Playing to Make America Great Again: *Far Cry 5* and the Politics of Videogames in the Age of Trumpism

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the politics of mainstream videogames in the contemporary political moment in the United States. To illustrate the political agency of videogames, the paper first considers the entanglements of videogames and gamer culture in the anti-progressive backlash that has accompanied Donald Trump's presidential campaign and presidency by looking at the GamerGate harassment campaign. The article then provides a critical reading of Ubisoft's *Far Cry 5* (2018), which demonstrates how the videogame (re)produces reactionary ideologies. *Far Cry 5* repeatedly employs tropes and narratives steeped in American colonialism, expresses a yearning for the past and its way of life, and works through a logic of taking back the country under the feeling of having one's home taken away by strangers. As it thus evokes a sense of 'making America great again,' *Far Cry 5* exemplifies the political resonance of videogames in the ongoing phenomenon of Trumpism in the United States.

KEYWORDS: Videogames; Politics; Trump; *Far Cry 5*; Retrotopia; GamerGate

Introduction: Videogames in the Age of Trumpism

Videogames matter. They do not only matter because hundreds of millions of people around the globe enjoy playing them, although this is reason enough to take them seriously. Rather, videogames matter because they are intimately entangled with ideologies, politics, and power relations of numerous figurations. Although often viewed as mere entertainment, mindless and inconsequential, videogames have always been highly political and implicated in different political discourses. To borrow from Bruno Latour's actor-network terminology, videogames are fully-fledged actors in the world, shaped by all sorts of technological, economic, and cultural forces, and they, in turn, set legion of other actors into motion. To contribute to an understanding of their cultural work, this article sheds light on the politics of videogames in the context of the current political moment in the United States, which can be described as the age of Trumpism. In her essay on "The Meta-Violence of Trumpism," Samira Saramo writes that

> [b]eyond Trump's personality, "Trumpism" came to represent the movement and ideas driving his election. As a new phenomenon, however, varied definitions and uses of the concept have been employed by voters and pundits. Though the definition of Trumpism is in flux and contested, it offers a useful lens for viewing a new phase of U.S. politics and for analyzing Donald Trump's political ascendance. (3)

Evidently, this era is about much more than what Donald Trump as the United States' forty-fifth president represents and Trumpism itself also has more facets than those addressed

here.[1] Saramo states that "we can identify three key characteristics of Trumpism: populism, strongman politics, and identitarianism" (3). Of these three, 'identitarianism' will be central to the connections between videogames and Trumpian rhetoric that I sketch out in this article. As will become evident, these and further features of Trumpism discussed below, especially its anti-progressive as well as anti-media rhetoric and reactionary politics, prove instructive in understanding the work of mainstream videogames in the current political moment, and vice versa. In the following pages, I will analyze Ubisoft's popular open-world shooter *Far Cry 5* as a paradigmatic example of the politics of videogames in the face of an ongoing "anti-progressive/anti-feminist backlash" in the United States (Esposito and Romano 57), which has only gotten worse since Trump's presidential campaign and subsequent election.

The article begins with a brief consideration of the online harassment campaign against women in videogaming now referred to as GamerGate and the trajectories that connect it to the so-called Alt-Right, "a loosely connected group of white nationalists" that rose to mainstream media recognition in the wake of Trump's election (Sherr and Carson). This serves not only to establish a context for my analysis of *Far Cry* 5 but also to highlight the role played by gamer culture in enabling anti-progressive ideas to further gain currency during the past few years. The remainder of the article will then take a close look at the videogame, the discourses it mobilizes, and how it thus relates to the political moment of Trumpism.

My approach to videogames here is indebted to critical Game Studies scholarship that has been concerned with situating videogames and their cultural work in existing power structures, such as Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* and Nick Dyer-Witheford's and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, as well as those scholars who put an emphasis on the procedural and actionable aspects of videogaming while remaining attuned to their political and ideological underpinnings, such as Ian Bogost and Alexander R. Galloway. Murray's work in particular is invested in highlighting the mutual exchanges between videogames, culture, and politics against a still widespread dismissal of videogames as a medium whose cultural impact deserves to be taken seriously and thus serves as a major reference point for my own approach to videogames. In the introduction to her book, she writes: "Is the 'culture' in games culture the 'culture' in cultural studies? The answer to that question is both yes and no. No: it is not conceived of in this way; but Yes: in fact they are one and the same, and we should begin to fully think of them as such" (42). Likewise, TreaAndrea Russworm, who highlights the need to interrogate videogaming's cultural work "in an age of reanimated white supremacy" (76), asserts that "video games are also powerful simulations that produce artificially constructed imagery or data, and like all imagery, systems, and data,

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1   For concise discussions of several aspects of Trumpism, see the short essay series "The Rise of Trumpism" edited by Lucas Bessire and David Bond for *Fieldsights*, run by the Society for Cultural Anthropology.

video games disseminate dominant values, beliefs, and assumptions in much the same way that 'fake news,' tweets, memes, and viral videos of police brutality do" (74). It is with this insistence on videogames as firmly belonging to the "dominant culture" (Murray 26), rather than somehow standing outside of it, that I approach the cultural work of *Far Cry 5* in the context of Trumpism in the following pages.[2]

From GamerGate to the 'Alt Right'

In the beginning, there was GamerGate, an extensive harassment campaign against women in videogaming which began to boil up in 2012, reached its peak in 2014, and, though it somewhat abated since, never entirely ceased. In a way, much of what has since become the new normal in the form of a public anti-progressive discourse first began to materialize and become visible on a large scale during GamerGate (Nieborg and Foxman 125; cf. also Lees). This is not to say that the roots of this moment in which, among others, misogyny, racism, and xenophobia appear undisguised in the public arena do not go back much further in time—one should be aware of the long histories of bigotry in the United States (and elsewhere) of which the current moment is yet another outburst. Nor is it to say that events like GamerGate or the election of Trump created something entirely new, even as there may be some new elements to it. Rather, they can be considered symptoms giving expression to long-standing sentiments and impulses which have always been there, even as they often remain subdued in public. Yet looking at GamerGate, as scholars and journalists have since pointed out (e.g. Lees; Nieborg and Foxman), can help illuminate some of the dynamics of the Trumpian moment as well as help understand the role videogames, as a dominant form of popular culture in the twenty-first century, play in the current political climate.

Since GamerGate, as well as its roots and implications, has been analyzed and discussed sufficiently and in depth by others (see, for example, Chess and Shaw; Shaw and Chess), this part will give a brief summary that rehashes the main points of GamerGate to provide a context for the following parts of the article. Emerging from and around the online imageboard and meme factory 4chan,[3] and subsequently promoted on various websites and

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[2]   Although critical academic work on videogames has a long history, approaches situated in or inspired by Cultural Studies have for a long time been marginalized in the larger field of Game Studies and only become more prominent and more widely recognized in the past few years. Part of the reason for this neglect is arguably the legacy of the so-called ludologists, which has resulted in an exaggerated emphasis on form and ontology, among others, within Game Studies. For more on this, see the insightful introduction to Murray's book, aptly titled "Is the 'Culture' in Game Culture the 'Culture' of Cultural Studies?" Moreover, it is worth calling attention to the fact that the study of videogames is still rather marginalized in the field of American Studies in Germany (perhaps less so in the United States). Hence this essay aims to provide an exemplary analysis of the cultural work of a specific videogame (as well as gamer culture generally) in a specific context in order to both continue the work of bringing critical approaches to Game Studies and to showcase not only the relevance of Game Studies to American Studies in Germany but also produce an example of what this kind of work may look like in practice.

[3]   "4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images"

social media (Shaw and Chess 280), GamerGate was a vile harassment campaign against women in videogame culture. During this campaign, rampant misogyny, verbal abuse, and threats of physical violence were cloaked in a proclaimed struggle for ethics in journalism (specifically games journalism), for 'freedom of speech,' and generally against any progressive endeavors to change the culture at large—that is, against anything and anyone attempting to make videogame culture more inclusive. In these basic features of GamerGate, one can already recognize some central tenets of Trumpism: attacks against the media, which are perceived to be biased; a sense of freedom under threat; and a general hostility toward progressive ideas.

The prelude to what eventually became known as GamerGate began in 2012, when media critic Anita Sarkeesian started a *Kickstarter* campaign for her website *Feminist Frequency* to fund a series of YouTube clips called "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games," in which she intended to deconstruct stereotypical representations of women in videogames (Chess and Shaw 210; Sarkeesian, "Tropes"). "In response," Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw write, "Sarkeesian received, and still receives, rape and death threats" (210). Predictably, the attacks only intensified once the series actually went into production—after the funding goal was exceeded by over $150,000 (Maguire)—and at one point forced Sarkeesian to leave her home, with the entire case eventually ending up at the FBI (Crecente). By this time, it was 2014 and the larger hate movement that came to be known as GamerGate had begun. The campaign and the hashtag that gave it its name started when independent game developer Zoë Quinn was falsely accused by her ex-boyfriend of sleeping with a reviewer to get a positive review of one of her videogames. The harassment that ensued was comparable in nature to that experienced by Sarkeesian. Shaw and Chess summarize its extent as follows:

> The worst of the attacks came in the form of doxxing (posting of large amounts of a target's personal information online), swatting (tricking police units into raiding a target's home) and death threats. Doxxing and death threats drove Zoe Quinn and another game designer Brianna Wu from their homes. Wu's offense was re-tweeting image memes that made fun of GamerGate submitted to her by fans of her podcast. Moreover, feminist popular cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian . . . was forced to cancel a talk at the University of Utah following a mass shooting threat. (280)

Despite such disproportionate and violent actions on the part of the perpetrators, GamerGate was framed by its disciples as an effort to expose unethical practices in games journalism. Hence the Twitter hashtag #GamerGate, popularized by actor Adam Baldwin and ostensibly framing misogynistic harassers as media watch dogs (Shaw and Chess 279), soon came to denote a movement that was built on little other than hatred. It was based on contempt for anyone trying to change a culture largely resting on white male supremacy, with Sarkeesian and Quinn being only two of several prominent female game developers and critics subjected to excessive abuse.

("FAQ"), all anonymously, which sometimes produces memes that get circulated and become popular outside of 4chan.

The rhetorical parallels between Trumpism and GamerGate make the latter relevant to comprehending the current political moment—although, as is often the case, this realization emerged as obvious only in hindsight. As *The Guardian*'s Matt Lees asserts: "This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it." As several scholars and journalists have since pointed out, GamerGate was essentially a prelude to both the emergence of the so-called Alt-Right and something like a first draft of the script of Trump's ascendance to the White House (see especially Lees; cf. also Sherr and Carson; Bezio; Nieborg and Foxman). Several scholars have since described GamerGate as the first battle in a larger culture war against social progress and ideas of equality and inclusion—with a particular contempt for feminism and identity politics as well as a perceived culture of 'political correctness'—in which sentiments and impulses that have always existed, but generally remained repressed, suddenly burst into the open. Highlighting the inherent "essentialism" that pervades American culture at large, Murray writes that "GamerGate can be thought of as a paradigmatic irruption of something that would normally remain pervasive but invisible into public view" (39). Likewise, David Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman contend that

> Gamergate was not a passing controversy, but the start of an ongoing culture war that extends far beyond the world of gaming and continues to the present day. For those who think that Gamergate is over, think again. It might not be receiving sustained coverage as it once did, but its infrastructure, ideology, and methods are very much intact; its members are primed to take on the next battle. (125)

That videogaming should become the site of this first battle should not necessarily be viewed as inevitable, yet in light of the retrograde kind of culture that persists in mainstream videogaming to this day, it certainly cannot be considered a surprise.

Besides being "an excellent breeding ground and practice ground" for the New Right, to quote Soraya Chemaly, who directs the Women's Media Center's Speech Project (qtd. in Sherr and Carson), there is also a continuity of personnel between GamerGate, the Alt-Right (whose members openly promote white supremacy), and Trump's propaganda machine. Some people who were active proponents of GamerGate, for example, YouTubers like Carl Benjamin alias 'Sargon of Akkad' and manosphere[4] activist Mike Cernovich, have since promoted central ideas of the so-called Alt-Right. Others, like Milo Yiannopoulos and Stephen Bannon, who had no substantial connection to gamer culture,[5] quickly tapped into

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[4] According to the *Washington Post*'s Caitlin Dewey, the manosphere comprises "a vast, diverse network of blogs and forums that take a certain antagonistic stance toward women and dating. . . . their core philosophy basically boils down to this: (1) feminism has overrun/corrupted modern culture, in violation of nature/biology/inherent gender differences, and (2) men can best seduce women (slash, save society in general) by embracing a super-dominant, uber-masculine gender role, forcing ladies to fall into step behind them." For an academic analysis of the manosphere's values and worldviews, see, for example, Debbie Ging's article "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere."

[5] Nonetheless, Bannon did make some of his money investing in a company employing *World of Warcraft* gold farmers, which are people who play an online multiplayer videogame solely to amass in-game items in order to sell them to other players for real money (Snider).

this pool of angry white men to promote their own agendas (Snider; Nieborg and Foxman 113). The simultaneously anxious and anger-inducing sentiments at the core of all these different phenomena, which all go back to ideas about white masculinity, intimately connect them. "Game culture's proximity to these things," Russworm writes about the revitalization of white supremacist activity under Trump, "is widely apparent when doxxing, trolling, and overt threats of violence are the ready-made tactics of online hate campaigns like #Gamergate and are also techniques that are used by the president and his supporters" (75). From GamerGaters to members of the Alt-Right, this anti-progressive media machine forms part of the basis that has secured Trump's success by strengthening and maintaining his political profile as the man who stands for preserving white, male America as it used to be.

So much shall suffice as a brief sketch of the entanglements of videogaming, conceived broadly as a cultural phenomenon larger than any particular videogames, in contemporary American politics. In order to show how individual titles themselves are a central component in maintaining this kind of discourse, I will now analyze the politics of *Far Cry 5*. Throughout my analysis, several of the issues alluded to so far will return and be elaborated on as I read the videogame against the phenomenon of Trumpism and especially its rhetoric.

The Politics of *Far Cry 5*

Expectations, Evasions, and Disappointments: *Far Cry 5*'s Announcement and Release

Far Cry 5's setting, narrative premise, and gameplay are easily summarized. The videogame transports players to Hope County, Montana, where an apocalyptic religious cult called 'Project at Eden's Gate' has taken over. The cult terrorizes everyone they consider a sinner and abducts and brainwashes citizens all over the county. The player takes on the role of a deputy sheriff who is part of a law enforcement team sent to arrest cult leader Joseph Seed and end the activities of the cult. Although one can customize the deputy's appearance, including their gender and complexion, this has no effect on the plot or how other characters treat the deputy; as shall become apparent, like the rest of the videogame, this 'colorblindness,' which applies to all of the characters of *Far Cry 5*'s diverse cast, does by no means translate into neutral or even inclusive politics beyond empty-handed symbolic gestures. The mission eventually goes horribly wrong and it is then up to the player to rally the resistance scattered around the area and re-conquer the county in whichever way they deem appropriate, which mainly necessitates killing countless numbers of heavily armed cult members.

When *Far Cry 5* was first announced in May 2017, a few months into Trump's presidency, journalists who reported on the first details revealed at that point were intrigued by the videogame's premise. Several of them drew connections between *Far Cry 5*'s themes and the Trumpian moment, suggesting the videogame may make a statement on American politics and the society that enabled it (see, for example, Machkovech; Walker). Drawing on what little information was available on the setting and plot, and even though the

developers named a growing rural militia culture one of the major inspirations rather than recent developments in electoral politics (Walker), it did not take a lot of imagination to read the antagonist Joseph Seed as a stand-in for populist leaders like Trump, who duped their followers with false promises and antagonized those who did not believe in their cause. The game's setting in Montana further amplified this appearance: not only was this the first *Far Cry* to be set in the United States—the previous titles in the series all featured remote, 'exotic' locales (Rivera)—but Montana also represented the conservative heartland as well as the mythic area of the Frontier, which has been so essential to imagining the American nation.[6] The central theme of religion furthermore appeared to play on Christian (mainly Evangelical) fundamentalists and their far-reaching influence on American politics (Rivera). During the preceding presidential campaign and election, Obama's appeal to hope in a sense had vanished and suddenly seemed to belong to a distant past, although, as Harris Beider, Stacy Harwood, and Kusminder Chahal assert, "[i]n many ways, Trump was the hope and change candidate in 2016, as Obama had been in 2008, albeit representing different constituencies" (8). In light of these recent events, the prospect of what awaited players in Hope County arguably generated some expectations that a mainstream videogame would perhaps take a stand and intervene into political discourse in the same way other forms of culture had long proven to be capable of and of which mainstream videogames usually fall short.

Alas, when *Far Cry 5* was finally published for PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One in March 2018, those who had been hopeful were quickly disillusioned. Besides drawing attention to a generally poorly constructed and not always logical plot, critics also lamented that *Far Cry 5* almost entirely circumvented any engagement with the political matters it appeared to allude to; none of the potential for political critique inherent in the game's premise and major themes blossomed into realization (for an overview of reactions, see, for example, Kuchera). Quite the contrary: it seemed as if the developers made a deliberate effort to quell potentially political issues in the game by either outright ignoring them, relegating them to inconsequential side activities and negligible characters, or by framing them in terms removed far enough from reality so as to make the game appear neutral, apolitical, and inoffensive. Yet precisely this refusal to address politics proves revealing of *Far Cry 5*'s cultural resonances and, ultimately, its politics.

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[6]   For an introduction into the major American founding myths, see, for example, Heike Paul's *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. For the myth of the Frontier in American culture, see especially Richard Slotkin's influential trilogy *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

Echoing Anxieties: *Far Cry 5* and the Sentiments Underlying Trump's Ascendance

The developers' decision to not seriously engage with any of the politically charged themes in *Far Cry 5* arguably betrays a fear of putting off a major target group, that is, those players for whom the term 'gamer' is a marker of identity (Shaw and Chess 280-82),[7] who have long been a major source of revenue for the big publishers in the industry. These are the same gamers who frequently demand: "Keep your politics out of my games" (Pfister).[8] Furthermore, it is these gamers who often support movements like GamerGate because of the feeling that 'their' culture is under threat and that videogames are about to be ruined (Shaw and Chess 280-82), which, as indicated earlier, can be traced back to all sorts of anxieties around fragile white masculinity.[9] *Far Cry*'s publisher Ubisoft, in particular, has long earned a reputation for explicitly denying making political statements, even as their games regularly and inevitably get mired in highly political matters of different varieties, and for trying to present their games as mere, apolitical entertainment (Pfister; cf. also Parkin).

The more important anxieties haunting *Far Cry 5*, however, are those that characterize the entire narrative premise of the game and which uncannily echo some of the sentiments at the heart of the emergence and persistence of Trumpism. What is at the center of the game's setting and plot is a sense that one's home and way of life are being taken away by strangers. As players explore the gameworld of *Far Cry 5*, which consists of a provincial small town as well as several businesses scattered throughout a breathtakingly beautiful Western landscape, they meet and talk to characters that represent a cross section of 'good' Americans: priests, veterans, farmers, mechanics, and many more, all of which are figures who are frequently invoked by conservative politicians in the United States. These are the people threatened by the cult, and all of them relate their own personal stories and emotions to the player, which characterizes them as thoroughly righteous folks. As the game progresses, players take back from the cult such places as farms, lumber mills, breweries, and youth camps, most of which appeal to a certain idea of stereotypical 'Americanness' in their evocation of white working-class America and a sense of community and self-reliance, particularly in the way they remediate previous comparable representations from American popular culture.

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[7] For an insightful account of the origins of the idea/identity of the gamer as it has been perceived culturally as well as an alternative, more inclusive vision for it, see the chapter "From Hackers to Cyborgs" in Brendan Keogh's *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (167-92), which explains videogames from a postphenomenological perspective.

[8] Which is itself an untenable postulation that, ironically, is also political.

[9] That the developers' concern in this regard is not imaginary can be witnessed during each and every outcry that regularly follows announcements of major upcoming videogame releases that dare to feature, for example, female or non-white protagonists in usually male-dominated settings or displaying behavior outside of what such gamers deem appropriate for white women, women of color, or people of color more generally.

It is exactly this feeling of having one's home and way of life taken away that connects *Far Cry 5* with the rise of Trumpism. A common diagnosis in the news media after the 2016 election argued that—besides the racism, misogyny, and xenophobia—one of the key potentials Trump was able to mobilize to his advantage were precisely these sentiments of loss, despair, and hopelessness found in certain rural and particularly formerly industrial, but now de-industrialized areas of the United States: "The narrative seems to be clear: Trump was the insurgent candidate against the political and media elite. He tapped into cultural and economic insecurity across white working-class America" (Beider, Harwood, and Chahal 16). While this assessment vastly simplifies a more complex matter, its popularity among those interested in understanding how this outcome of the election could have happened is also evidenced by the attention subsequently given to books like Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, an ethnographic study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, a memoir concerned with growing up white and poor in Appalachia.

Although Donald Trump arguably does not represent or belong to the demographics at stake here, which make up a considerable part of his voter base, he is nonetheless conceived of as sufficiently different from the political class which lower-middle-class and working-class white Americans in rural and de-industrialized regions of the United States have given up investing their hope in, as someone who signals change at last (Beider, Harwood, and Chahal 8). "Despite being a self-proclaimed billionaire," Saramo explains, "he was accepted as 'of the people' and for the people by his largely white, male, non-college-educated, and rural supporters" (4).[10] The Trumpian rhetoric of taking care of 'the forgotten people' of the United States appeals strongly to those who feel that they have been left behind as the country, its economy, and its society rapidly changed during the second half of the twentieth century. In this context, the characters in need in *Far Cry 5* appear very much like those 'forgotten people,' and Hope County with its telling name may as well be read as a proxy for the kind of counties, often remote from the country's metropolitan centers, who turned to Trump for change and thus, as it were, turned into hope counties for Trump. Many of those asking the player for help in the videogame narrate their own personal stories, often involving accounts of the hardships they endured or how hard their families worked to acquire a property or establish a business—in short, how they deserve the life that now seems to be taken away from them. The sentiments expressed by these characters thus appear like mirror images of the anxieties permeating parts of Trump's voter base (Saramo 4).

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[10] For example, Trump won by a considerable margin among "White non-college graduates" (66 to 29 percent received by Hillary Clinton), "Small city and Rural" (61 to 34), as well as those who felt they had experienced a decline in their "financial situation compared to 2015" (77 to 19). Moreover, his margin over Clinton among voters who answered the questions "What quality of leaders matters most" with "can bring needed change" was an overwhelming 82 to 14 ("2016 Election").

On another level, the dynamic between the cult's behavior in *Far Cry 5* and the resistance to it embodied by the player in its basic impulses resembles the ongoing culture war of which GamerGate and the Alt-Right are but two figurations. The major in-game conflict can be described as a fight for freedom against adversaries trying to curb that freedom according to values alien to the group, which perceives itself to be under threat. This, indeed, uncannily resembles the sentiments governing the anti-progressive backlash against 'political correctness' and ongoing civil rights struggles around race, gender, and sexuality, of which GamerGate was but one expression. Just as "gamers felt that their domain was under attack by unruly women and 'Social Justice Warriors' who were perceived as trying to take their games away" (Nieborg and Foxman 114), many of Trump's white supporters from rural and de-industrialized areas of the United States had come to view themselves as "strangers in their own land" (Hochschild 219), in other words: "They'd begun to feel like a besieged minority" (Hochschild 221; cf. also 225-230). The story behind this, as Hochschild explains, "is a *feels-as-if* story" (135). Throughout *Strangers in Their Own Land*, she draws a picture of a group of people who *feel* as if they are constantly told to feel sympathy for others— women, African Americans, immigrants—while their own perceived struggles and anxieties are not recognized, let alone mitigated by either the public or politicians. In light of this, Hochschild affirms, "Trump was the identity politics candidate for white men" (230).

Another remarkable aspect of *Far Cry 5*'s gameworld and gameplay regarding anxieties around losing one's land is the videogame's framing of prepper culture.[11] Doomsday preppers, a milieu which often overlaps with that of rural militias, are among the original inspirations for *Far Cry 5*'s theme (cf. Walker) and thus should be expected to make an appearance on the cult's side in Hope County. Nonetheless, in the videogame, they instead feature as good, reliable people whose preparation activities—hording supplies, that is— prove beneficial to the resistance and its fight against the cult. There is a whole line of side missions devoted entirely to locating and securing 'prepper stashes' in order to help the resistance, and each successfully solved mission of this kind provides the player with resources that facilitate her progress. Since part of preppers' motivation is a lack of trust in the ruling elite and fear of an impending collapse of society, they align rather well with Trumpism ideologically, both in their distrust of government and their thriving on anxieties of inevitable disaster; hence, it is quite telling that these people are portrayed so uncritically and even benevolently in *Far Cry 5*. In the terms of the videogame, if you will, the preppers were right all along, which implicitly confirms their anxieties as ultimately justified: The event that ruptured society occurred in form of the cult's arrival and whatever the preppers have hoarded now helps those who survived and who now resist 'Project at Eden's Gate.'[12]

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[11] So-called 'preppers' engage in preparing for catastrophic events during which basic infrastructure, or even society at large, collapses and forces people to survive on their own. For a glimpse into the movement, particularly under the Obama administration, see Raasch.

[12] Those players who finish *Far Cry 5*'s story ultimately get to witness a truly apocalyptic event as Hope County is struck by nuclear missiles, setting up the background for the videogame's sequel, *Far Cry: New Dawn*,

Before I move on to the final section, there is one more way in which the anxieties shaping the current political moment not only feature in *Far Cry 5* but also connect to larger American myths and the narratives that support the phenomenon of Trumpism. Though there would be more to say about the wilderness and frontier theme evoked by the virtual landscapes of Montana, which is at play as a subtext in *Far Cry 5*, I would only like to address one prevalent aspect here. It relates to the civilization vs. savagery binary so central to the American myth of the West and, hence, one of the origin myths of the American nation, as well as to the American expansionist and colonialist project generally (see also footnote 6). In the videogame, the cult and its behavior, especially the cult's foot soldiers—who act in furor because they are being administered a drug called 'bliss'—clearly appear as 'savages.' Said drug, by the way, is one of the design decisions used in *Far Cry 5* that amount to attempts to dodge any real explanation why these people follow the cult, that is, to avoid addressing politics. Several times during the game, the player's character is captured, gets to see the inside of the cult, has to overcome some kind of ordeal, and has to flee back to civilization, which marks nothing short of a playable reenactment of one of the oldest genres of American literature, the captivity narrative. Intimately entangled with American colonialism and westward expansion, the main function of this tale was precisely to establish such a savagery vs. civilization dichotomy in the first place by painting a horrific picture of the captors, which also served to prove the superiority of those considered to be civilized; as the captive faced their ordeal in the wilderness and overcame it, their sense of civilization and incentive to promote some kind of order was strengthened (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 94-115). Since *Far Cry 5* is set in a pristine Montana landscape, this kind of subplot arguably conjures the essential American national myths of the wilderness and the frontier experience.

Moreover, this aspect of the videogame can also be viewed, in light of the game's political context, as echoing the ever-escalating Trumpian rhetoric about immigrants, especially undocumented ones entering through the southern border. These immigrants have regularly been framed by the President and his team as a "barbarian horde" threatening to "overrun" the country and put the American nation's security at risk (Boot). Of course, such a rhetoric, by no means unintentionally, once again plays directly into the anxieties of 'the forgotten people' evoked and addressed by Trump (cf. Beider, Harwood, and Chahal 24), which is also evidenced by Trump securing 64 percent of the voters who viewed immigration as the most important issue in the 2016 election ("2016 Election"). Although the cult's members in *Far Cry 5* are in no way marked as immigrants and are ethnically diverse, they clearly constitute an outside group invading Hope County, disrupting the community, and corrupting its members, not least through administering 'bliss,' which once again echoes Trumpian fearmongering about drug trafficking through the southern border (Bump).

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published in 2019 for PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One.

Reactionary Gameplay, Reactionary Politics: *Far Cry 5*'s Retrotopia

The final piece of the puzzle that is *Far Cry 5*'s politics in the context of Trumpism bears the name of reaction. Trump's election as president clearly was a reaction itself; however, exactly what kind of reaction it was, depends on which aspect of the rise of Trumpism one emphasizes. On the one hand, it was a racist reaction to the mere fact of a Black American president in the sense of what some media outlets have called a "white backlash," which can be traced back at least to the Civil Rights Movement (Newkirk) and which culminated in the election of Donald Trump as "America's first white president" (Coates).[13][14] In the words of Russworm: "While Trump's presidency is a realization of many things, there can be no equivocation, however, that it is also fundamentally a racially motivated retraction of Barack Obama's presidency and a doubling down on the sites of power of where capitalism and white supremacy converge" (74). On the other hand, it was certainly also a reaction to years, decades even, of a feeling—and it must be stressed that this is first and foremost a feeling—of one's perceived way of life and prospects for the future increasingly endangered as politicians consistently appear oblivious to 'ordinary' people's daily struggle (cf. Beider, Harwood, and Chahal 6-7, 33, 40). This is the "*feels-as-if* story" of people who, at some point, began to consider themselves "strangers in their own land," as Hochschild demonstrates throughout her book (135, 219). Whether or not these feelings are based in empirical facts or not, whether it was bigotry or economic anxiety that played the decisive role, and what kind of combination of the two really emerged here: those are different stories, all of them complex, important, and part of the larger puzzle of what is happening in the United States under Trump's presidency. But what remains and connects all of these facets is the fact of reaction, which also proves crucial to understanding *Far Cry 5* in the context of Trumpism.

The sense of 'reaction' at the center of *Far Cry 5*'s politics is the one implied in the concept of reactionary politics. Though many still tend to simply call Republicans in the United States conservatives, the Trump administration's rhetoric as well as policies are more accurately described as reactionary, a specific form of conservatism "harking back to, and attempting to reconstruct, forms of society which existed in an earlier period" (Allison). Trumpism is less concerned with keeping things as they are, as the traditional notion of conservatism would have it, and more with going back in time to some previous state. Particularly in the early days of the administration, most of the executive orders and bills drafted, from healthcare to

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[13] In the same vein, one could arguably also read the election as partly a sexist response to the prospect of a female President Hillary Clinton.

[14] This 'white backlash' was a backlash based entirely on (mostly racist and white supremacist) sentiments rather than facts that would evidence fundamental political or socio-cultural changes. The feeling that something had changed, had even been taken away from white Americans, even as their structural privileges remained firmly in place, appears to have proven powerful enough to fuel this ongoing backlash in the absence of any substantial transformations of a still white-dominated American political system and society. For an interpretation of Trump's election as "the negation of Barack Obama's" legacy, see Coates.

environmental protection, appeared to aim first and foremost at dismantling as much of Obama's legacy as possible. As Jon Sopel writes,

> [w]hat we have now is the slogan America First. But what does it add up to? Well for all the chaos, the one apparently consistent thing the president has wanted is to undo anything that seemed to be a signature Obama-era policy—health, climate change, the Iran nuclear deal, better relations with Cuba.

Such an assessment, of course, makes the idea of Trumpism as a reaction to Obama come full circle. This orientation toward the past, particularly a past preceding the Obama years, has been encapsulated by the Trumpian rallying cry all along: make America great *again*. In line with the anti-progressive backlash that found its present culmination in Trumpism, this is a slogan that is steeped in a toxic nostalgia. To imagine a future for the United States, it looks back to the past—a past partly imagined, partly misremembered, but wholly reassuring in its promises of the good life that some believe to have known once. This is the reaction in progress under the Trump administration: the attempt to re-establish an America that once was, whether imagined or not.

In his book of the same title, Zygmunt Bauman describes such a vision as "retrotopia" (8). Like utopia, retrotopia thrives on believing in a clearly defined place or state as the guarantor of security and freedom, but unlike its 500-year-old predecessor, it has given up on ideas of progress and an ideal future-in-the-making and is, instead, thoroughly oriented toward the past. Retrotopia thus constitutes a kind of disfigured revenant of the utopian idea (8-9). For those who have come to realize for themselves that neither utopia nor its negation, the perceived reality of a disorienting and unsettling globalized world, represent tenable grounds for a life in happiness and security, retrotopia represents the only viable alternative to invest their hopes in, whether in the United States or elsewhere. As Bauman describes it:

> From that double negation of More-style utopia—its rejection succeeded by resurrection—'retrotopias' are currently emerging: visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future, as was their twice-removed forebear. (4-5)

In other words: retrotopia constitutes a longing for a better future in the image of an idealized, if not outright imagined, past.

This is precisely what much of *Far Cry 5*'s core gameplay amounts to. Central to progressing in the videogame's story is the conquering of the different areas of Hope County, which mainly happens by taking back so-called 'cult outposts'—essentially different businesses and institutions the cult has taken over. As indicated earlier, many of these places appear decidedly American in the sense that they conjure idealized images not only of white working-class America (for instance, when liberating a lumber mill or a farm) but also of a sense of community appearing as once lost and now found again. After each of these missions there is a short, noninteractive cut-scene that depicts people working together to erase the traces of the cult, rebuild the site as it was before, and celebrate, with the people

regularly sporting Stars-and-Stripes paraphernalia. What happens on the screen is essentially a reinstating of a country that once was—or that is imagined to have been once—and of the community believed to depend on this previous state in order to thrive. To play on Richard Slotkin's seminal work: players, as it were, are implicated in a "regeneration through violence" here (*Regeneration* 5). Granted, it is an evil cult that players are fighting in *Far Cry 5*, and in terms of the videogame, all that players are doing is expelling the cult so that things can go on as they used to and that people can be free again. Yet in the political context the game enters, which has been called the age of Trumpism here, the politics of 'making America great again' reverberate strongly in the central rhetoric of *Far Cry 5*. The world players restore here seems an all too idealized—indeed imaginary—America, absent any consideration of the factors of colonialism, racism, gender discrimination, or any other unpleasant reality not allowed to feature in the retrotopia conjured. This world is an America that is fondly remembered but that never was.

Conclusion

The problem with videogames is that they are inherently political, while frequently denying that they are, especially when produced by the industry's leading publishers (Pfister; cf. also Parkin). As *Far Cry 5* repeatedly employs tropes and narratives steeped in American colonialism, expresses a yearning for the past and its way of life, and works through a logic of taking back the count(r)y under the feeling of having one's home taken away by strangers, it echoes central tenets of the Trumpian rhetoric. That a videogame aligns so well with the political moment of Trumpism, which caters predominately to a white male American identity, should not be considered a surprise. As Murray reminds her readers,

> all games engage in a politics of identity, not just some of them. It should be understood that the perceived neutrality of games, even those that do not purport to deal with issues of identity, traffic in the assumption of a perceived 'universalism' or 'neutrality' that is fictive. It has never been the case that there was a politically neutral or a raceless form of games representation. Rather, there was such a stranglehold on the image-making machine by a small and privileged constituency of producers who possessed the temporary power to displace their own subjectivity as 'universal,' when in fact it is shot through with the politics of identity. (40)

As one could witness in the case of GamerGate and its legacy, such 'politics of identity'—which, as should be evident, are the politics of whiteness and masculinity—cloaked in the guise of 'universalism' or 'neutrality' can go a long way and gain traction in real political processes, with one amplifying the other. As *Far Cry 5* serves up politically charged themes for players to engage with while refusing to situate or even recognize their political implications, its purported neutrality translates into a politics of identity which promotes a particular view of the world while excluding a plethora of others. The same applies to its 'colorblind' approach to race in its representations, which again exposes said politics of identity as the politics of whiteness. Hence, *Far Cry 5*'s "retrotopian romance with the past"

(Bauman 9) constitutes an affective, if not outright sentimental, alignment with the feelings driving the Trump machine; its players are indeed playing to 'make America great again.'

In an age of Trumpism, claiming political neutrality for such an influential form of popular culture is careless at best and dangerous at worst. The videogames industry, which has long been an essential component of the "*military-industrial-media-entertainment network*" (Der Derian xxvii),[15] needs to take a long look in the mirror and critically reflect on its entanglements with contemporary politics in the United States and elsewhere. Commercial interests must not be an excuse for refusing to assume responsibility for the effects of the growing cultural importance of their medium. At the same time scholars, particularly those in fields committed to critical interventions (such as American Studies), need to take these newer formations of popular culture seriously and shed light on their dealings in the culture at large. Such an engagement must go beyond across-the-board condemnations or dismissals of an entire medium and instead devote the same differentiation and thoroughness to individual texts which other forms of culture have long enjoyed in critical studies. The politics of Trumpism, for example, operate in and are sustained by many domains. Videogames, as my analysis of *Far Cry 5* demonstrates, are one of the sites where such politics are acted out, which is why they demand critical attention. And while it may not be enough to dismantle Trumpism, critical scholarship always serves the resistance against the dominant order in the domain it is concerned with; this is what both critical Game Studies and American Studies should aspire to, especially in a political moment like this.

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[15] Besides James Der Derian's seminal study *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, see also Timothy Lenoir's and Luke Caldwell's book *The Military-Entertainment Complex*.

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