as violent Other throughout *Far Cry 5* reinforces their difference from westernized society. Consequently, the gamer is paradoxically forced to defend this American “ideal”, as mentioned above, by destroying The Project, whilst simultaneously destroying a community that wholly embody such “ideals”. The cult, regardless of its closeness to familiar political and religious beliefs, exists as a deviant space that threatens our contemporary lives. I say “overt representation” because I believe the portrayal of the cult within *Far Cry 5* subverts the expected demonization of cult movements. The violence of real-world cults – such as Waco, Jonestown, and the Mason family – and the responsive anticult rhetoric, creates the belief that society and cults rest upon opposite sides of the spectrum: one normative, the other deviant. Yet, through exploring the representation of The Project, we can begin to formulate an argument for perceiving fictional representation as a means of allowing cult narratives to engage with contemporary religious and political concerns, challenging the normative behaviours of society and questioning how “Othered” cult movements truly are.

Samuel and Thompson argue that “national sentiment [...] can hardly be studied without reference to the demonization of enemies both within and without” (1990, 5). Cults are often deviations from our own familiar culture: challenging the way we live our present lives and, seemingly amongst fictional representations of millenarian cults, actively seeking to destroy such ways. They exist as heterotopias, a place which – as Foucault highlights – “simultaneously [represents], [contests] and [inverts]” (1986, 24) the contemporary society they exist *without*, whilst remaining *within* the national identity of America. As seen with

⁴ The 1999 National Archives and Records Administration Annual Report states: “our way of life [...] [is] based on pieces of paper, the Charters of Freedom – the Declaration that asserted our independence, the Constitution that created our government, and the Bill of Rights that established our liberties” (Worsham 1999, 6). Of course, such constitutions include the Second Amendment.

⁵ Dan Hay, the creative director of *Far Cry 5*, describes the recurrent “concept of freedom, faith, and firearms” they came across as Ubisoft researched Montana during the production of the game. Hay continues: “When we were there, [the residents] absolutely didn’t want to be lied to, and this resonating feeling of freedom, faith – and the firearms to protect those two things – came back again and again. [...] [We’re] applying that to the *Far Cry* series.” (Charlie Hall 2017, n.p.).

aforementioned criticism towards *Far Cry 5*, cult movements are unsettling to us because they not only pose a violent threat but disturb the ways we interpret our own lives: they disturb the rigid “us” versus “them” boundaries that govern societal norms. A key example of this can be seen in the beliefs of the Peoples Temple – those killed during the Jonestown Massacre. Despite their violent end, Hall describes them as “an activist religious social movement committed to racial integration, social and economic justice, peace and other progressive and radical political causes” (Hall 1995, 305). Despite being cast by the anticult movement as a brainwashed community led by a tyrannical extremist, their beliefs challenged the very right-wing ideologies the anticult movement accused the Peoples Temple of supporting. We see a similar conflict between violent action and peaceful ideology within The Project throughout *Far Cry 5*.

Challenging Stereotypes of Cults and Violence

At first glance, it would seem Joseph Seed has established The Project with beliefs mirroring conservative religious politics: abstinence, the right to bear arms, and a rejection of all behaviour that conflicts with a hard line or literalist interpretation of biblical teachings. Yet, whilst this would indicate the cult solidly conforms to conservative expectations – remember, the cult not only represents but contests and inverts “normative” ideologies – the game plays upon the concept of cults existing both *within* and *without* society. We see this exemplified in the physical portrayal of The Project. Through the use of different non-playable-character (NPC) models, *Far Cry 5* differentiates between cult AI and resistance – or Hope County – AI. NPC cult members are recognisably dirtier than their societal counterparts: adorned in muddied beige combat jumpers emblazoned with the symbol of The Project, they all wear recognisably similar uniforms and the men all sport facial hair. Furthering this, there exist only a handful of male NPC models used throughout the game to represent cult members: as the player progresses through *Far Cry 5*, the NPCs become less individualized and more a reproduction of the same few figures. In contrast, the members of Hope County society are dressed in varying

colours dependant on their role within the game: plaid shirts and sports trainers if they belong to communal NPCs, military combats should they belong to the resistance force. Therefore, when the player meets an ex-cult member during the main storyline of *Far Cry 5*, he is easily differentiated from Hope County NPCs: he continues to adorn the facial hair inherent among cult NPCs and is identifiably one of the small selection of male NPC models dedicated to representing members of The Project (Figure 2). In making such physical differences obvious, the NPCs of The Project become faceless figures, mass-produced for slaughter at the hands of the player. *Far Cry 5* encourages the player to kill indiscriminately. In removing their individual identities and making them easily identifiable from Hope County NPCs, the cult is successfully “Othered” and therefore deviant to the normative expectations of society, despite

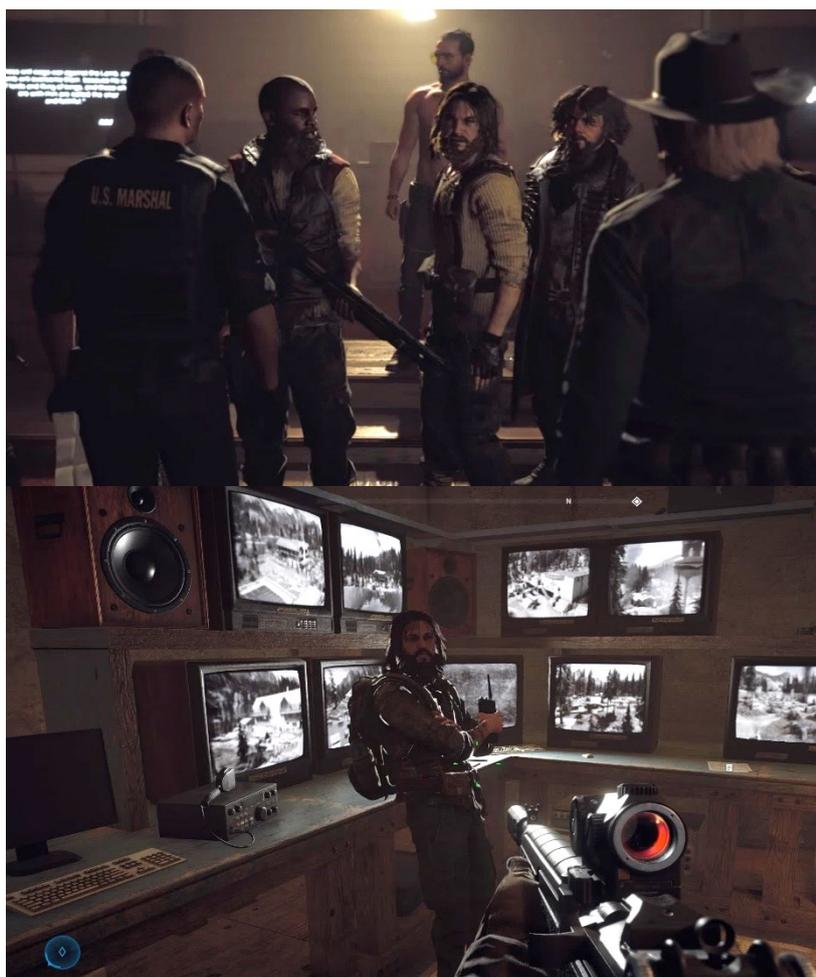


Figure 2 Source: *Far Cry 5* (2018) - (top) the "standard" model of cult members, standing before Joseph Seed, (bottom) the ex-cult member

their ideologies seemingly mirroring conservative apocalyptic Christian beliefs found within contemporary America.

To combat this obvious “Otherness”, Hope County is militarized and the player – as Deputy – becomes the messianic leader of the local community: it is the player who kills the leader of each faction of The Project before ultimately coming face-to-face with the game’s antagonist. Therefore, at face value, *Far Cry 5* offers the player a first-person shooter (FPS) in which you are sent to destroy a cult that threatens the political and religious beliefs underpinning modern-day American life: The Project forces individuals within the Hope County community to join the cult or die. Arguably, if Joseph abides by right-wing ideologies, the game offers a liberal success story in which the left-wing deputy defeats capitalist and conservative ideologies. However, I argue the role of the cult as deviant space allows the videogame to challenge such ideologies, and the very expectation of the player as winner is subverted. Rachel Wagner argues “[unlike] the complexities of real contemporary life, a videogame environment is shaped by known rules that determine what one can and cannot do, and these rules tell us exactly how to win” (2013, 250). Whilst the environment of *Far Cry 5* does indeed dictate the narrative arc of the player, the ability to “win” – to defeat Joseph Seed – is unattainable. We see the first example of this plot twist when the player and Joseph Seed come into contact during a drug-induced hallucination. In a scene in which the player hallucinates a conversation with Joseph and watches the conflict and destruction of the contemporary world destroy a future Earth, Joseph challenges the right-wing political views Hope County society cast The Project as supporting. Instead, Seed positions himself in league with liberal attitudes found in contemporary American society:

[You] look at the same news I do. Do your eyes not fill with horror? [...] Communities being torn apart. Walls being erected. Because leaders are too impotent to act. Bullies are too addled to lead righteously. [...] We

are hurtling towards our destruction and no one is willing to do anything about it. (*Far Cry 5* 2018)

The face value portrayal of the “liberal success story through defeating the cult” within *Far Cry 5* begins to deteriorate and, as we begin to see the concept of “the winner” subverted by the narrative, Joseph’s apparent right-wing allegiances switch. Matthew Avery Sutton acknowledges the rise of fundamentalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within America. In *American Apocalypse*, he highlights the rise of a “radical apocalyptic evangelicalism” which later came to shape what we call “millennialism” (Sutton 2014, 4). These fundamentalists believed “God had destined the rest of humanity to succumb to the Antichrist, tribulation, and then final judgement [whilst] the faithful looked forward to eternal bliss” (Sutton 2014, 4). Interestingly, the drug used to induce the above hallucination is known to The Project as “Bliss” and is used to free its followers from the horrors of the modern world as they await the End Times. Therefore, in alluding to real-life issues within contemporary America – Donald J. Trump’s wall dividing Mexico and the United States, and the increasing racial tensions as a result of his presidential leadership⁶ – during the Bliss-induced hallucination, Joseph adopts the role of a millenarian fundamental, saved from the End Times by God’s grace whilst also functioning as Democratic challenger to the right-wing politics leading contemporary America. Therefore, if the player is to remain on the opposite pole of thought to the cult, they must support the right-wing ideologies listed in Joseph’s monologue. The poles of “winner” and “loser” begin to shift.

The differentiation between “winner” and “loser” extends further still when we consider how Joseph’s belief in the End Times allows him to manipulate biblical allusions to suit his, now liberal, worldview. For example, in parodying the name of the Sheriff, Earl Whitehorse,

⁶ In a 2019 article published by The Pew Research Centre, it was recorded 56% of Americans “think the president has made race relations worse” (Horowitz, Brown and Cox 2019, n.p.).

he uses Revelation 6:8 to address the player as such: “and behold it was a white horse... and Hell followed with him.” As deputy, the player follows the Sheriff both occupationally and, in this scene, physically – standing behind the Sheriff as they confront Joseph for the first time. Therefore, Joseph casts the player as the Antichrist of the narrative. If we are to suppose the nomenclature “Joseph Seed” alludes to the coming of a messianic figure, then the condemnation of The Project by Hope County works to confirm this: the Messiah is often portrayed as a radical figure, pushing against the “normative” ideologies of the time and bringing about significant change. “Every messianic proclamation [...] arrives always [...] in [the] apocalyptic” (Hemming 2005, 48), and if Joseph is cast as the Messiah sent by God to lead his people through the impending nuclear apocalypse, then the deputy is cast as the False Prophet, or Antichrist, seeking to prevent the Messiah from achieving his mission from God to guide his people toward a better time. The expectation of the apocalyptic cult as the threat to society is subverted, for The Project seeks to challenge real-world issues in America whilst the player seeks to prevent such interference. The concept of “winning” is complicated, for winning against the cult would mean supporting the prejudices detailed by Joseph’s “Bliss Monologue” and also, by extension of Sutton’s observations, would cast the player as Antichrist leading us toward the End of Time.

In many violent FPS games, the stereotyped “American way of life” – previously defined as firearms, freedom and faith – appears to be propagated. However, as a deviant space throughout *Far Cry 5*, The Project’s representation draws light upon the political issues within American popular culture in a manner that allows this stereotype to be problematized. Whilst the cult is overtly condemned for their militarisation and violent faith, so too is the community of Hope County. At the opening of *Far Cry 5*, Joseph offers an escape for the player: to arrest him and trigger the commencement of the storyline (as is scripted should the player wish to complete the game) or refuse and walk away, cutting the 17.5 hour narrative down to 10

minutes. Here, *Far Cry 5* plays with notions of secrecy and unveiling; a poignant fact to consider when viewing the videogame as an apocalyptic narrative. Apocalypse [*apokalypsis*] translates to “revelation” (hence the Book of Revelation, detailing the eschatological “End” of the known world) or the unveiling of that which is hidden. As Frank Kermode argues, “apocalypse [...] represents a mood finally inseparable from the condition of life, the contemplation of its necessary ending, the eradicable desire to make sense of it” ([1966] 2000, 187)⁷. It is an open secret that the *Far Cry* franchise conceals hidden endings at the opening of their games. The videogame, therefore, is truly apocalyptic because it engages with the concept of revelation and, for the first time in the franchise, the concealed “ending” within *Far Cry 5* would appear to be the *only* way of “winning” the game. Should the player continue the game as scripted, two alternative endings exist: both condemn the violent actions of the deputy and both entirely remove the concept of “winning”, allowing the antagonist to survive. Before the final “boss battle” between the player and The Project’s charismatic leader, Joseph offers a meta-monologue to the player, admonishing their violent playthrough and challenging the concept of the FPS style that the *Far Cry* franchise is known for:

God is watching us and He will judge us on what we choose in this moment. [...] [Every] [...] choice reveals our sin. [...] When are you going to realize that every problem cannot be solved with a bullet? When you first came here, I gave you the choice to walk away. You chose not to. (*Far Cry 5* 2018)

Condemning the choice to play the game (albeit one of limited freedom, for the *choice* to play the game is a scripted one), Joseph simultaneously challenges the expectation within our contemporary society to demonize and punish cult movements, whilst also challenging the acts

⁷ See also Paul S. Fiddes’ *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* and Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowlands’ *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* for further definitions of apocalypticism.

of violence within American popular culture: the War on Terror, in which the West answered terrorism with terror; the numerous wars as a result of political conflict; the violence enacted toward minority groups across nations all over the world. Violence is inherently condemned by Joseph's final monologue and it is here the player is offered two endings: either walk away from Joseph and leave him to tend to his flock without interference, or fight Joseph and lead Earth toward the apocalypse.

Neither ending sees our playthrough resulting in a "win". Should we walk away, it is discovered our character was successfully "brainwashed" by The Project and murders their companions as they drive out of Hope County. Should we choose to fight Joseph, the Deputy fulfills their role as the Antichrist of The Project's prophecy: as Joseph is about to be executed by the player, the first of many nuclear bombs detonates in the distance. Much contention surrounds the origins of these bombs, with many fan theories blaming Joseph Seed. However, textual evidence within *Far Cry 5* details a series of political conflicts between America and China, resulting in the commencement of a nuclear war at the close of the videogame's narrative (which we later learn destroys most of the known world within *Far Cry: New Dawn* (2019)). This is important to note, for it defines The Project as a cult who *believe* in the End Times, yet do *not* have a direct hand in bringing about the Apocalypse. Furthermore, this ending does not occur should the deputy walk away and is therefore a direct consequence of the player's choice to continue their violent playthrough of the game. Therefore, *Far Cry 5* correlates violence with the End of Times, highlighting a need to reject such conflict and pursue alternative means of conflict resolution.

Discourses of Persecution

Damian Thompson, in his discussion around apocalyptic thinking and millennialism, highlights:

Apocalypticism has been described as a genre born out of crisis, designed to stiffen the resolve of an embattled community by dangling in front of it a vision of a sudden and permanent release from its captivity. It is underground literature, the consolation of the persecuted. (1997, 14)

Through exploring *Far Cry 5*'s representation of The Project, we can see how the cult is used to challenge political issues within contemporary America, alongside problematising the negative stereotypes surrounding cults. As discussed, cults can be understood as heterotopias, trapped in the deviant space between existing *within* a society that defines them as a minority and *without* that society because of their "Othered" status. Therefore, we can understand why Seed would look toward leading his people through the impending nuclear war, toward a "sudden and permanent release from [the] captivity" (Thompson 1997, 14) of their deviant status. As Joseph explains, "I saw what was coming and I chose to act. To lead. Because society is broken and the only way forward... is to go back to the way things once were" (*Far Cry 5* 2018). He sees the need for an apocalyptic-scale event to wipe the slate clean; to remove the right-wing issues he has listed throughout his numerous Bliss-monologues and enter a more liberal era. If apocalyptic rhetoric is the discourse of the persecuted, then the cult – as minority – engages with apocalyptic ideologies as a means of finding purpose.

The first game within the *Far Cry* franchise to cast the antagonist as the "winner", the narrative concludes that in order to escape the injustices of our modern world a clean slate is required: and the only way to achieve such a clean slate is through the total destruction of our contemporary lives. However, as previously explored, *Far Cry 5* also condemns the violent and destructive actions of contemporary American politics. How can the game condemn one act of violence when suggesting another form of destruction is the only way of achieving a clean slate? Likewise, whilst we have acknowledged Joseph's role as a political radical

supporting liberal ideologies, at face value it can be understood how audiences would perceive Joseph Seed as a right-wing conservative Christian, conforming to the expectation of the charismatic cult leader as being one intent on brainwashing and control. This conflict between apocalyptic rhetoric protecting the persecuted and apocalyptic rhetoric supporting violence and destruction reflects the existence of varying forms of apocalypses: such rhetoric can be restorative, compensational or punitive. However, despite these differences, no absolute distinctions exist. Just as Joseph seamlessly transitions from right-wing fanatic to liberal-thinking radical, apocalyptic rhetoric can be used to support the marginalized whilst oppressing them⁸.

It seems poignant, therefore, that *Far Cry 5* directly critiques the contemporary political climate of America, for apocalyptic rhetoric is frequently used by President Donald J. Trump to oppress, which he does so successfully because, paradoxically, he speaks to those who feel persecuted. In recent months, Trump quoted the apocalyptic rhetoric of Senator John Kennedy on Twitter to attack four Democratic representatives – Ayanna Pressley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar:

....they are destroying the Democrat Party. I'm appalled that so many of our Presidential candidates are falling all over themselves to try to agree with the four horsewomen of the apocalypse. I'm entitled to say that they're Wack Jobs." Louisiana Senator John Kennedy (@realDonaldTrump, 17 July, 2019)

Trump's support toward such apocalyptic rhetoric not only aligns these women – of whom, despite being American citizens, are often condemned for being women of colour and therefore “Othered” – with ideas of bringing about destruction and bringing an end to contemporary

⁸ See the aforementioned Kovacs and Rowlands' *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* and Michael S. Northcott's *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire*, which provide insight into how apocalyptic thought has been used within both religious and secular environments, whilst also observing the variegated manner by which apocalypses are employed in such spheres.

America. This tweet comes in response to Pressley, Ocasio-Cortez, Tlaib and Omar aligning themselves in solidarity with Palestine and, therefore, directly criticizing Trump's support toward Israel. Therefore, these Democratic women stand with the oppressed, yet Trump's apocalyptic rhetoric is used to oppress those who are already persecuted and validate their oppressors. This conflict between Israel and Palestine can be found recurrently within rhetoric throughout premillennial dispensationalist beliefs and is considered an important step in the Second Coming of Christ: a scenario represented in detail throughout the *Left Behind* sequence of novels, an apocalyptic biblical series by LaHaye and Jenkins (1995-2007).

Whilst conflicts exist between those using apocalyptic rhetoric to free the oppressed and those using it to oppress, engaging with this dualistic relationship allows *Far Cry 5* to contest its use by Trump and many others who seek to use such discourse as a means of oppression and, by extension, contest the anticult rhetorical battle against cult movements as a whole. As Ania notes, "apocalyptic writing re-surfaces in times of persecution and crisis, and promises deliverance and redemption to those who endure" (2014, 284). With the rise of apocalyptic and cult representations within the American videogaming industry, we can see a rise in the application of certain forms of apocalyptic narrative as emancipatory. *Far Cry 5*'s deliberate criticism of violence enacted by contemporary America, for example, alongside its use of apocalyptic discourse by Joseph Seed calls for radical change toward a more liberal era, echoing the voices of Pressley, Ocasio-Cortez, Tlaib, Omar and many others who challenge the use of religious ideologies to support violent and oppressive behaviour.

After the commencement of the nuclear war at the narrative's conclusion, the player awakens in a bunker alongside Joseph, who has dragged the deputy's unconscious body away from the destruction above. As they listen to the End of the World, Joseph states "the politicians have been silenced [...] the corporations have been erased" (*Far Cry 5* 2018). Joseph speaks underground, mirroring Thompson's description of apocalypticism as "underground literature,

the consolation of the persecuted” (1997, 14) and Joseph is confirmed as the messianic political revolutionary, guiding his people through the End of Times as the capitalist and political ideologies condemned throughout the narrative are eradicated. The cult of *Far Cry 5* becomes a space of accomplished political resistance, as deliverance and redemption are provided to The Project, whilst the world burns above them.

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