The Depoliticisation of *Far Cry 5*

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Introduction

In 2018, the year after Donald Trump's inauguration, *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018), the first opus of the series taking place in the United States, was released.

In *Far Cry 5*, the player character is a junior deputy sent to New Hope's County to protect its population and get rid of Eden's Gate, an evangelical militarised sect led by Joseph Seed. The people depicted in the game have strong similarities to real-world political groups, especially the prepper community which has ideological similarities to the Tea Party and is the player's main ally in the game's world.

Even though some game critics considered the game too political by watching the game's advertisements (Plante 2017), others found that by wanting to not get political, the whole message of the game has been reduced to nothing (Kuchera 2018). Indeed, none of the characters of the game display any strong political opinions. Questions of race, gender, or class are never addressed throughout the game. The disturbing thing in those articles is that they never mention the real-world counterparts of the characters of *Far Cry 5* and do not analyse how they are depoliticised. Moreover, during 30 hours of gameplay[1], completing the main story line, some sidequests, listening to dialogues with over twelve story-driving NPCs, and watching nearly three hours of cutscenes, the game does not fall into being empty.

In the first part of the essay, I will analyse how the game depoliticises its characters, focusing on prepper culture. In the second part, I will focus on an alternative understanding of the game's narration.

The Preppers of the Game and their Real-world Counterparts

Ubisoft Montréal already has a standardised process for the depoliticization of religion that came from its experience with the *Assassin's Creed* series, in which religious topics were marketed to largely "secular demographics" (Wildt and Aupers 2023). *Far Cry 5* is the studio's first game since the first instalment of *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) which portrays

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[1] Average completion time for "main story + extras" according to *How Long to Beat*, with 1.3k players polled.

Christians as the main enemies. In *Far Cry 5,* the main enemies are part of an apocalyptic sect, whose ideas are mainly based on the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. In real life, the Waco Siege of the Branch Davidians is a clear inspiration for Eden's Gate. Branch Davidians is also an apocalyptic sect, which was led - at the time of the siege - by David Koresh who shares some similarities with one of *Far Cry 5*'s main antagonists, John Seed, both in their look and leading roles in the sect. Without elaborating too long on the resemblances and differences between the two of them, a depoliticisation of Branch Davidians and David Koresh was not necessary since their ideas were not directly linked to far-right ideologies but only triggered a reaction from right-wing extremism (Kingdon 2019).

However, the process of depoliticisation in *Far Cry 5* is interestingly applied to prepper culture, a movement focusing on the preparation for catastrophes by stockpiling food and weapons, and living in a bunker.

If at first glance prepping does not seem to have any predetermined political side, some elements allow one to see their link to far-right groups and their ideological overlap. In *Obamageddon: Fear, the Far Right, and the Rise of 'Doomsday'* (Mills 2021), Michael Mills brings us to the Prepper Fest of Arizona, the population of which is dominated by far-right people, moved by an anti-Obama ideology. The people invited to this event are partially representative of prepper culture. These include Steven Anderson, a white supremacist preacher, Richard Mack, a former member of a far-right militia, and the Tea Party. Mills argues that the ideological overlap between preppers and the Tea Party is partly due to their shared reliance on fear rhetoric: "... the particularly acute crisis-laden framing of the transition between the George W. Bush and Obama administrations is already recognized as undergirding the broad rise of the Tea Party and its popular support. What we see here, however, is not only that such fear has contributed to the rise of this vociferous, fear-based political movement. Rather, the growth of prepping as a revival of American survivalist interest here clearly emerges as an overspill of these same developments." (Mills 2021, 363) This fear is the politically legitimate counterpart of the apocalyptic fear of the preppers.

Targeted advertising on preppers is done on right-wing media and personalities like Fox News and Ben Shapiro (Mills 2021, 362) but prepping companies are also using far-right rhetoric for their advertising. Indeed if we look at the Vivos website (VIVOS 2022), we can see in their presentation videos all the risks that could end the world as we know it. These risks include some of the common US far-right rhetorics such as the holy war in the middle east, immigration invasion, or militarization of some non-NATO members.

Although the discourse of the preppers is not focused on racism, but instead on fear of Obama and left-leaning economic decisions, it would be wrong to oversimplify prepper culture; "With the stereotype of the survivalist white supremacist, religious fanatic, and extreme antigovernment ideologue offering a poor fit with many in the expo crowds and ethnographic sample, it thus became evident that existing reflections have failed to capture and engage with the nuances of many preppers' anti-Obama fear" (Mills 2021, 351).

The main allies players have in the game are the preppers of New Hope's County. The first one players meet waking up in his bunker is called Dutch. He rescued the player and maintains radio contact with the player throughout the game. When the players explore his bunker they discover his inclination for gun-right defence, cars, and USA flags (see Table 1). While this depiction is not unpolitical, it represents only the politically acceptable part of far-right rhetoric. Guns, cars, and USA flags are symbols of success and power in the game. Throughout the mission of constructing the resistance against Eden's Gate, players will meet other preppers like Dutch, all of whom have the same values and motivations.
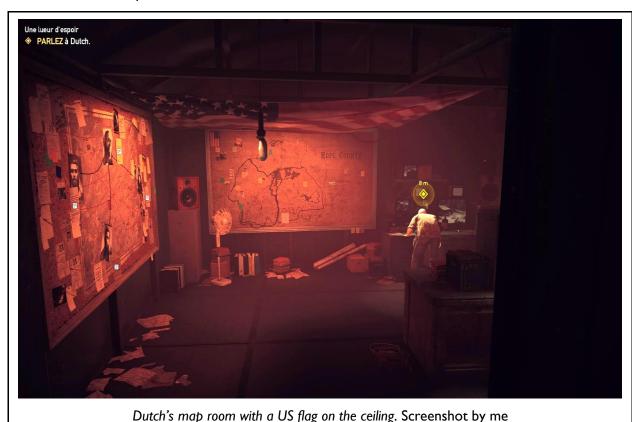
Table 1: Screenshots from Dutch's Bunker

Dutch's map room with a US flag on the ceiling. Screenshot by me

Dutch's armoury. Screenshot by me

"Rancher" Car poster. Screenshot by me

As diverse as preppers are, they are not only the stereotypical gun and car aficionados depicted in the game but are also close to even more dangerous far-right ideologies that are found at the Prepper Fest, in the media that advertise for them or in the prepping advertisements themselves.

With all this information, the critics mentioned in the introduction fell into what they thought *Far Cry 5* did, not bringing any message by wanting to please everyone. The journalist did not even mention the preppers in his article, only focusing on the representation of Christian extremism. However, the main depoliticisation process was more applied to the preppers than to the Branch Davidians-inspired Eden's Gate.

An Alternative Analysis to *Far Cry 5*'s Narrative

But even keeping the game as it is, an alternative analysis of the game's story shows that the depoliticisation of the characters can be seen as a tool for another political message. As seen in the first part, preppers and far-right politicians have a common ground for their ideologies, and in parallel, in-games preppers and Eden's gate show some similitude and overlapping ideas. In this second part, I will argue that New Hope's preppers and Eden's Gate's members are built upon the same ideology, and have the same goal. As a starting point for this, I will use the notions of utopia and dystopia.

Utopia "carries with it the trappings of an elaborate thought experiment, a kind of parlor game for intellectuals who set themselves the task of designing a future society, a perfect society" and "Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now"(Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010, 2). In other words, a utopia designer builds the perfect future by suppressing the problems of the

present, and a dystopia designer builds the worst future by pushing the problems of the present to their limits.

As the preppers are the player's main allies and Eden's Gate's members the main enemies of *Far Cry 5*, I will consider them the utopian and dystopian parts of the game's world, respectively. Sören Schoppmeier explains how New Hope's County is an idealised, nostalgic space that uses the American conservative imagination (Schoppmeier 2022). He uses the concept of retrotopia, a distortion of utopia which is turned toward the past in the search of a "modicum of stability" reconciling "security with freedom", used in nationalist discourses (Bauman 2017, 8-9). With this concept, Bauman "theorizes the recent surge in populist, reactionary, and nationalist political movements in many Western democracies" (Schoppmeier 2022, 33). As Schoppmeier argues, New Hope overlaps with retrotopia in multiple aspects, like its reinterpretation of the frontier myth (conquering the wildness), or the "regeneration of local businesses" without any appearance of companies like Google or Amazon (ibid., 46). The utopian side of New Hope's County is the embodiment of right-wing political discourse without any realistic contradiction to it.

Even if the antagonists are depoliticised, Eden's Gate is not completely disconnected from Christian mythology and culture. References to Christianity, the Bible, and especially the Book of Revelation are explicit during the game (see Table 3). The apocalypse is the main motivation both for Eden's Gate and the preppers.

John Seed and his siblings (who are sub-antagonists of the game) can be read as representing the four horsemen of the apocalypse, by their colour and by their role in the destruction of New Hope (see Table 3). Also, the Preppers struggle to defend themselves against the Seeds, and at the end of the game, are all wiped out, whereas John Seed succeeds in protecting himself (and the player character) from the atomic bomb. Moreover, by ending the game with an atomic explosion, the designers made John Seed's prediction of the apocalypse right.

The parallel between the cult and the preppers becomes most obvious when comparing the first to the last scene inside Dutch's bunker (see Table 3). Their promises and their goal are the same: to reconstruct the world once the player character gets out of the bunker.

Table 2: Comparison of the first and last shots in Dutch's Bunker

| *Dutch's first appearance.* Screenshot by me | *Final scene.* Screenshot by me |

By constructing the character player's allies and enemies from the same ideological ground, the designers allow us to question stereotypical American moral values as they are embodied in the apocalyptical Seeds. Nevertheless, because the in-game preppers are depoliticised, the criticised values are harmless for far-right parties as racism or fear of immigration are erased from their discourse.

Conclusion

As studied for the *Assassin's Creed* series, it is common for Ubisoft Montreal to depoliticise their games to reach a larger audience (Wildt and Aupers 2023) which is already constituted by "young, Western, educated, and male" and " and overwhelmingly — representing 79% of Ubisoft's sales — from North-America and Europe" (Wildt and Aupers 2023, 66). Considering the past work with the *Assassin's Creed* games, the comparison between in-game preppers, their real-world counterpart, and their main audience, it does not sound extravagant to assume that *Far Cry 5* had to lower its political stands to the strict minimum (concerning religion and gun rights) for marketing reasons as their target audience could be antagonised otherwise. On one hand, this is an example of designers depoliticising their game in favour of the far right because of the capitalist production system. The value of the game is based only on how profitable it is, whether it has a political influence on its player or not, it has to be sold to the largest target audience.

On the other hand, it is also an example of capitalism producing its own inoffensive criticism. Even if at first glance, the game looks like a criticism of conservative America, it only poorly depicts prepper culture without taking any risk of offending the Tea Party or any other real-world influential conservative power. In this sense, the necessity of the designers to

negotiate their ideological stand with the market results in a cultural production that is no more than a reflection of the dominant ideology.

This phenomenon is increasingly common with, for example, series such as *Squid Game* (Hwang Dong-hyeok 2021) or *The Boys* (Eric Kripke 2019) produced by companies that look like they are criticising the system in which they are the winners.

As players, we must learn to distinguish between a game that supports the dominant ideology and a game that is against the ideology, and that it is impossible to find the latter category in the AAA industry.

Table 3: Table comparing passages of the Book of Revelation with their reference in Far Cry 5.

Book of Revelation	*Far Cry 5*
"(…) there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest." (Rev. 6:2, New International Version)	"There before me was a white horse" is tattooed on Joseph Seed's right arm.
"Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword." (Rev. 6:4, New International Version)	Jacob Seed is a war veteran whose motto is "Cull the weak". His power is to condition people to kill when they hear a specific song. During the loading screens, Jacob Seed appears armed with a knife with a red handle and his main weapon is a red long rifle.
'I looked, and there before me was a black horse! (...) Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"' (Rev. 6:5-6, New International Version)	John Seed is mainly depicted with a black suit and dark tone. He is responsible for the agricultural area of New Hope.
"I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." (Rev. 6:8, New International Version)	Faith Seed matches the pale colour with green tones, she drugs and manipulates the sect members and the animals with "the bliss", a magical plant.
"(…) the stars in the sky fell to earth" (Rev. 6:13, New International Version)	An atomic bomb wipes out New Hope's County during the main ending of the game[2]
"There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet" (Rev. 17:13, New International Version)	In several cutscenes, Joseph Seed is lightened with purple, and the seven deadly sins are scarified on his body.

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[2] I refer to it as the main ending because it is canonical for the sequel *Far Cry New Dawn* (Ubisoft Montréal 2019).

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