

Representations of New Religious Movements in Games

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Dissertation

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Abstract

Why, how, and to what ends are new religious movements (NRMs) depicted in games? This dissertation analyzes several examples of games which depict NRMs – *Outlast 2* (Red Barrels, 2017), *Waco Resurrection* (Stern et al., 2004), and *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft, 2018) – and the contexts of their production to gain an understanding of why game developers choose to depict NRMs, and what impact these depictions have on players. In general, video games are heavily influenced in their production by Public Opinion, and this affects the way that NRMs are presented in them.

Content Warnings

This dissertation discusses various topics which may be distressing to some readers. The following content warnings are given so that readers may exercise discretion. The text of this document includes references to:

- Displacement and/or genocide of indigenous people (in *Outlast 2*, fictionally targeted towards the Havasupai Indians)
- Infanticide (in *Outlast 2*, concerning the Peoples Temple and fictionally the Testament of the New Ezekiel, in *Waco Resurrection* concerning the Branch Davidians)
- Rape and sexual abuse, including of children (in *Outlast 2*, concerning the Catholic Church, the Nuwaubian Nation, and fictionally in the Testament of the New Ezekiel)
- Religious abuse and violence (in *Outlast 2*, concerning the Catholic Church, the Peoples Temple / Jonestown, the Nuwaubian Nation, and fictionally in the Testament of the New Ezekiel, in *Waco Resurrection* concerning the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and the Branch Davidians, in *Far Cry 5* concerning the fictional Eden's Gate).
- Suicide, including so-called "mass suicide" (in *Outlast 2* concerning Jonestown and fictionally the Testament of the New Ezekiel, in *Waco Resurrection* concerning the Branch Davidians)
- Terrorism (in *Waco Resurrection* concerning Timothy McVeigh)
- War (in *Far Cry 5* concerning hypothetical nuclear war)

Figures include depictions of:

- Body horror
- Nudity
- Violence

Introduction

Overview

This dissertation provides an analysis of several games in terms of their production, design, and reception, in order to provide an overall picture of why, how, and to what ends NRMs are represented in games. Three games have been considered in this analysis: *Outlast 2* (Red Barrels, 2017), *Waco Resurrection* (Stern et al., 2004), and *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft, 2018). Each game has a unique origin and presents new religious movements in a different manner. The analysis of each game draws upon various methodologies from different fields, including literary criticism, art criticism, media studies, semiotics, and game design.

Definitions and Explanations

Art – A broad term, liberally applied in this dissertation to anything humanly produced which is mimetic of reality, consistent with one Platonic definition of art (Plato, 1998). This definition also applies to games, although there is controversy surrounding whether games can be considered "art" under other definitions (Ebert, 2010).

Cult – A pejorative term, often used in the modern day to refer to new religious movements (Harrison, 2016; Ross, 2009).

New Religious Movement (NRM) - A neutral term which implies no judgement upon the group to which it refers, other than that they are a religious group which is relatively "new". The earliest definition of "new", in this sense, extends to movements founded in the 19th Century (Driedger and Wolfart, 2018), while the latest extends only to movements that have "become visible in their present form since the Second World War" (Barker, 1989). The term "NRM" is mostly applied in this dissertation to movements founded in the 20th Century, with qualifiers included for those founded in the 19th Century.

Motivation

This analysis was motivated by the ongoing production of my own game, *An Appeal to Heaven*, which seeks to portray a fictionalized version of the anti-cult movement and deprogramming in the United States of America during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, as well as fictional contemporaneous NRMs. Being religious myself, my aim with *An Appeal to Heaven* has been to explore themes surrounding the role of religion in society, and especially how and why new religious movements arise during times of societal upheaval. I was already aware of *Outlast 2* and *Far Cry 5* containing depictions of new religious movements, but they lacked the thematic depth for which I strived in *An Appeal to Heaven*. I also felt that both made unrealistic villains of NRMs, something which I specifically was trying to avoid in *An Appeal to Heaven*. Therefore, my analysis has allowed me to see exactly how this message was communicated in various games, and how I could avoid doing the same in *An Appeal to Heaven*.

Context

The portrayal of religion in video games has typically been minimal due to the perception of the subject as “fraught” (Park, 2020), and “because of the relatively brief history of digital gaming and its neglect by scholars of religion and media, the academic study of religion in gaming has a correspondingly short genealogy” (Campbell and Grieve, 2014). However, as games gain more recognition as a viable artistic medium, with the Supreme Court of the United States affirming games’ legal status as such (*Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 2011), it is obvious that games are tackling such subjects. *The Shivah* (Wadjet Eye Games, 2013), shown in figure 1, has received praise for “getting deep enough that its religious trappings become part of the game’s fabric rather than just scenery” (Cobbett, 2013) and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) was lauded for being “so frank, so nakedly autobiographical, and so imbued with its creators’ spiritual identities” (Machkovech, 2016).

Depictions of so-called cults have long been present in games, although rarely receiving as much praise for their spiritual qualities as the likes of *The Shivah* and *That Dragon, Cancer*. However, by the representation of NRMs and so-called cults in works, various artists have conveyed different messages and have often been praised for doing so. *The Wicker Man* (1973), a work praised by some critics as among the best horror films ever made (Billson, 2010), depicts neo-pagan cults as a counterpoint to Christianity, contrasting material need and want with the hope of the afterlife. Beyond horror, the drama film *The Master* (2012), which was nominated for an Academy Award (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2013), sees members of a group reminiscent of Scientology (Wickman, 2012) desperately seeking meaning in the existentialist post-war years.

Furthermore, NRMs are significant in modern society. According to the 2011 census of England and Wales, here there are more Rastafarians than Druze, more Scientologists than Shintoists, and more Wiccans than followers of traditional African religions (Office for National Statistics). Significant figures of recent centuries have been members of NRMs, such as civil rights activist Malcolm X, also called Malcolm Little and Malik el-Shabazz, of the Nation of Islam (X with Haley, 1965); Nancy Astor, the second ever female member of parliament in the United Kingdom and the first to take her seat, was part of Christian Science (Masters, 1981); and popular music band The Beatles were well known for their affiliation with Transcendental Meditation (Spitz, 2005). As games tackle the subject of spirituality more tactfully, so too may they incorporate depictions of NRMs with the same care.

Structure

The following section, “Methodology,” briefly explains two major tools used in the analyses in this dissertation, and why certain approaches to research have been taken. “Research and Analyses” analyzes each game in turn, before “Reflection and Conclusion” make the final point of this dissertation, consider flaws in it, and suggests directions for future research.

Methodology

In writing this dissertation, various articles and works concerning the development, design, and production of each game being analyzed have been sought out, so that the aims of the game designers may be compared to the outcomes of their games. It is important here to acknowledge *The Death of the Author*: that meaning is made in the mind of the reader, regardless of authorial intent (Barthes, 1967). While game designers may have sought to inspire a particular feeling in the player, they may have failed to do so, and conjured up a different feeling entirely. By examining authorial intent, the goal is not to elevate it, but to compare the desired outcomes to those achieved, and see why they differ from each other.

Consider the dyadic sign-system of Saussure: “a link... between a concept and a sound pattern... a two-sided psychological entity...” (1983). Likewise, in Barthes’ *Death of the Author*, meaning, or the concept, arises in the mind of the reader from the writing, or sound pattern, of the author. It is important, then, to note that “the link between signal and signification is arbitrary”; one reader may glean a different meaning than another, although both read the same text.

This is where Public Opinion becomes a factor, called “those [mental] pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups” (Lippmann, 1922). Although readers may arrive at separate conclusions from the same text because of a variety of factors affecting their interpretation, many will reach similar conclusions because of Public Opinion, as they share “mental pictures”: understandings which are common to a certain group. One example, used by Lippmann, is a fictional island inhabited by Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans, who did not know that the First World War had begun until six weeks after it had done so. The people on the island did not change with this news, but their “mental pictures” did, and they became hostile to one another as a result. While England and Germany had not changed, Englishmen and Germans associated the other’s nation with hostility and opposition.

Likewise, the word “cult”, previously defined as a pejorative term, has clear negative connotations. No one, apart from those who use the term in irony or reclamation, is “pro-cult”; the association between that sound pattern and the concept of malice is too strong, and Public Opinion only reinforces this. The word “cult” appears in our media to refer to evil and malicious things, and this reinforces itself: many who watched *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) were influenced by its depiction of the “cult,” as can be seen in later films such as *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Mother!* (2017) (Loughrey, 2018). Games, too, are part of this media landscape, influencing and being influenced by Public Opinion.

This dissertation will analyze the chosen games in the context of both *The Death of the Author* and Public Opinion.

Research and Analyses

The following section, which is the bulk of this document, details the findings of the research conducted into each game and provides analyses of this information.

Outlast 2

Of the games analyzed, *Outlast 2* is the most influenced by Public Opinion. *Outlast 2* is a first-person survival horror game set in and around Temple Gate in the Havasupai Indian Reservation in Arizona. The inhabitants of this area have founded several NRMs, all believing that the Antichrist will be born in Temple Gate soon, and he will bring about the end of the world. The most important of these NRMs is the Testament of the New Ezekiel, or simply the Testament, led by Sullivan Knoth, whose rape of a girl named Anna Lee results in her pregnancy, escape from Temple Gate, and eventual death in hospital, arousing the attention of investigative journalist Lynn Langermann and her husband and cameraman Blake, the player character.

The game is a sequel to *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013), which was the first title of the studio Red Barrels. Philippe Morin said that after he and fellow co-founders Hugo Dallaire and David Chateaufneuf left Ubisoft they needed to agree on a genre, and that “making a horror game became the most attractive choice... Hugo suggested we use *Rubber Johnny* as a reference for our game” (Morin, 2015).



Figure 2 – A still from Rubber Johnny.

The original *Outlast* attempted to capitalize upon a particular emerging niche within the survival horror genre: the horror game without weapons, which gained popularity with *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010). This was combined with the infrared camera and body horror of *Rubber Johnny*, a short film by Chris Cunningham depicting the titular Johnny, shown in figure 2, a wheelchair bound, nude man with a large and deformed head, dancing to music by Aphex Twin (The Windowlicker, 2012). The journalist protagonist gave an in-fiction reason for the infrared look, while also mimicking found-footage horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and giving an understandable reason as to why the player would be unarmed. This can be seen in figure 3.



Figure 3 – A screenshot from Outlast 2.

Much of this – the lack of weapons, the infrared camera, the body horror, and the journalist protagonist – would be transferred to *Outlast 2*. However, after the release of *Outlast* as well as its DLC in 2014, Red Barrels wanted to explore locales beyond the asylum to which *Outlast* had thus far been confined. To this end, Red Barrels settled on making a sequel inspired by the Jonestown massacre:

“There is one thing that we... [no omission] I don’t know if I should... [no omission] There is one thing that we studied a lot for the second game which was the Jonestown thing that happened in the ‘70s, which is called the biggest mass suicide of all time, I believe. And so that’s something we studied and checked a lot as an inspiration for Outlast 2.” (Indie Games Level Up! / Jeux indie en action!, 2016)

Jonestown was a religious commune in Guyana founded by the NRM known as Peoples Temple and named after the founder, Jim Jones. Jonestown famously came to an end on 18 November 1978 with the massacre of 918 people (Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple, 2013). It is important to briefly note that the “mass suicide” moniker is inaccurate. Although some of those in Jonestown, including Jim Jones himself, did commit suicide, many more were murdered. Tim Carter, who left Peoples Temple before the massacre, estimates that 551 people can be considered to have been “murdered” in Jonestown, perhaps including even more, depending on the definition of “murder” used (2013). This figure includes 246 children and 180 seniors who could not have defended themselves, as well as approximately 125 other adults who were forcibly injected with poison.

Why exactly Morin used the term “mass suicide” rather than “massacre” is debatable: he is French Canadian, and while he speaks English very well, it is entirely possible that he honestly confused the terms. However, it is also possible that Morin came to understand the massacre as a “mass suicide” because this is how it has been consistently portrayed in the media, making its way into Public Opinion. As Carter states:

“I will break down those whom I consider to be murdered, beginning with the group of people who were forcibly injected poison. This is a historical fact that no documentary or film has yet chosen to discuss or even portray. In every [emphasis in original] interview I’ve ever given, I’ve spoken about the bodies that I personally saw with abscesses. And yet, that fact is never reported. Could it be that this reality is left out of media portrayals because it doesn’t fit neatly into the ‘mass suicide’ argument?”

The idea of a “mass suicide” is more frightening than a “massacre,” because for a “massacre” only one or a few people need to be so-called “deviants”, whereas for a “mass suicide” a significantly larger group must be, and the narrative of this being the case in Jonestown has been constructed and maintained by media in the years since the event (Jorgensen, 1980). In making *Outlast 2*, the developers of the game seem to have consistently chosen what they find to be “scary,” without much consideration for originality or the way that various elements will fit together.

In an interview with Alex Co (2016), Philippe Morin lists several other inspirations, from which almost the whole of *Outlast 2* may be deduced. The plot concerning the birth of the Antichrist can be found in *The Omen* (1976) and *V/H/S/2* (2013); the rural American setting can be seen in *Children of the Corn* (1983); the investigative journalist couple is also found in *The Shrine* (2010); the apocalyptic visions of the protagonist also appear in *Take Shelter* (2011); the effect of a place on its inhabitants is a crucial element of *The Shining* (1980); and the occultist murdering women and children come from *True Detective* (2014). One element, though, is difficult to trace from any pre-existing source of inspiration: the flashback narrative.

Throughout the game, Blake experiences flashbacks to his childhood at a Catholic school, where he was a student along with his future wife Lynn and their friend Jessica Gray. The flashbacks usually occur at high points of tension in the game, and while in reality flashbacks to traumatic moments can be triggered by events reminding a person of that trauma (Mind, 2021), in the game they are caused by a hallucination-inducing device which also seems to be the cause of Knoth’s prophetic visions. This flashback narrative culminates in the death of Jessica at the hands of a teacher, Father Loutermilch, who is implied to have sexually abused Jessica. Blake helped to cover-up Jessica’s death, making it appear to be a suicide, something for which he continues to feel guilt. This narrative depicts the very real epidemic of sexual abuse and coverups in the Catholic Church (Romo, 2018), which has been represented in films such as *Spotlight* (2015), but no works were explicitly cited by Morin as inspiring this element of the game. In fact, many of the films cited by Morin as inspirations, such as *The Omen*, imply that the Catholic Church is the only institution capable of saving people from evil.

However, when looking at Public Opinion it becomes clear that in recent decades there has been a shift in the narrative in the media, away from the Catholic Church being unambiguously morally good. Gallup polls indicate a decline in the views of Americans regarding Catholicism from 64% favorable in 2000 (Gallup, n.d.) to 45% in 2008 (Jones, 2008). Meanwhile, American Catholics reported a lack of confidence in their own Church, and Americans in general professed a lack of confidence in organized religion itself (McCarthy, 2019).

This may explain why the depiction of the Catholic Church in *Outlast 2* mirrors Temple Gate, just as Father Loutermilch mirrors Sullivan Knoth, and Jessica Gray mirrors Anna Lee. *Outlast 2* seems not to see any difference between NRMs and religious institutions as typically conceived, as each creates and maintains hierarchical power structures in which those with power may act with immunity from repercussion, claiming divine authority. However, to see NRMs and older religious institutions in their present form as indistinguishable in these senses is incorrect and misguided, as will be revealed by a comparison of some NRMs with the fictional Testament.

In *Outlast 2*, the Testament of the New Ezekiel was started by Knoth in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1966; he and his followers left Albuquerque in 1969 and arrived in the Havasupai Indian Reservation, Arizona in 1971. This Reservation is not unpopulated, with 639 inhabitants, and is also a member of

various intertribal organizations (Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, n.d.); it is implied that the Testament either displaced or killed the indigenous inhabitants. Knoth then ministered to his followers and built Temple Gate over the course of the subsequent 42 years, carrying out abuse, enforced abortions, and infanticide, with the events of *Outlast 2* taking place in 2013. Somehow, during all this time, the Testament was unchecked by law enforcement agencies.

Compare the history of the Testament, and the ability of Knoth to abuse his followers without prosecution, to the story of the Nuwaubian Nation and its founder, Dwight D. York. York started out with a small group of followers, living in existing American cities, before eventually moving to his own compound, “Tama-Re”, which was raided in 2002 by the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI) and the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); York was sentenced to 135 years in prison for molesting children, along with other crimes, in 2004 (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Compare the Testament to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), who split from the mainstream LDS church over its decision to abandon polygamy and has since then been subject to several FBI raids of its isolated Yearning for Zion (YFZ) Ranch and other legal actions due to its practice of plural marriage, instances of religious discrimination, and cases of sexual abuse (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014). Compare the Testament to Jonestown, the Jonestown massacre being the result of the arrival of Congressman Leo Ryan to investigate the settlement on charges of abuse. While individuals within NRMs may wield institutional power within that NRM, the NRM itself will lack power in the institutions of the nation in which it is situated, as will its members and leaders. This makes the portrayal of *Outlast 2* unrealistic.

An unrealistic portrayal of something is not necessarily bad, but this representation of NRMs and of organized religion in general is harmful, as *Outlast 2* implies that faith itself leads to abuse. Abuse certainly does occur in NRMs such as the Nuwaubian Nation, the FLDS, and the Peoples Temple, and it also occurs in traditional religious institutions such as the Catholic Church, but individual faith and spirituality is not the causal factor: it is the complex web of material factors which pressure individuals to remain silent.

York preyed upon the fears of African Americans, claiming to offer them a path out of oppression which required them to give everything they owned to him, cutting off any escape route. The FLDS was like a family: for an apostate to leave the church they would also have to leave every acquaintance they had ever made. The Peoples Temple combined these factors, among many others. People are born and raised in the Catholic Church: to admit that they were being sexually abused by a Church official would mean causing uproar in their own community, and risking ostracization. The Catholic Church also wields significant power in many western democracies, due to its number of adherents. With regards to the Testament, the only thing preventing its adherents from leaving are threats of physical violence from individuals who become secondary antagonists in the game, such as from the seven-foot-tall pickaxe wielding woman, Marta; or from the dwarf, Laird Byron, astride the giant Nick Tremblay; or from the lustful androgyne, Val. While these may be fun encounters or interesting characters, to imply that the Testament has any real similarity to the Nuwaubian Nation, or the FLDS, or Jonestown, or the Catholic Church, is to turn the genuine issue of abuse in religious institutions, both new and old, into absurdities, trivializing the issue.



Figure 5 – Secondary antagonists in Outlast 2.

Waco Resurrection

An interesting point of contrast to *Outlast 2* is *Waco Resurrection*, a third-person shooter in which the player character is a resurrected David Koresh fighting against the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI) and Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) during the Waco Siege, as seen in figure 6. The game is only playable as an art installation, with no downloadable version available for home computers. Its distribution is limited, and therefore so are discussions and descriptions of the game, with the largest quantity of information being available on the game's page on co-creator Eddo Stern's website (Stern et al, n.d.). Included on this website is a statement on the game's intentions, but it is somewhat difficult to determine whether it is sincere or not given the tone and style of the rest of the content.

"Waco Resurrection draws on the rhetoric of conspiracy theory, cult activity and apocalypticism to investigate the Waco siege as a cultural milestone. It addresses the multi-layered dynamics of a 51-day media-event that served to mobilize the militia movement, radicalize Timothy McVeigh and cause a re-evaluation of the role of religion in society."



Figure 6 – Screenshot of Waco Resurrection.

It is worth briefly mentioning what the Waco siege was for the sake of context. The following information is taken from the report of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight with Committee on the Judiciary (1996), from the United States House of Representatives. On 28 February 1993, 76 ATF agents attempted to storm the Mount Carmel Center, which was the headquarters of the Branch Davidians, an NRM led by Messiah claimant David Koresh. The ATF intended to serve a search

warrant for the property, as they suspected it contained illegal firearms, as well as serving an arrest warrant for Koresh. However, the Branch Davidians resisted, and opened fire on the ATF, leading to a gunfight. In the subsequent 51-day standoff the ATF were joined by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies, negotiating the release of 25 individuals from the compound, including 21 children, and applying various pressures to force the remaining Branch Davidians out. On 19 April, the FBI warned the Branch Davidians via their radio link that they would be inserting “riot control agent”, or tear gas, into the compound, and then played an announcement via loudspeaker. After six hours, fires broke out almost simultaneously throughout the compound. Nine more people escaped, while more than 70 others perished inside.

Some conspiracy theorists claim that the fires were started by the Government agents besieging the compound. Documentaries such as *Waco, the Big Lie* (1993), one of the first to be made after the Waco Siege, purport to show the large-scale Government conspiracies which resulted in the deaths during the Siege. *Waco, the Big Lie* was so influential that the defense of the domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh used the film during his trial as evidence of the existence of an overzealous Government violently infringing on individual liberties (People in the News, 2011), and a report from the House of Representatives mentioned the “significant impact on public opinion” of the film (Committee on Government Reform and Oversight with Committee on the Judiciary, 1996). A poll from 1999 even suggested that most Americans believed a cover up had taken place (CBSNews.com staff).



Figure 7 – A still from Waco, the Big Lie purporting to show a flamethrower mounted on a tank during the Waco siege.

However, genuine analyses of the siege conclude that the fires began within the compound, probably started by Branch Davidians (Committee on Government Reform, 2000; Stone, 1993), and coincidentally fanned by the holes that the Government agents had created for the purposes of deploying the tear gas. Graeme Craddock, who was one of the nine individuals who escaped during the fire, testified that he heard Branch Davidians discussing moving fuel, and saying, “light the fire” and “don’t light the fire” at various points (Craddock, 1999). If Branch Davidians acting under the orders of David Koresh did light the fire in the compound, their actions would be comparable to the so-called “mass suicide” of Jonestown, although, considering that the fire killed many children inside the compound as well, “massacre” would again be more appropriate.

The impact of the Waco siege on wider society is difficult to understate; one may even characterize some of the movements it spawned as NRMs in and of themselves. Consider the militia movement, the collective name used to refer to the typically right-wing armed groups and individuals that consider the American Government to be increasingly infringing on individual liberties (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.; Cozic, 1997; Doxsee, 2021; Anti-Defamation League, 2020). Such groups appeal to the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which is written as follows:

“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” (Constitution.gov, n.d.)

While the militia movement is fundamentally a political movement, it is impossible to deny its religious aspects. Many militia groups allege that the American Government and many other governments around the world are secretly controlled by a shadowy deep state, “New World Order”, or “Zionist Occupation Government”, an idea that has been an antisemitic dog whistle since at least the publication of the canard *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903 (Eco, 2002). Others, such as the Montana Freeman, believe in so-called Christian Identity: the spurious idea that Anglo-Saxons, not Jews, were the people who were called the “Israelites” or “Hebrews” in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible (Baker and McMillan, 2019). The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon in 2016 (Binder, 2016) and the Bundy standoff in 2014 (Ritter, 2014) both heavily involved the Bundy family, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, popularly called Mormons, which some consider to be an NRM, and which has had a history of conflict with the American Government such as during the Utah War (Roberts, 2008).

At the core of all these beliefs is a form of the Christian persecution complex, believing themselves to be under attack from an atheist or Jewish-controlled Government which is gradually including many more non-Christians in society to the detriment of Christians (Noble, 2014). Of course, the Christian persecution complex is just that: a complex, one which has no basis. Certainly, Christians do face persecution in many countries (Ochab, 2021), but there is no systematic injustice facing them in the United States, as Christians remain the majority of the population (Pew Research Center, 2015), almost every American President has been Christian (Sandstrom, 2021), and even if there were to be a non-Christian President in the future, or if irreligious people came to number more than Christians in the United States, Christians would still remain a significant part of the population with tremendous political power in the democratic system. The premises of the Christian persecution complex and the militia movement are fundamentally incorrect.

Roger Ebert calls *Waco Resurrection* a “mindless shooting gallery” (2010), but this is the point of the game: it highlights the absurdity of Koresh’s “resurrection”, the conspiracies surrounding the siege, the militia movement, and of needless martyrdom against imagined foes. It counters one of the major narratives which has solidified itself in Public Opinion, and undermines players’ abilities to take this narrative seriously, dissuading them from the beliefs which motivated the likes of Timothy McVeigh and the Bundys. “The medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964), and in *Waco Resurrection* the “shooting gallery” game format is carefully and purposefully used to clear effect. This can be compared with *Outlast 2*, which fails to realize its own absurdity and purpose it for anything meaningful, instead creating a muddled product.

Far Cry 5

The final game to be examined is *Far Cry 5*, an open-world first-person shooter in which the player character is an unnamed sheriff's deputy in the fictional Hope County, Montana. At the beginning of the game, they attempt to serve an arrest warrant for Joseph Seed, fictional leader of the fictional NRM, the Project at Eden's Gate, or simply Eden's Gate. The player and their allies are attacked as a result, and although the player manages to escape most of their allies are captured. Eden's Gate increase their operations, enacting a military takeover of the county, believing that an apocalypse called the "Collapse" is imminent and thus converting decommissioned missile silos into bunkers to wait it out.



Figure 9 – Antagonists in *Far Cry 5*.

When the game was first revealed, many journalists noted an apparent similarity between Eden's Gate and the contemporary far right, and especially the militia movement, due to the group's use of Christian and American nationalist iconography, and most of the antagonists, seen in figure 9, appearing to be white. These traits had come to be associated with certain political elements through Public Opinion at the time. Martin Robinson of Polygon thought it would be "an attempt to satirize the rise of the far-right" (2017) while Joshua Rivera of GQ called Eden's Gate "a doomsday cult that bears a striking resemblance to Christian extremists, fueled by the sort of conservative gun-toting militias that are in fact very real – and usually very white" (2017). However, upon the game's release, many felt that these expectations were not met; religious themes were barely mentioned, and despite Eden's Gate's all-white leadership, its membership seemed diverse, including women and people of color. Despite this, Eden's Gate was still portrayed without nuance as a destructive cult, violently enforcing its beliefs on others. Ben Kuchera of Polygon called the game "a meandering, defiantly inoffensive mess" (2018b) while Andrew Webster of The Verge said that "By using the imagery of modern-day American turmoil, it [*Far Cry 5*] creates the illusion that it has something to say, then stubbornly refuses to say anything" (2018).



Figure 10 – People of Color (POC) members of Eden's Gate in Far Cry 5.

The assumptions of these journalists were reasonable: in 2011, survivalist blogger James Wesley Rawles published an article entitled *Move to the Mountain States – The American Redoubt*, in which he urged a massive political and religious migration of “Christians of *all* [emphasis in original] races... [and] Orthodox Jews and Messianic Jews” to “Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, eastern Oregon, and eastern Washington” to “effect a demographic solidification” of these groups. Rawles states that they “share the same moral framework,” and continues: “In calamitous times, with a few exceptions, it will only be the God fearing that will continue to be law abiding.” Throughout the article, he makes several mentions of a “coming collapse.”

The similarity between the Redoubt proposal and Eden Gate's arrival and takeover of Hope County, down to the location in the Northwestern United States, the tolerance of different races but enforcement of religious homogeneity, and the expectation of an apocalypse called “the collapse”, is impossible to deny. It is hard to believe that no one on the writing team at Ubisoft had heard of Rawles' article, especially considering the movement it spawned. Rawles continues to post weekly about the Redoubt; the website Redoubt News has been established, frequently posting articles on the subject (Redoubt News, n.d.); 2008 Presidential Candidate for the Constitution Party Chuck Baldwin endorsed the proposal (Baldwin, 2011); Chris Walsh of Revolutionary Realty, a real-estate agency for survivalists operating within the region of the Redoubt, “says growing demand has turned into such a ‘massive upswelling’ that he now sells about 140 properties a year in the north-western part of the Redoubt” (Economist, 2016); and even after the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency, the migration continued (Criscione, 2017). It is worthwhile to consider why advocates of the Redoubt, hereafter called Redoubters for short, believe what they believe, and to contrast this with Eden's Gate.

Rawles claims that the Redoubt should welcome Christians and adherents of Orthodox and Messianic Judaism, but he is playing a trick with this statement: he pretends to be talking about religion, despite actually talking about politics. Earlier, it was mentioned that the relationship between a concept and a sound-pattern is arbitrary. So too does it go for the word “Christian”, which can refer to many different

things. When Rawles says “Christian”, he means a specific kind of Christian: one who believes “that the Bible is inerrant, infallible, and inspired by God” (Rawles, 2013). This rejection of Biblical criticism, and assertion that all Christians should abide by the laws prescribed by the Bible, is characteristic of a group of Christians called Evangelicals in the United States (Finn, 2020; Hinch, 2016), who have since at least 2004, and especially in 2016 and 2020, voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates in Presidential Elections (CNN, 2004; New York Times, 2008; Washington Post, 2012; New York Times, 2016; CNN, 2020). Meanwhile, Orthodox Jews are predominantly Republican (Liu, 2013), and Messianic Jewish organizations such as Jews for Jesus share close ties with Evangelicals (Jews for Jesus, n.d.), to the point that “Messianic Jewish” is synonymous with “Evangelical from a Jewish background”.

The platform of the Republican Party should briefly be mentioned. One statement on the Republican Party’s website is as follows: various things which are accepted as being good, such as “American values and traditions... constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms... the integrity of our elections... national security... America’s greatness... America’s values... our nation and way of life” are under attack by the “left,” which stands in opposition to these things (Republican National Committee, n.d.). Rhetorically, this implies that to oppose this “left,” and to preserve these good things, Americans should join the Republican party and vote for Republican candidates. It is impossible to say for certain whether these candidates believe in this platform themselves, but they often make a show of at least performing as though they do, as can be seen in many of the speeches given by former President of the United States Donald Trump (Bennett, 2020; Smith, 2020; Naylor, 2021). The belief in a “collapse,” for Redoubters, arises from a belief in this battle, and that if the “left” is allowed to gain the upper hand in America there will be devastating consequences.

The fundamental issue that journalists had with *Far Cry 5* was that these kinds of survivalists were not just the antagonists of the game, but also the protagonists. Eden’s gate were simply “bad” survivalists, in contrast to the “good” ones. Creative director of *Far Cry 5*, Dan Hay, explains:

“What was interesting, and why we built a cult – it was super interesting to have a character that was talking about this feeling that he had, that a calamity was going to come. You look at the potential in this. There have been a number of times that we could all believe that a calamity was about to occur. We’ve almost been desensitized to it.” (Takahashi, 2017a)

In another interview, Hay highlights his childhood during the Cold War and the more recent subprime mortgage crisis as inspiring in himself a sense of impending doom, and projects these fears onto the fictional Joseph Seed (Takahashi, 2017b). Throughout the game, news reports are heard of escalating international tensions due to terrorism and nuclear weapons testing, as well as more local issues in the United States relating to politics and economy, eventually culminating in a nuclear war, the survivors of which emerge for the events of the spin-off title *Far Cry: New Dawn* (Ubisoft, 2019). In reality and in *Far Cry 5* the belief that the “end is nigh” is a part of Public Opinion.

This begs the question, though, of whether the end is truly nigh. To answer this in full is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but while humanity is at risk of facing many potential catastrophes soon, such as from climate change (Earth Science Communications Team, 2022) or nuclear war (Roser, 2022), these are not inevitabilities, and can be prevented through human counteraction. People have predicted apocalypses for a long time. For perspective, two examples will be compared: as noted in *Apocalypses* (Weber, 1999), Martin Luther predicted the world would end by 1600 while Jim Jones predicted 1967

much later. Of course, neither of these predictions proved correct. While each based their predictions upon their own interpretations of the Bible, their minds were clouded by their perspective: to Martin Luther, the Catholic Church seemed to have completely given up spirituality in favor of materialism, while he also felt there was a growing threat from the Ottoman Empire; to Jones, the entire world seemed ready to begin a nuclear war, while the United States systemically and institutionally oppressed minorities and women.

The end may seem to be nigh to Hay, to Redoubters, and to the fictional characters of *Far Cry 5*, but it probably isn't. The association of tragic occurrences in one's own life or with the world with some greater metaphysical purpose is usually superstition. To quote Sgt. Howie in *The Wicker Man*:

"There is no sun god. There is no goddess of the fields. Your crops failed because your strains failed. Fruit is not meant to be grown on these islands. It's against nature! Don't you see that killing me is not going to bring back your apples?"

The absurdity of the beliefs and actions of Eden's Gate is not quite the same as what is seen in *Outlast 2*, however, as it applies not just to the NRM, but to the game's fictional world at large, and reflects part of our own reality, however heightened it may be. This gives *Far Cry 5* a lot of potential to say something meaningful, yet it fumbles, as it is deeply critical of Eden's Gate while being completely uncritical of society beyond it. It sees something wrong with a doomsday cult, yet nothing wrong with an entire county filled with doomsday preppers. As H. P. Lovecraft (1927) says: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." As NRMs are seen as reclusive to some extent, as having their own rituals and books and ways of being separate from society at large, they are part of this "unknown". NRMs frighten us, yet the apocalypse has become mundane.

Reflection and Conclusion

This dissertation set out to answer the questions of why, how, and to what ends NRMs are represented in games for the purpose of encouraging a more considered approach. The games analyzed represent only a small selection from among the many games which have represented NRMs over the years, and this subject could be explored further by analyzing more games. Some others which may be of interest are *The Story of Kamikuishiki Village* (Kanai Karasawa, 1995) and *Fighting Force* (Eidos Interactive, 1997), neither of which were discussed here for the sake of brevity. However, from the games which have been analyzed in this dissertation some conclusions may be drawn.

Recent mainstream games often use NRMs, or "cults," as antagonists, as they are somewhat "unknown" when compared to religion as formally conceived. These fictional NRMs will often have some real-world inspiration of which the developers are aware. They are often contrasted against, or made like, other groups, considered to be more of a part of mainstream society, such as existing religious institutions. Many are quick to assume that there is an intended cultural critique at work in the game, however this may never have been the intentions of the developers. While they may have had some intended basis, they have had many other influences which they were unaware of. One sees in these works not any original commentary, but a conglomeration of derivations. To look at Temple Gate is to see Jonestown as it was represented by the media, with a *Children of the Corn* setting and *Take Shelter* visions. To look at Eden's Gate is to see a normalized militia movement fighting against some vague notion of Christian extremism.

Waco Resurrection serves as an intelligent send-up of these amalgams: it is a game which is directly about Public Opinion, and the ways that it and NRMs interact with one another. Its absurdism, in contrast to *Far Cry 5* and *Outlast 2*, is its point: to look at the Branch Davidians in that game is to see the folly underlying the beliefs of the militia movement, of Timothy McVeigh, and of every conspiracy theory surrounding the events of Waco.

Still, there exists a large and open niche for games which aim to directly examine NRMs. Such a game's developers should, before development truly begins, consider what NRMs it wishes to portray and how it wishes to portray them, and the influences affecting these decisions. They are not impervious to Public Opinion in this process. Likewise, players of the game may not come away with the interpretation that the developers expected them to. To ensure that the message is carefully constructed, rigorous playtesting should be conducted, and new play testers with little knowledge of the game's intent should frequently be involved. In addition, research should be thoroughly conducted into everything the game endeavors to tackle, and knowledgeable consultants should be contacted wherever possible. Even the marketing must be carefully constructed so as not to be misleading to potential players.

I am doing the above for my own game, *An Appeal to Heaven*, using extensive documentation, conducting frequent playtests, and deeply researching every aspect of the anti-cult movement and of NRMs by reading books, interviews, articles, watching films, documentaries, and TV series, and consuming anything else I can, before teasing out the most useful parts. Whether this turns out to be a success remains to be seen, but early feedback has been positive and encouraging. I hope to have the first "chapter" of the game completed by the end of April, after which further analyses may be conducted.

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