INFINITE EXCEPTIONALISM: THE ROLE OF THE DIVINE IN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of

Master of Arts in Communication

By

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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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August, 2014
INFINITE EXCEPTIONALISM: THE ROLE OF THE DIVINE IN AMERICAN
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ABSTRACT

INFINITE EXCEPTIONALISM: THE ROLE OF THE DIVINE IN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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This thesis *BioShock Infinite* to explore how videogames serve as a uniquely persuasive platform through which political and religious narratives can be forwarded to a segment of the population that typically is not receptive to, or interested in, such messages. *BioShock Infinite* utilizes the cultural myths of American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth to communicate messages regarding the infusion of religion into political and civic life. The messages contained within the narrative world of *BioShock Infinite* are analyzed, while exploring the implications of such an approach with regard to the cultural views of its players. Analysis suggests that *BioShock Infinite* presents a narrative world where religious interventionist politics serve as a metaphor for the disease at the heart of America, where the only possible antidote is secular libertarianism. This message likely resonates with the majority of videogame players who tend to oppose religion in politics.
Dedicated to my parents who taught me the importance of knowing how to think for myself and never give up.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to Dr. Joseph Valenzano III for serving as my thesis advisor. Your criticisms and critiques taught me a lot through this process and enabled me to improve as a writer and academic. I could never have finished this on time without all of your time and dedication, and your ominous presence hovering over this process encouraging me to meet my deadlines.

A very special thanks to my wife Katie. I don’t know how or why you put up with me, but there is no way I could have done this without you. All of your contributions are too numerous to list here, the least of which was holding down the fort and taking care of Ender all day, every day. All of your tremendous sacrifices have not gone unnoticed, and I deeply appreciate everything you’ve done for me and Ender.

I would also like to thank Jordan Wood for his invaluable encouragement, commiseration, and help. Knowing someone else was as miserable as I was for the same reasons got me through so many days. Thanks to Ender, my Little Man, for being such a good Little Man, and making the little time I had to spend with you very special. Thanks to my Mom and Dad for their endless encouragement, always believing in me, and giving me the tools to persevere and succeed.

Thanks to my former employer whose deplorably unethical behavior enabled me to have the time, and pay, to dedicate my efforts full-time to my thesis. A thanks to the capitalist, corporate coffee machine for providing me with an excess of delicious calories.
and caffeine, as well as an abundance of fast internet. Thanks also to all of my friends for providing many, many much needed distractions and encouragement. Lastly, a huge sarcastic thanks to Katie and Dr. Valenzano for somehow talking me into doing this. I blame you. Both of you.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 2009 Texas Republican governor Rick Perry drew national attention when he suggested Texas secede from the Union if the federal government did not reform its size and vast expenditures.¹ While the secession movement gained traction among Tea Party supporters, Perry ultimately retracted his interest in such a move.² As a Tea Party-affiliated politician with strong ties to conservative evangelicals, Perry continued to remain in the national spotlight with his “machismo” rhetoric and hard-line conservative stances.³ Perry, and politicians like him, was instrumental in connecting the Tea Parties and conservative social positions, with conservative evangelicals.⁴ This association of conservative political ideology and religion is mirrored in the narrative world of BioShock Infinite, a videogame that primarily takes place in the religiously controlled floating city of Columbia. Utilizing the unique medium of videogames, BioShock Infinite is able to create a narrative about the role of religion in politics to a demographic typically indifferent to political affairs. This thesis analyzes the messages contained

⁴. Ibid.
within the narrative world of the game, and explores the implications of such an approach with regard to the cultural views of its players.

The popularity of videogames has grown relatively steadily since their entry into the commercial market, with $20.77 billion spent in 2012 on videogames in America.\(^5\) By 2012 58% of all Americans played videogames, with 64% of all videogame players aged 35 or younger.\(^6\) As the demographics of gamers expanded over the years, more companies designed videogames that include more complex themes and content targeted toward an adult audience.

This trend toward complexity in themes and content also was driven by advances in technology. Videogames possess many of the narrative qualities of movies, books and television, but are able to create an even more immersive experience by inserting the audience into the narrative. Instead of passively observing the story, videogames enable the audience to experience the narrative through active involvement, and, in some games, determine how the story will unfold. Unlike books, movies, or television, however, videogames can allow the gamer to observe the effects of the decisions and actions they choose to make. This interactive process also adds to the problem solving and critical thinking benefits of videogames and further fuels their rhetorical legitimacy.\(^7\)

Games designed for adults often contain religious and political themes and messages, and the popularity of videogames enables their messages to be conveyed directly and indirectly to a large number of individuals. The immersive nature of

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6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 270.
videogames allows players to interact with rhetorical messages, rather than passively experience or observe them. This interaction gives the messages contained in videogames the potential to wield significant influence over the individuals who play them. Videogames can reinforce attitudes, beliefs, and actions first encountered in real life, and vice-versa. The messages individuals see in games carry the potential to impact their perceptions and consequent behaviors in their lived world.

Additionally, videogames uniquely appeal to people who are less likely to be the targets of similar messages in other media. For example, the same demographic that primarily purchases and plays videogames (18-35 year olds) has some of the lowest reported religious and political participation and tends to have unfavorable views of religious organizations. 8 They also traditionally have the lowest levels of political participation of any age group, and are increasingly against religion making its way into politics. 9 This indicates that the same demographic who compose the majority of videogame players are also increasingly disinterested in religion and politics, and are also increasingly negative about religion in politics. Thus, videogames which explore religious and/or political messages would seem to have unique access to these individuals, which other media seemingly do not.

BioShock Infinite (2013) is a game that introduces its audience to political and religious messages. BioShock Infinite is a first-person-shooter \(^{10}\) videogame that contains strong religious and political themes in both its setting and narrative. Released in 2013, BioShock Infinite has since sold over 4 million copies and received numerous game-of-the-year awards. This thesis explores how videogames serve as a uniquely persuasive platform through which political and religious narratives can be forwarded to a segment of the population that typically is not receptive to, or interested in, such messages. In this chapter I introduce the topic by providing a brief overview of the context for the game and the theoretical framework I use in the analysis. I end with an overview of chapters.

**Context**

Key to exploring the unique rhetorical elements of BioShock Infinite is an understanding of the context surrounding the development and release of the game in relation to some of its primary narrative elements which depict the merging of politics and religion in society. BioShock Infinite was developed and released during a time that saw the political participation of 18-35 year olds sharply rise, while political candidates increased their use of alternative media sources directed toward younger voters. The ability of alternative media sources to reach younger audiences suggests that the age group playing videogames are more receptive to political messages conveyed through alternative media channels.

Concurrent with this rise and fall of political participation is an increasing number of young individuals who do not affiliate with an organized religion. Much of this rise in

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10. Or FPS (first-person-shooter).
the unaffiliated is associated with an increased distrust of mixing religion with politics by politicians and political activists, and the conflation of religious affiliation with certain social and political beliefs. Religion and religious expression play a significant role in American life. Religion served as a justification for many of the early colonists settling in America. Religion and religious themes are pervasive throughout much of American history, and the Constitution contains specific protections for religious freedom. While America remains the most religious industrialized nation in the world, the number of younger Americans claiming religious affiliation is declining. Thus, while America remains a religious nation, the primary demographic of videogame players, 18-30 year olds, are increasingly apathetic towards organized religion. Additionally, there is an increasing amount of individuals who think there is too much religious rhetoric in politics and who think that churches and other houses of worship should stay out of politics.

While 18-30 year olds comprise the most rapidly growing demographic of the religiously unaffiliated, there are multiple causes for the decrease in religious affiliation in the United States. Dissatisfaction with the perceived connection between religion and politics, and the consequent increased involvement of organized religion in politics, coupled with rejection of the assumed equation of religious affiliation with social and political beliefs has worked together to create an increasingly negative view of religion in public life. As a videogame, BioShock Infinite has a unique voice in this context because it conveys political and religious messages to a demographic that is not usually receptive to those messages. Additionally, BioShock Infinite’s message, which is critical of the

conflation of religion and politics, likely, resonates with this demographic because of their tendency to be skeptical of both institutions.

Coinciding with this increase in apathy towards organized religion and decreased political participation is the inception of the Tea Party movement, commonly perceived to have strong religious overtones. While development for *BioShock Infinite* began in late 2007, the setting and some key narrative elements were not in place until 2009. This period also saw the emergence of the Tea Party movement, inspired by the 1773 Boston Tea Party, a political protest against perceived unfair taxation. The rapid growth and popularity of the Tea Party movement almost immediately became a magnet for politicians drawn to the potential votes available by those associating with the cause, and the label was quickly endorsed by conservative Republicans hoping to ride the tide of popularity into office. 14

The Tea Party movement’s popularity among religious conservatives resulted in a noticeable increase in the religious rhetoric present in politics and, at least partially fueled the conflation of not only religious affiliation and conservative politics, but also religious affiliation and deep patriotism. 15 The positions espoused by some of the Tea Parties are rhetorically justified by their proponents through a desire to return to the “Founder’s Constitution.” 16 The Tea Parties endow the founders who constructed the Constitution mythic status, with some even suggesting divine inspiration in crafting the Constitution. 17 This mythical status, combined with divine inspiration gives the Constitution a sacred status. As the founding document of America, the Constitution serves as the embodiment

15. Ibid., 1810-1816.
16. Ibid., 1808.
17. Ibid., 1807-1819.
of religiously based American Exceptionalism for the Tea Parties.\textsuperscript{18} Elements of the Tea Parties advocate for the need to return to the fundamental principles that the founders established to save the nation from ruin. These different elements surrounded the development of \textit{BioShock Infinite} and influence the messages contained within the game, and their ability to resonate with its primary audience.

\section*{Method}

To better understand how videogames can uniquely depict political and religious messages to younger adult audiences, I analyze the interplay of narrative elements in \textit{BioShock Infinite}. I first look at the unique rhetorical characteristics of videogames generally: interactivity, realism, and ludological and narrological aspects. Then I focus on how those narrative elements in \textit{BioShock Infinite} communicate two strong political and religious mythologies: American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth.

As videogames progressed towards a more story driven medium, the narrative potential for videogames to reflect the context of the lived world they are developed and released in began to be realized. The narrative capacity of videogames is influenced by two unique factors: the interactivity between the game and the player, and the realism of the game, gameplay, and the game world.

Videogames, like books, movies, and television, can be utilized as compelling narrative vehicles.\textsuperscript{19} Videogames as a narrative vehicle are distinguished from traditional

\begin{flushleft}
18. Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
forms of media by their interactive capacity.\textsuperscript{20} Interactivity is essentially the ability of the player (audience) to both effect, and be effected, by the narrative through their gameplay choices and strategies.\textsuperscript{21} Functionally, the narrative contained in a videogame can determine the nature of the gameplay. The narrative world is influenced by a set of paidea rules\textsuperscript{22} which determine how the world operates. A change in the narrative world can lead to a change in the rules, and thus a change in gameplay, affecting the experience of the player.\textsuperscript{23} This change in the narrative world can range from story elements pre-ordained by the programmers, to random interactions and choices determined by the gameplay of the player. Thus, the actions of the narrative can influence the player, and the player can influence the narrative.\textsuperscript{24} This allows for multiple gamers, or even a single player, to play through the same game, and have different narrative experiences depending on player choices and strategies. This interaction between the player and the narrative, gives videogames an added layer of persuasive potential as players are more involved in the narrative process.\textsuperscript{25}

Realism is another component of the interactive player experience that influences the persuasive potential of videogame narratives. Realism essentially describes the ability of a game to create an experience that lines up with a player’s imagined perceptions of what would or would not happen in given situations.\textsuperscript{26} When a player’s interactions with

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 260.  \\
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 263.  \\
\textsuperscript{22} Paidea rules are simple programming rules that define the functional parameters of the game.  \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ang Chee Siang. "Rules, gameplay, and narratives in video games." \textit{Simulation & Gaming} 37, no. 3 (September 2006): 318.  \\
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{26} Michael A. Shapiro, Jorge Pena-Herborn, and Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Realism, Imagination, and Narrative Video Games.” In \textit{Playing Video Games}, edited by Peter Vorderer and Jennings Bryant, 277. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2006. 
\end{flushleft}
objects in a game reflect how they would be expected to operate in the lived world of the player, this creates immersion into the game world.\textsuperscript{27} The ability for a player to be immersed in the other reality of the game is dependent on the realism of the game and heightened through interaction with it. The unique persuasive ability of videogames comes from their ability to give the player the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality in an interactive narrative world.\textsuperscript{28}

Researchers focus on two primary approaches to videogame scholarship: ludology and narrology. Narrology refers to the diverse research being done with narrative theory across multiple disciplines. Ludology refers to the study of games and play activities.\textsuperscript{29} The idea of studying the actual gameplay of games was not intended to replace a narrological approach, but to complement it, while allowing for the consideration of elements that make videogames unique from other media.\textsuperscript{30} This thesis primarily focuses on the narrative elements in \textit{BioShock Infinite}. However, while the proposed method is from a narrative perspective, it does not exclude ludological components such as gameplay elements or game mechanics from the analysis. A rhetorical analysis cannot divorce the narrative and game play elements from the mechanics of a videogame, as the game mechanics are how the player experiences the narrative, and thus are integral to the narrative experience.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
The religious and political themes in the narrative of *BioShock Infinite* heavily rely on American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth. Myths, rather than empirical evidence, frame political and social events. These frames function to form a prevailing interpretation of the meaning and implications of those events.\(^{32}\) As myths are a form of cultural narrative, they can often be seen in the narrative messages presented in media produced by that culture.\(^{33}\) The media a culture produces, including videogames, can both reflect and work to create the prevailing interpretations of the public.

Two predominant cultural myths communicated through popular media, including videogames, are American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth. The American Exceptionalism myth is based on the premise that the United States is a special nation with a special divine destiny.\(^{34}\) This premise is born out of the belief that America’s founding documents set it apart from the Old World by removing the inherent corruptions of Europe while still allowing America to progress. The divine destiny of the United States and the ability to progress free of tyranny and corruption allows America to escape the inevitable fall of all great civilizations of the past.\(^{35}\) The rhetoric of American Exceptionalism manifests through either the mission of exemplar or the mission of intervention. The mission of intervention involves an active assertion of America’s

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35. Ibid.
greatness on the rest of the world in politics, economics and culture, shaping the world it helped to create.  

A prominent extension of American Exceptionalism is the Frontier Myth. The Frontier Myth is central to American national identity, developing from some of the earliest colonists and continuing to influence many aspects of political and social life.  

Born out of the desire to promote western expansion, the frontier myth has featured so prominently in American society that it is considered America’s “secular creation story.” The self-gratifying qualities of the myth have ensured its ongoing prominence.  

Slatta observes that this myth continues to be prominent despite the debunking of many of its core claims such as the strongly held image of the American cowboy as a rugged, solitary, individual, when historical record is clear that community and reliance on others was essential for survival in the old West.  

The worldview of the Frontier Myth does not see the frontier as a hindrance, but “something that should be explored and conquered through American expansion and intervention.” Therefore, the expansionist behaviors depicted in the Frontier Myth function as an interventionist interpretation of American Exceptionalism. These cultural myths are prominently featured in BioShock Infinite to shape the characters and setting, creating the messages embedded in its narrative world.

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36. Valenzano III and Engstrom, “Cowboys, Angels, and Demons.”  
38. Ibid., 2.  
41. Valenzano III and Engstrom, “Cowboys, Angels, and Demons.”  
42. Ibid.
BioShock Infinite is a science fiction videogame with steampunk elements set near the end of 1912, in the flying city of Colombia. Colombia was originally founded by self-proclaimed prophet Zachary Comstock as a religious haven for his followers. A physicist, Rosalind Lutece, made a discovery which gave the city the ability to float in the sky. Comstock then utilized this ability to break away from America and transformed Columbia into a floating, sovereign, city-state. The rich, complex storyline essentially boils down to a trans-dimensional story of redemption between a father and daughter, and the illusory nature of free-will in the context of multiple alternative dimensions.

Paramount to life in Columbia is religion. Power and control in Columbia is contained entirely within the context of the official religion of the city, and originates solely from the founder of the religion and city, Zachary Comstock. Columbia, the city, grew out of the collection of believers following Comstock’s new pseudo-Christian religion. Comstock founded Columbia as a haven for his followers, and established a political structure which drew the entirety of its power from the religion. The rules, laws, practices, customs, and even entertainment all function as tools infused with religion. In Columbia there is a complete fusion of politics and religion, such that the civil structures of the city are a part of the official religion. For example, the city’s Independence Day celebration is also considered a religious holiday. In this world, all aspects of social life are established by the religious hegemon, and serve to maintain the status quo of his power.

43. Steampunk typically features a mixture of old technology and selected advanced technologies. Futuristic technologies are often achieved through the implementation of older technologies. For example, the city of Columbia in BioShock Infinite floats through a breakthrough in quantum mechanics, while still utilizing 1912-esque video technology.
Outline of Chapters

In this thesis I argue that *BioShock Infinite* presents a narrative world where religious interventionist politics serve as a metaphor for the disease at the heart of America, where the only possible antidote is secular libertarianism. I analyze how *BioShock Infinite* utilizes cultural myth to communicate religious and political messages to the primary demographic of videogame players.

In the next chapter I establish the rhetorical context of *BioShock Infinite*. I begin with describing the primary demographic of videogame players, with a focus on the nature of their political engagement and religious affiliation. This is followed by a discussion of the Tea Parties, a political movement with strong religious associations that arose during the development of *BioShock Infinite*. This chapter concludes with describing *BioShock Infinite* and why it was selected.

In the third chapter, I establish the method used to analyze *BioShock Infinite*. The chapter begins with a discussion of narrative and cultural myth as a form of narrative. I focus on two primary American cultural myths: American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth. This is followed by describing realism and interactivity; two inherent characteristics of videogames that make them a unique rhetorical medium. The chapter then concludes with the specific textual analysis process used for this thesis.

The fourth chapter presents the actual analysis of *BioShock Infinite*. First I discuss the presence and role of the Frontier Myth, then I focus on the presence and role of American Exceptionalism in the game. This is followed by the final chapter, a discussion of the conclusions drawn from this analysis. There, I discuss the presentations of the two
major characters of the game, and their influence on how the demographic of videogame players may be influenced by the game in terms of their views of American political life.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT

Videogames were born out of the rapid technological advancement during the space race in the 1960’s. As the size of computers shrank, the public’s access to computer technology grew. In 1972 Allan Alcorn developed *Pong* as a programming exercise while working for the newly formed Atari Incorporated. *Pong* became the first commercially successful videogame marketed to the public, and was released for individual home consumption in 1975.\(^4\) *Pong* was so successful that it sparked the birth of the videogame industry, spurring other companies to test the market and develop their own games and platforms. Many of these companies became major players in the videogame industry. Over the years the industry grew, and videogames became widely available as developers created videogames for a variety of platforms for commercial and personal consumption. The increasing availability of videogames for consumers created a broad audience and many contexts in which consumers could experience videogames.

Since their introduction to the public market, with the exception of the 1983 videogame crash, videogames experienced an almost linear increase in sales and

\(^{44}\) Steven L. Kent, *The ultimate history of video games: from Pong to Pokemon - the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world.* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 38-48.
popularity. This rapid increase in popularity also fueled the widespread availability of videogames. In 1973, the year after Pong’s introduction to the public as an arcade game, Americans spent $40 million on videogames. By 2012 that figure was dwarfed by the $20.77 billion that Americans spent on videogames. In 2012 58% of all Americans played videogames. Of that population, 68% were 18 and older, with 64% of all players 35 or younger, making the average age of videogame players 30 years old. Additionally, 45% of all gamers were female, including adults and children. Adult females (18 and over) comprised far more of the total population of videogame players (31%) than did male children aged 17 and younger (19%). As the demographics of gamers shifted and expanded over the years, more companies designed videogames to cater to an older, adult audience that include more complex themes and content.

As videogames progressed, developers began to utilize the narrative potential for videogames to reflect the complex context of the lived world into which the games they create are developed and released. Because games contain complex themes and narratives, it is impossible to understand them as rhetoric outside of their social and political context without an understanding of their audience. Bioshock Infinite is a videogame released in 2013 that contains strong political and religious elements in its setting and narrative. Videogames are powerful tools for rhetoric, so in order to better understand the political and religious messages contained in the game, we must first

45. Ibid., 220-258; The 1983 videogame industry crash saw peak revenues of $3.2 billion in 1983 drop 97% to $100 million in 1985.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
examine the political and religious context surrounding the game’s development and release. In this chapter, I describe the political participation and religious views of the demographic which constitutes the largest number of videogame players. Then I explore the immediate political and religious context for Bioshock Infinite with a special focus on the emergence of the Tea Parties, a powerful political movement that received a lot of attention (both good and bad) during this time period, and whose ideologies appear to be reflected throughout much of the game. I conclude with a brief overview of Bioshock Infinite’s release, including developer Irrational Games and creative director Ken Levine.

**Political Engagement of Younger Voters**

One of the prominent and consistent characteristics of the 18-29 year old demographic is their level of political engagement. Traditional measures of political engagement are aggregated from civic associations that are centered on casting ballots and activities thought indicative of voting habits. Commonly, these traditional measures include an individual’s voter registration status, their likelihood of voting, the degree to which they follow election news, or the amount of thought given to the election. These traditional measures all assume that the purpose of politics is to acquire the most votes, and thus are ballot-centric. Under these traditional measures, 18-29 year olds consistently have the lowest levels of political engagement of any age group. Alternatively, political engagement can be measured from non-traditional methods of participation, such as discussing political content online and participating in online

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51 Hargittai and Shaw, Digitally Savvy Citizenship,” 117-118.
communities focused on specific social or political issues. While traditional measures of political engagement seem to indicate that younger voters are abandoning politics and civil activity, analyses that include alternative methods of participation indicate that they are instead turning to newer technologies to engage politically.

Traditional measures of political engagement have always remained low for the youngest age groups. Even expanding the voting age to include the youngest voters didn’t boost levels of political participation. The ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971 lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, so the 1972 presidential election marked the first election where 18-21 year olds were allowed to vote. Since 1972, the voter turnout rate of 18-29 year olds has dropped from 55% to a low of 40% in the 2000 presidential election. During this time period younger age groups continued to produce the lowest levels of voter turnout, and had the largest decrease in voter turnout at approximately 15%.

With the traditional measures of political engagement of younger voters remaining continuously low and experiencing an almost linear decline since 1972, the increased political engagement experienced during the 2004 and 2008 elections stands out as noteworthy. While many factors may have contributed to the increase in traditional

52. Ibid., 117.
53. Ibid., 117-119, 128-131.
measures of political engagement, many point to the increasing use of technology in political campaigns as a significant contributing factor.\textsuperscript{56} The emergence of the Internet as a political tool provided campaigns a whole new set of methods to try to engage younger voters in more traditional methods of political engagement. The extensive use of the Internet in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections corresponded with increased levels of voter registration from younger voters, with 57\% of 18-29 year old voters registered in 2004.\textsuperscript{57} In 2004 there was a 9\% increase in voter turnout among 18-29 year olds and while they still retained the lowest levels of voter turnout, younger voters experienced the greatest percentage increase of any age group from 2000 to 2004.\textsuperscript{58} Many of these levels of traditional measures of political involvement continued to increase during the 2008 election with voter registration among younger voters peaking at 61\%.\textsuperscript{59} While some attribute the rise in traditional forms of political participation to the advent of the Internet in politics, others point to alternate causes.

The Internet was a primary component of the Obama campaign’s strategy to target younger voters during the 2008 presidential election. Unlike the preceding elections, during the 2008 election the Obama campaign had a notably focused effort to target younger voters.\textsuperscript{60} One of the primary ways the Obama campaign went about this

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\textsuperscript{58} Lopez, et.al, “Young voter turnout,”; Morris, “Voter turnout by age.”

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} Malik Simba. "The Obama Campaign 2008: A Historical Overview." \textit{Western Journal Of Black Studies} 33, no. 3 (Fall2009 2009): 187-188.
was through the increased use of the Internet, particularly social networking sites (SNS) for political campaigning and fundraising.\textsuperscript{61} In that election, the Obama campaign raised around $500 million through online donations, collected 13 million email addresses, and amassed about 2 million volunteers through SNS who were responsible for organizing over 200,000 offline events.\textsuperscript{62} Additionally, during the 2008 presidential election nearly 1 in 10 people under 30 friended or followed one of the candidates on SNS, and 27% of voters under 30 used SNS to get information about a candidate.\textsuperscript{63} This increase in traditional measures of political engagement among younger voters demonstrated that they can be receptive to political messages, depending on how those messages are delivered.

While traditional measures of political engagement increased among younger voters in the 2004 and 2008 elections, those levels of participation decreased in subsequent elections.\textsuperscript{64} The 2010 midterm election, which saw the rise of the Tea Party movement and Republicans reclaim the House of Representatives, saw decreases in traditional measure of political involvement across the board. These drops continued in the 2012 presidential election with voter registration among younger voters falling to 50% from the high of 61% in 2008.\textsuperscript{65} Despite the regression from the 2008 peak of political involvement, the Internet remained a prominent feature of the 2012 election with

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. The research is inconsistent in its use of terminology to reference social media type websites. For the purposes of this paper, “SNS” will include the terms social networking sites, social networking systems, and social media.


\textsuperscript{64} Midterm elections, such as the 2006 election, are not considered as they have consistently much lower voter turnout than presidential elections.

\textsuperscript{65} Pew Research, “Youth Engagement Falls.”
47% of voters (67% of voters under 30, 65% 30-49) reporting that the Internet was their main source for campaign news. Additionally, 39% of adults and 66% of SNS users participated in civil or political activities on SNS, including following elected officials or political candidates. The ability of alternative media sources to reach younger voters and effectively increase their political engagement suggests that younger voters who are more likely to utilize new or alternative media channels are also more likely to engage in them politically.

In a study on the increased use of the Internet in political campaigns and the corresponding increase in traditional measures of political participation among younger voters, Hargittai and Shaw observed that increased Internet use did not necessarily affect the likelihood of an individual to vote, but did lead to other forms of civil and political engagement. While the increased use of the Internet and SNS in political campaigns doesn’t necessarily prevent decreased participation in traditional measures of political involvement, they can bring about heightened levels of low-intensity political activity. Thus, while political engagement centered on casting a ballot remains low, technological engagement, even when related to politics, can enable higher levels of political participation through alternative measures. These alternative levels of political involvement remain relatively low compared to other age groups, but also demonstrates that younger voters are not completely politically disengaged. Videogames represent one such emerging platform of alternative political engagement.

68. Hargittai and Shaw, Digitally Savvy Citizenship,” 130.
69. Ibid.
Religious Affiliation and Political Association

In addition to having the lowest levels of political participation among adults, younger voters also share an increasing dissatisfaction with institutional religion and religious messages in politics, giving rise to a growing group of the religiously unaffiliated. Religious unaffiliation does not automatically equate with being non-religious. Those who claim to be religiously unaffiliated include those who claim to be agnostic, atheist, and who do not claim any specific religious affiliation. Religious disaffiliation refers to those who have distanced themselves from church, not from God. Thus, this does not necessarily indicate a rejection of religious ideas, but it does indicate a rejection of organized religion, and the associations with their labels.

Religion and religious expression play a significant role in American life and politics. Religion served as a justification for many of the early colonists settling in America. Religion and religious themes are pervasive throughout much of American history, and the Constitution contains specific protections for religious freedom. While America remains the most religious industrialized nation in the world, the number of Americans claiming religious affiliation is declining. In 1948, 98% of Americans

72. Ibid., 178.
claimed religious affiliation, but by 2008, this number had dropped to 83.1%. The number of religiously unaffiliated Americans remained fairly stagnant, increasing by only 4% from 1948 to 1975. In 1975, when the videogame industry introduced its first commercially successful product for home consumption, *Pong*, the number of adults claiming to be religiously unaffiliated was 6%. This number grew rapidly in the 1990’s from 7% to 14%, increasing to 19% by 2012. While no causal relationship has been established, in the time since the birth of the videogame industry there has been a significant increase in the number of religiously unaffiliated, especially among 18-30 year olds. Thus, while America remains a religious nation, the primary demographic of videogame players, 18-30 year olds, are increasingly apathetic towards organized religion.

Just as there are a significantly higher number of religiously unaffiliated individuals among younger adults compared to older adults, there is also a significantly higher amount of individuals claiming no religious affiliation who identify as politically liberal compared to those who identify as politically conservative. Among individuals describing themselves as politically conservative there has been little change in the number claiming no religious affiliation, as it still hovers around 4%; while the unaffiliated among those who claim to be politically liberal has been steadily increasing

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76. Kent, “The ultimate history of video games,” ; Newport, “This Easter.”
77. Fischer, et.al, “Religion Trends in the U.S.”
78. No causal link is being suggested, nor has any research demonstrated any causal link. The timeline statement is only intended to situate religious unaffiliation in the context in which videogames exist.
from 7% in 1990 to almost 40% in 2012. Hout and Fischer contend that this rise in the unaffiliated is not due to more individuals simply rejecting organized religion, but rather the changing nature of politics. They argue that the unaffiliated, in large part, reject the growing connection between organized religion and conservative politics, and the assumption that claiming religious affiliation equates to holding particular conservative social views and political ideology. Additionally, there is an increasing amount of people who think there is too much religious rhetoric in politics and who think that churches and other houses of worship should stay out of politics.

In an analysis of the dramatic increase of the religiously unaffiliated through the 1990’s and early 2000’s, Hout and Fischer argue leading up to and through the 90’s religious affiliation and conservative politics developed a reciprocal relationship. This meant that someone claiming religious affiliation was assumed to also subscribe to conservative politics and claiming conservative politics implied religious affiliation. While their analysis begins in the 90’s, the conscious insertion of God and religion in politics began in the late 1970’s with the implementation of the “God Strategy,” designed to mobilize the large, politically apathetic evangelical Christian voting bloc. While this strategy eventually spread through all political parties, it originated with, and retains the strongest associations with conservative politics. This association with the social agenda of the “Religious Right” caused many liberals and moderates with religious

80. Hout and Fischer, “Why more Americans have no religious preference,” 168.
81. Ibid., 186; Fischer, et.al, “Religion Trends in the U.S.”
82. Hout and Fischer, “Why more Americans have no religious preference,” 181.
84. Ibid., 18.
affiliation to reject this association through unaffiliation.\textsuperscript{85} This idea is supported by the increase in religious unaffiliation among liberals and moderates, but little to no change among conservatives. While Hout and Fischer did not examine specific social and political issues in their political analysis of religious disaffiliation, Vargas argues that political motivations for religious disaffiliation now stem from specific social and political issues.\textsuperscript{86} Vargas contends the increase in religious unaffiliation in the 1990’s and early 2000’s stem from the general association of religion and conservative politics as described by Hout and Fisher. However, in the current political environment many moderates and liberals may not be as concerned with this general association, as it has become more of an accepted aspect of American political life.\textsuperscript{87} Rather, moderates and liberals seem to be more concerned with specific religiously mobilized groups targeting social and political issues that are most important to them. Thus, the specific social and political agendas of conservative groups and politicians with religious ties, affiliations, or associations are fueling the continued growth of the religiously unaffiliated, particularly among social and political liberals and moderates.\textsuperscript{88} While the specific motivations may have shifted, the role of religion in American political life continues to contribute to the increase in religious unaffiliation in the United States, particularly with regards to political movements with strong religious associations.

While 18-30 year olds comprise the most rapidly growing demographic of the religiously unaffiliated, there are multiple causes for the decrease in religious affiliation in the United States. Dissatisfaction with the perceived connection between religion and

\textsuperscript{85} Hout and Fischer, “Why more Americans have no religious preference,” 181.
\textsuperscript{86} Nicholas Vargas, "Retrospective Accounts of Religious Disaffiliation in the United States: Stressors, Skepticism, and Political Factors." \textit{Sociology Of Religion} 73, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 214.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
politics, and the consequent increased involvement of organized religion in politics, coupled with rejection of the assumed equation of religious affiliation with social and political beliefs has contributed to an increasingly negative view of religion in public life.

**Advent of the Tea Party Movement**

There are inherent difficulties in describing a movement, one of which is corralling the competing dimensions of the same movement. The various Tea Parties across America are depicted as the actions of a single group. Many scholars who studied the Tea Parties differentiate two main categories of Tea Parties: a nationalized core, and the grassroots loose confederation of movements which exist outside of the core.\(^8^9\) While not a part of the nationalized core, the actions of these loosely confederated groups still contribute to the popular perception of the Tea Parties as a whole. The purpose of this section is not to create an exhaustive or definitive examination of what the Tea Parties may or may not be, but rather to paint a picture of how the Tea Parties are depicted in messages to a younger demographic, and explore the ideologies and policies “they” express. Thus, while the term “Tea Party candidate,” for example, may be a misnomer, this label, whether self-imposed or otherwise acquired, still places them and their conduct within the popular understanding of the Tea Parties. While popular notions of “the Tea Party” generally stem from the actions of the more popular and publicized nationalized core, actions of the loose confederation that receive local or national attention are still attributed to the collective “Tea Party.” Formisano employs the unifying term “Tea

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Parties” to refer to the collective groups of the Tea Party movement as the actions of one group reflect on all of the others.\textsuperscript{90}

The Tea Parties rapidly gained popularity as a right-wing populist movement against the perceived government expansion embedded within the Democrat’s economic recovery proposals and healthcare reform.\textsuperscript{91} Substantial media coverage and conservative support contributed to this rapid popularity growth. From the time surrounding the emergence of the Tea Parties leading up to the 2010 midterm elections, and through the budget disputes of 2012 and 2013, the Tea Parties received a relatively substantial amount of coverage and commentary in the mass media, increasing their exposure to the general public.\textsuperscript{92} The combination of exposure and monetary support all contributed to the Tea Parties’ rapid success in American politics.\textsuperscript{93} By April of 2010, a Pew Research Center survey of US voters treated the Tea Party as its own political party. When asked, “Which of the following groups best represents your views right now?” 28% of Republicans and 30% of Republican leaning Independents selected the Tea Party.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90} Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 7-8; Accordingly, “Tea Party” or “Tea Parties” will be used in the colloquial as opposed to the literal/actual sense of the word.
\textsuperscript{92} Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 5,19; The Tea Parties also benefited from the sponsorship, funding, and direction provided by many top Republicans, corporations, and political investors, notably the Koch brothers, who from 1998-2008 had contributed over $200million to conservative causes and institutions. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/opinion/29rich.html
\textsuperscript{93} Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 5.
The 2010 election contained several candidates who carried the Tea Party label. Republicans affiliated with the Tea Parties won five seats in the Senate and 40 in the House. While Republicans fell short of gaining a majority in the Senate, some of the Tea Party victories in Senate races were over prominent Democratic incumbents, gaining significant national attention. In the House, the 40 Tea Party victories propelled Republicans to a majority of seats and control of the U.S. House. These victories demonstrated that the Tea Parties were not just an overblown media sensation, but had significant support from American voters.

One of the key characteristics of the Tea Parties is their appeal to history and the founding of America. This appeal begins with naming the movement after the Boston Tea Party, famous for being a demonstration of defiance to the British monarchy in advance of the American Revolutionary War. This historical nostalgia for the era of America’s founding is not only a form of external image construction, but also serves as a basis for many of the policy positions taken by the Tea Parties.

Many of the positions espoused by the Tea Parties are rooted in a form of Constitutional fundamentalism which rhetorically justifies these social and policy

95. Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 4; These included the likes of Marco Rubio (R-FL), Michelle Bachmann (R-MN), Rand Paul (R-KY), and Jim DeMint (R-SC), and others
98. Ibid.
positions through a stated desire to return to the “Founder’s Constitution.” In an analysis of the constitutional rhetoric of the Tea Parties, Goldstein found that the Tea Parties have a pronounced reverence for the Constitution. This reverence does not extend to all interpretations of the Constitution, but only to what they believe to be the “original” interpretation held by the Founding Fathers of America. The rhetoric of the Tea Parties gives the Founding Fathers a mythic status which is used to elevate claims of “Founder’s intent” beyond argumentation and interpretation. This is despite the fact that true “intent” is impossible to decipher, and that many of the Founders held wildly varying positions and interpretations of the Constitution. For many Tea Party supporters, this mythic status includes the idea that the Founders possessed divine inspiration while crafting the Constitution. This leads to the elevation of the Constitution to a sacred status typically reserved for religious texts. After all, if the Constitution was inspired by God, it follows that it would, in many respects, possess the same level of authority and infallibility as other religious texts also claimed to be inspired by God. In 2010, 55% of Tea Party supporters held the Christian Reconstructionist view that America is a Christian nation founded by Christian men, on Biblical principles, guided by God.

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101. Ibid., 1808.
102. Ibid., 1807-1819.
103. Ibid., 1807-1810.
104. Ibid., 1808-1811.
105. Ibid., 1808-1810
106. Ibid.
107. Formisano, “The Tea Party,” 52-54; These ideas are also echoed by Tea Party Political candidates such as Tea Party-affiliated Republican Christine O’Donnell, who ran for a Senate seat in Delaware in the 2010 midterm elections. During a speech in front of the conservative, evangelical Values Voters Conference, she embraced constitutional biblicalism claiming that the constitution was not only a legal document, but a covenant based on divine principles, claiming the constitution to be America’s version of the Hebrew Scriptures. While O’Donnell ultimately lost in a landslide, the fact that her remarks received significant media coverage and aren’t just a fringe position among Tea Party supporters further solidified the link between the Tea Party and the Religious Right.
Goldstein contends that these claims regarding the Christian origin of America stem from the divine component of the Tea Party mythos.\textsuperscript{108}

The Constitutional fundamentalism promoted by the rhetoric of the Tea Parties serves to justify many of their social and economic policy positions, as well as bestow a divine imperative to their rhetoric and mission.\textsuperscript{109} They advocate that their social and policy positions will not only save the nation from the inevitable ruin that the current policies and administration will cause, but also return America to some mythical period of unparalleled greatness.\textsuperscript{110} This also serves to justify their characteristic unwillingness to compromise on any issue, as it is seen as compromising the truth and what is right.\textsuperscript{111} Additionally, this mindset has even led to a number of Tea Party leaders and supporters to call for a secession from the Union on the grounds that the federal government stands in violation of the Constitution, and isn’t “American” enough.\textsuperscript{112}

The constitutional fundamentalism expressed by some of the Tea Parties also coincides with a relationship between the Tea Parties and religion, specifically American Christianity.\textsuperscript{113} While not founded as a specifically religious movement, the Tea Parties quickly gained the support of many members and leaders of the Religious Right and other

\textsuperscript{108} Goldstein, "Can Popular Constitutionalism Survive," 1807-1819.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.; Many Tea Party supporters promote these as the only true American ideals and principles, and as such should be the basis from which all policies should be constructed.\textsuperscript{<>} Consequently, ideas or policies that stand in opposition to this ideology and resulting principles are considered to be un-American, anti-American, or foreign, as they will cause America to continue down the road to ruin.\textsuperscript{<>} While these beliefs are not binding to the entire movement, they do feature prominently in their rhetoric and policy justifications, and serve to paint a clearer picture of what the Tea Parties think government and society should look like.
\textsuperscript{111} Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 141-144.
\textsuperscript{113} Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 67-68.
evangelicals.\textsuperscript{114} As the Tea Parties and evangelicals largely shared positions more conservative than the general public, many members of the Religious Right found a comfortable home in the Tea Parties, especially as the Tea Parties adopted more social issues to their platforms.\textsuperscript{115} Like evangelicals, Tea Party supporters tend to be more conservative than the general public on issues evangelicals tend to focus on, such as abortion and same-sex marriage.\textsuperscript{116} In the 2010 midterm elections, 78% of evangelicals voted Republican and 52% said they supported the Tea Party, while only 8% opposed it.\textsuperscript{117} While the Tea Parties enjoy strong support and membership from White evangelicals 49% of Jews, 42% of religiously unaffiliated, and 67% of agnostics and atheists oppose the Tea Party.\textsuperscript{118} While the Religious Right is a powerful force in the Tea Parties, it is also easy for the media to sensationalize their role and influence in the Tea Parties.\textsuperscript{119} Regardless of the truth value of the reports, the propensity of the media’s tendency to sensationalize the Religious Right’s presence in the Tea Parties serves to engrain the conflation between the two to the public. While evangelicals don’t comprise a vast majority of Tea Party supporters, they are a vocal and very visible component that has had a rather substantial influence on the policy direction of the Tea Parties, and on the portrayal of the Tea Parties as religious.\textsuperscript{120}

This strong association with white, conservative, religious evangelicals also feeds into claims of racism among the Tea Parties. While Tea Party supporters are, understandably, quick to deny any links to racism, one of the more controversial common

\textsuperscript{114} Formisano, \textit{“The Tea Party,”} 52.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 50-55.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 50, 55.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 55-56.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{120} Street and DiMaggio, \textit{“Crashing the Tea Party,”} 67-68.
perceptions of the Tea Parties is their association with racism. In their book, *Crashing the Tea Party: Mass Media and the Campaign to Remake American Politics*, Paul Street and Anthony DiMaggio argue that while overtly racist Tea Party members may be in the minority, many Tea Party supporters hold deeply racist positions.121 A University of Washington Poll from 2010 found that Tea Party supporters tend to have deep seated animosity against blacks and immigrants, and are particularly prone to believe black Americans are "indolent, stupid, and untrustworthy."122 For example, 73% of Tea Party supporters surveyed in the University of Washington poll said that laziness explains the economic disparities between black and whites, and 88% of Tea Party supporters (compared with 70% of all white participants) agreed with the statement, "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors."123

These claims of Tea Party racism also carry over into policy positions, specifically with social services. In a 2011 study Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin contend that Tea Party supporters judge government entitlement programs by the perceived deservingsness of recipients. Their main opposition to federal social welfare programs is directed primarily at perceived government handouts to the “undeserving,” largely defined by ethnic and racial stereotypes, particularly of blacks, immigrants, and younger people.124 Williamson and colleagues noted that the fear of immigrants receiving undeserved assistance from federal social programs also fueled the importance of

121. Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 75-79.
123. Ibid.; Street and DiMaggio, “Crashing the Tea Party,” 82.
immigration issues among Tea Party supporters.\textsuperscript{125} Additionally, Street and DiMaggio found that the groups who primarily comprise Tea Party supporters, conservatives, Protestants, Republicans, whites, and older Americans, are, according to the Pew Research Center, more likely than other groups to hold racist beliefs against Muslims.\textsuperscript{126} Thus, while not all Tea Party supporters are racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim or anti-Arab, the Tea Parties are disproportionately populated by demographic groups that typically are.

The fact that the Tea Parties are a largely segregated movement does nothing to alleviate the problem of implicit Tea Party racism or the public portrayal of Tea Party racism.\textsuperscript{127} Tea party supporters are prominently white and disproportionately represent rural areas where there are less Black people.\textsuperscript{128} This was punctuated in a 2010 CBS/New York times poll, with a +/- 3\% margin of error, which found 1\% of Tea Party supporters to be black.\textsuperscript{129} This was used by various media outlets, such as \textit{The Colbert Report}, as a demonstration of the Tea Parties containing no statistically significant black membership.

From their inception, the Tea Parties have always courted controversy with the general public. According to a Pew Research Center report in February 2010, 42\% of American’s hadn’t heard of the Tea Party and 25\% had an unfavorable view of them. After the midterm elections of 2010, and by August of 2011, only 21\% of American’s hadn’t heard of the Tea Party, but those with an unfavorable view grew to 43\%. During

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{127} Street and DiMaggio, \textit{“Crashing the Tea Party,”} 89.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.

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this same time period those with a favorable view only grew from 30% to 33%. The debt ceiling debate of 2011 had exposed more Americans to the Tea Parties, but their unwillingness to compromise in the face of looming crisis, combined with other tactics and policy proposals, caused a significant spike in the general public’s unfavorable attitudes towards the Tea Parties. Unfavorable views of the Tea Party spiked again to 49% in October 2013 after more budget debates, while favorable views dropped to only 30%. Additionally, younger voters, who tend to be more liberal, have extremely low favorable views of the Tea Parties. In 2013, only 6% of 18-29 year olds and just 26% of 30-49 year olds who are Republican or lean Republican agreed with the Tea Parties. Here we see younger voters’ tendencies to be more socially liberal than the Tea Parties and younger voters’ increasing dissatisfaction with religion and politics largely due to social issues applied to the very socially and politically conservative Tea Parties.

While the practical realities of having candidates representing Tea Party ideology don’t seem to be sitting well with the general public, the Tea Parties had a relatively sizable impact on American political and social life in a rather short time span. The Tea Parties impacted both Democrats and Republicans in many ways, helped create a new Republican majority in the House, shaped the Republican’s legislative agenda, and also

shaped the national political discourse in a manner that does not typically resonate with
the primary demographic of videogame players.\textsuperscript{133}

\textbf{Bioshock Infinite}

The time during the inception and rise of the Tea Parties’ relevance in political
discourse, also saw the development and release of \textit{Bioshock Infinite}. \textit{Bioshock Infinite} is
the second game in a series developed by Irrational Games, and creative director Ken
Levine. Beginning with the first game, \textit{Bioshock}, Irrational Games used the \textit{Bioshock}
series to focus on more complex themes and topics, and take an innovative approach to
the use of narrative in videogames. Irrational Games was founded in 1997 by Ken
Levine, Jonathan Chey, and Robert Fermier. Under the creative direction/design lead of
Ken Levine, Irrational Games has released several innovative and influential games. In
1999, \textit{System Shock 2} was released to much critical acclaim for its many innovative and
influential game design elements. Proclaimed by Levine as the “spiritual successor” of
\textit{System Shock 2}, \textit{Bioshock}, released in 2007, was also widely praised for delivering
innovative gameplay and narrative elements. Almost immediately after releasing
\textit{Bioshock}, Irrational Games began working on \textit{Bioshock Infinite}.\textsuperscript{134} In 2013, Irrational
Games released \textit{Bioshock Infinite}, continuing that legacy of innovation.\textsuperscript{135} Many of the
innovative characteristics of games directed by Ken Levine stem from the deep,
immersive settings that contribute to the complex narrative elements.

\textsuperscript{133} Formisano, “The Tea Party,” 5-6.
\textsuperscript{134} Bioshock is considered a spiritual successor because, while not a true sequel to System Shock 2,
Bioshock drew many narrative and gameplay ideas from the System Shock series.
\textsuperscript{135} Bioshock 2 was not developed by Irrational Games nor directed by Ken Levine, did not feature the
same level of innovation, and so was not included here.
*BioShock Infinite* is a science fiction videogame with steampunk elements set near the end of 1912, in the flying city of Colombia.® Colombia was originally founded by self-proclaimed prophet Zachary Comstock as a religious haven for his followers. A physicist, Rosalind Lutece, made a discovery which gave the city the ability to float in the sky. Comstock then utilized this ability to break away from America and transformed Columbia into a floating, sovereign, city-state. The rich, complex storyline essentially boils down to a trans-dimensional story of redemption between a father and daughter, and the illusory nature of free-will in the context of multiple alternative dimensions.

Paramount to life in Columbia is religion. Power and control in Columbia is contained entirely within the context of the official religion of the city, and originates solely from the founder of the religion and city, Zachary Comstock. Columbia, the city, grew out of the collection of believers following Comstock’s new pseudo-Christian religion. Comstock founded Columbia as a haven for his followers, and established a political structure which drew the entirety of its power from the religion. The rules, laws, practices, customs, and even entertainment all function as tools infused with religion. In Columbia there is a complete fusion of politics and religion, such that the civil structures of the city are a part of the official religion. For example, their Independence Day celebration is also considered a religious holiday. In this world, all aspects of social life are established by the religious hegemon, and serve to maintain the status quo of his power.

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136. Steampunk typically features a mixture of old technology and selected advanced technologies. Futuristic technologies are often achieved through the implementation of older technologies. For example, the city of Columbia in *BioShock Infinite* floats through a breakthrough in quantum mechanics, while still utilizing 1912-­esque video technology.
Summary

Since their inception, videogames tend to cater to a younger audience. Over the years, that audience grew to include an older, more mature audience. As the audiences of videogames matured, so did their content. Technological innovations enabled videogame developers to utilize the narrative potential of videogames to reflect the context of the lived world including politics and religion. Videogames, like Bioshock Infinite, are powerful tools for rhetoric. When we look at Bioshock Infinite, we have to look at the political and cultural context surrounding the development and release of the game to understand its complex messages.

The primary demographic of videogame players are adults under the age of 40. These younger voters tend to exhibit lower levels political engagement when measured by traditional levels than older voters. However, younger voters are turning to alternative measures of political engagement enabled by the Internet, social media, and other technologies. These same voters also have increasingly negative views of organized religion. They are turning away from religious affiliation due to the associations between religious affiliation and certain conservative social and political views, and increasingly dislike the involvement of religion in politics. The Tea Parties brought a new brand of conservative politics which married nicely with much of the agenda of the Religious Right. This portrayal of the Tea Parties as a conservative, religious movement and the social and political positions they promoted did not resonate with younger voters. Bioshock Infinite was released in the midst of the political turmoil caused by the Tea Parties, to be played primarily by a demographic with unfavorable views of the Tea Parties and the mixture of organized religion and politics. Bioshock Infinite provides an
alternative means of political participation by engaging players, primarily younger voters, with a narrative infused with conservative politics and religion, allowing players to experience and witness many of these same ideas taken to their logical conclusions.
CHAPTER 3
METHOD

In December of 1993 id Software, led by John Carmack and John Romero, “unleashed” *Doom* on the world amid sizable anticipation.  

According to Lowood’s history of computer games, *Doom*’s wild popularity created a lasting impact on almost every aspect of the gaming world, from “graphics and networking technology to styles of play, notions of authorship, and public scrutiny of content.” Among the more prominent influences was *Doom*’s popularization of the first-person shooter (FPS) genre. The hallmark of an FPS is that the player experiences the game from the perspective of a character in the game, typically the main character, enabling them to interact with the narrative world as a character in that world. While *Doom* restricted movement to only two axes, (looking side to side and moving “into” the space), it still provided the player with the unique experience of moving through the game space of the narrative world. While *Doom* wasn’t the first FPS, its popularity defined the genre and set the standard by which subsequent FPS’s such as *Jedi Knight* (1995) and *Descent* (1994/1995) were

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measured. As a first-person shooter, *BioShock Infinite* exists as a part of the gaming legacy spawned by *Doom*.

In this chapter I develop a theoretical framework for understanding the persuasive power of videogames through their narrative qualities. As narrative media, videogames are embedded with cultural myths. Understanding the utilization of cultural myths in videogames as vehicles for narrative fidelity and narrative coherence in light of the underlying interactive immersion between the player and the game is key to understanding the persuasive power of videogames. I utilize a theoretical framework of narrative to perform a mythic criticism of *BioShock Infinite* to see the interplay of myth, religion, and politics in that game. This chapter begins with a discussion of narrative and its function in videogames. This is followed by a discussion of myth as a form of cultural narrative, and I focus on two American cultural myths: American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth. Next, I explore two inherent characteristics of videogames, realism and interactivity, with particular attention to how they enhance the presence of narratives and myths. The chapter concludes with the specific process used for the textual analysis of *BioShock Infinite*.

**Narrative**

Videogames have the ability to be uniquely persuasive. Much of this persuasive power stems from the way in which videogames utilize narrative. Walter Fisher defines narratives as a sequence of symbolic actions, real or fictitious, which have meaning to

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those who create and interpret them.\textsuperscript{141} Fisher’s narrative paradigm contends that humans are essentially storytelling creatures processing and relating to the world around them through stories.\textsuperscript{142} Thus, narratives can function as highly effective arguments as they appeal to the way humans naturally relate to the world around them.\textsuperscript{143} Narrative coherence, the internal coherence of a story, and narrative fidelity, the ability of a story to line up with prevailing interpretations, fuel the persuasive ability of narratives.\textsuperscript{144} Thus stronger narrative coherence and fidelity in a videogame equates with stronger resonance of the narrative message with the player, by giving the messages more persuasive power through immersing the player in the narrative world of the videogame.

In scholarly work, narrative functions as the vehicle for communicating arguments to the audience. In videogames the narrative works in conjunction with elements that are unique to games; the game mechanics or gameplay. This interplay between narratives and gameplay is reflected in two primary focuses in videogame scholarship: narrology and ludology. Narrology refers to the diverse research being done with narrative theory across multiple disciplines. Frasca first proposed the term “ludology” to refer to the “discipline that studies game and play activities,” to unify scholarship on games and gameplay. The idea of studying the actual gameplay of games was not intended to replace a narrological approach, but rather to complement it, allowing for the consideration of elements that make video games unique from other

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 9. This stands in contrast to the “rational world paradigm” which subscribes to a more modernist approach, adhering to the Aristotelian rules of logic and reasoning.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 8.
media.\textsuperscript{145} The ludological components of video games produce the interactivity between the game and player, changing the narrative experience of the game, positioning videogames as a unique rhetorical media. Thus, narrology and ludology function in tandem to create the unique videogame experience.

In a narrative analysis of \textit{Fable I and II} (2004, 2008) Rovner incorporates several ludological elements in arguing that video games are a narrative form.\textsuperscript{146} Rovner observes that video games function as narrative text in three ways: (1) video games are a text through the player’s experience of the game (within the procedures and parameters of the game), (2) video games have narration through the narrative fidelity and narrative coherence of the game world, and (3) the agency of the player is a narrative property through interaction.\textsuperscript{147} In justifying video games as narrative texts, Rovner incorporates several ludological elements such as interaction, player experience, and rules of the game that help to explain how narrative functions in videogames.\textsuperscript{148} The narrative text of the videogame gains relatability through the game world, which is experienced via the player interacting with the narrative world. A similar combination of narrology and ludology is used by Brock to critique the embedded racism in the narrative and gameplay of \textit{Resident Evil 5} (2009).\textsuperscript{149} Bourgonjon and colleagues also integrate narrology and ludology in an analysis of \textit{Bioshock} (2007) using Burke’s dramatic pentad to demonstrate the potential

\textsuperscript{146} Adam Rovner, "A Fable: or, how to recognize a narrative when you play one." \textit{Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds} 1, no. 2 (2009): 97-115.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} André Brock, "‘When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong’: Resident Evil 5, Racial Representation, and Gamers." \textit{Games and Culture} 6, no. 5 (2011): 429-452.
conflicting interactions between game narrative (narrology) and game mechanics (ludology).\textsuperscript{150}

As the narrative elements of videogames continue to gain prominence in the gameplay experience, narrative should be considered in any rhetorical analysis of videogames.\textsuperscript{151} Likewise, a rhetorical analysis should also include ludological elements, as analysis should not divorce the narrative from the gameplay and mechanics of a video game, as the game mechanics are how the player experiences the narrative, and thus are integral to the overall message communicated to the player.\textsuperscript{152}

Myth as Narrative

Preliminary analysis of \textit{BioShock Infinite} suggests that one of the predominant ways it develops narrative fidelity and narrative coherence is through the deployment of American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth in its narrative world. Myth is a form of cultural narrative which Janice Hocker Rushing refers to as the means through which cultures define themselves. Some myths also serve as the building blocks of national identity.\textsuperscript{153} Fisher refers to myth as a form of rhetorical reality that is not designed to replicate the lived world, but is created through the repeated telling of stories born out of


\textsuperscript{151} Scott Brendan Cassidy, "The Videogame as Narrative." \textit{Quarterly Review Of Film & Video} 28, no. 4 (July 2011): 292.


fantasy themes.\textsuperscript{154} The myth functions as a form of cultural narrative that either implicitly or explicitly advocates moral choices which serve to unify or divide a community.\textsuperscript{155}

As cultures craft a national identity through the myths they create about themselves, these myths, rather than empirical evidence, frame political and social events.\textsuperscript{156} These frames function to create a prevailing interpretation regarding the meaning and implications of those political and social events.\textsuperscript{157} As myths are a form of cultural narrative, they can often be found in the narrative messages presented in media produced by that culture.\textsuperscript{158} For instance, in an analysis of the Donner Party narratives, Stuckey utilized the Frontier Myth as a means to explore the intersection of cultural narrative and empirical reality. Stuckey observed that the enduring nature of myth is due, at least in part, to their ability to give society a meaningful past from which they can draw to create cultural identity. Myths retain this ability even when in conflict with discrediting empirical evidence, due to the power of cultural identity they help create.\textsuperscript{159} As cultural products, media, including video games, can incorporate cultural myths as a means to establish a narrative world that is more relatable to the player by aligning with prevailing interpretations. An analysis of the myth transmission in the narrative world of \textit{BioShock Infinite} provides a way to approach how the text develops narrative fidelity and narrative coherence with the player through the incorporation of empirical reality in the narrative world of the videogame.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{Rushing155} Rushing, “Mythic Evolution,” 268.
\bibitem{Stuckey156} Stuckey, “The Donner Party,” 231.
\bibitem{Stuckey159} Stuckey, "The Donner Party, 229-260.
\end{thebibliography}
American Exceptionalism

Two predominant cultural myths communicated through popular media are American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth. American Exceptionalism centers around the belief that America is a unique and superior nation that has a special role to play in human history.\(^{160}\) This belief is a core element of American national identity, and an integral part of American politics. Generally, the public relies on the rhetoric of America’s political leaders to offer a semblance of order to the world around them. This is particularly true regarding America’s foreign policy and the vastness of the world largely unknown to the general public. The rhetoric of American Exceptionalism conveys that sense of order and understanding of the outside world to the public.\(^{161}\) The language used by political leaders to discuss these ideas and situations create connections between the public and the outside world from which the public draws their understanding of the world around them. The rhetoric used by American political leaders shapes and creates the political reality and informs how that political reality is understood. The language used in American politics also establishes principles that define how America fits and works in the world. These principles are couched in larger American ideals.\(^{162}\) These larger American ideals originate in the cultural myth of American Exceptionalism.

Edwards identified three main components of this belief which create the different elements of American Exceptionalism: the United States is a special nation with a special destiny, the United States is qualitatively different than Europe, and the United States can

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{162}\) Ibid., 3-5, 7.
escape the trappings of history.\textsuperscript{163} A closer look at these three components reveals the different elements of American Exceptionalism.

The belief that the United States is a special nation with a special destiny stems from the colonial notions that God chose the United States for a special role in history. This belief enables America to sincerely believe its foreign and domestic policy acts are all performed with good intentions, while believing that other nations will want to emulate American policies.\textsuperscript{164} Also originating from the colonial era is the idea of the United States being qualitatively different than Europe. America was a place the colonists envisioned as a virgin land where people could build a civilization upon ideas, values, and principles unique from the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{165} These unique ideas, values, and principles served as the foundation for the United States Constitution which created the governmental structure necessary for America to become the greatest republican society in the world while avoiding the corruption and failures of European politics. This allows America to continually justify its distinctiveness from the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{166} The third component of American Exceptionalism is the belief that the United States can escape the trappings of history. America’s Founding Fathers argued that the United States has the ability to escape the inevitable decline experienced by all preceding great civilizations due to America’s unique geography, system of government, and divine guidance and destiny. This is also coupled with the idea that the exceptional quality of America is never fully realized. America’s exceptionalism stems from the potential of what America could be, rather than what it actually is. This fosters a sense of superiority and

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 6.  
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
distinctiveness which justifies a constant attempt to better itself and the rest of the world. Thus, it is believed this constant desire to better itself enables America to escape the inevitable devolution of great powers, and often leads to calls for a return to some mythical golden era of American Exceptionalism seen in American politics.\footnote{167}

McCrisken identifies two primary manifestations of American Exceptionalism: the rhetoric of exemplar and the rhetoric of missionary/intervention. These two strands of rhetoric stem from different ideas of how American Exceptionalism should translate into action.\footnote{168} In essence, the rhetoric of exemplar conveys the idea of America as the best example of what all nations should be and manifests in ideas such as the ‘city upon a hill,’ ‘nonentangling alliances,’ ‘anti-imperialism,’ ‘isolationism,’ and ‘Fortress America.’\footnote{169} The rhetoric of intervention is the idea of America as a missionary nation and involves the active assertion of America’s greatness in politics, economics and culture, through the phrases and policies of ‘manifest destiny,’ ‘imperialism,’ ‘internationalism,’ ‘leader of the free world,’ ‘democracy promotion,’ and the ‘new world order.’\footnote{170} Like most cultural myths, American Exceptionalism maintains its prominence despite mounting evidence that America is not all that exceptional.\footnote{171} Thus, the factual accuracy is wholly secondary to the public’s belief in the myth of American Exceptionalism, which finds continual reinforcement through political rhetoric, national holidays and scripted cultural rituals.\footnote{172}

\footnote{168. McCrisken, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 10.}
\footnote{169. Ibid., 2, 183-184.}
\footnote{170. Ibid., 2.}
\footnote{171. Ibid.}
\footnote{172. Ibid., 7-8.}
A prominent extension of American Exceptionalism is the Frontier Myth. The Frontier Myth is also central to American national identity, developing from some of the earliest colonists and continuing to influence many aspects of political and social life.\(^{173}\) The frontier myth has featured so prominently in American society that it is considered America’s “secular creation story.”\(^ {174}\) Born out of the desire to promote western expansion, the worldview of the Frontier Myth does not see the frontier as a hindrance, but “something that should be explored and conquered through American expansion and intervention.”\(^ {175}\) The self-gratifying qualities of the myth have ensured its ongoing prominence.\(^ {176}\) Slatta observes that this myth continues to be prominent despite the debunking of many of its core claims, such as the strongly held image of the American cowboy as a rugged solitary individual when historical record is clear that community and reliance on others was essential for survival in the old West.\(^ {177}\)

Unlike American Exceptionalism which centers on core values and ideologies, the Frontier Myth centers on particular characters and setting which embody the ideologies and the conflicting values and beliefs embedded in the myth. These ideologies stem the Frontier Myth’s role in America’s founding. Bercovitch argues that the Frontier Myth originates as a founding myth with the Puritans during the initial settling and eventual

\(^{174}\) Ibid.
\(^{176}\) John Tirman, "The Future of the American Frontier: Can one of our most enduring national myths, much in evidence in the recent presidential campaign, be reinvented yet again?." *American Scholar* 78, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 30.
founding of America. The Puritans settled the New World in order to escape the religious persecution in Europe and establish a “New Israel” in the wilderness, one that was quantitatively different from the Old World. Their mission was rooted in biblical myth, and the Puritans justified their actions with the traditions of Christianity. According to Bercovitch, these Puritanical justifications, rather than the Christian tradition itself, established, “a moral framework within which a certain complex of attitudes, assumptions and beliefs can be taken for granted as being not only proper, but right.” This moral framework justified the attitudes and actions characteristic of the Frontier Myth.

Stuckey, in an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the Donner Party, identified four defining characteristics of the Frontier Myth: (1) erasure of indigenous peoples and other “nonwhites;” (2) the triumph of American civilization over the wild frontier; (3) the triumph of individual aggression to sustain the community; and (4) the imperative and value of mobility in American democracy and the price of immobilization. According to Rushing, these characteristics manifest themselves in the Frontier Myth through the dialectical opposition of the values of individualism and community. From this central conflict, other competing values emerge from different components of the myth. Rushing

179. Ibid., 39-40.
180. Ibid., 39.
181. Ibid., 39, 41.
identifies two primary components of the Frontier Myth demonstrating this dialectical opposition: the cowboy, and the frontier.\textsuperscript{184}

The cowboy, the quintessential character of the Frontier Myth, embodies the conflict of individualism and community.\textsuperscript{185} The cowboy is depicted as the prototypical masculine figure: daring, noble, ethical and romantic; a rugged individual, yet integrated with the community.\textsuperscript{186} To combat the harsh savagery of the environment, he must be a rugged individualist. However, in order to settle and civilize the frontier, he must face the demands of the community for cooperation and conformity. The cowboy must deal with the paradox of being alone and in a community. If he is not a rugged individual, then he is not a hero, yet if he doesn’t respond to needs of the community, usually in the form of some threatening outside, evil force, he cannot meet the goodness requirement also necessary for a hero of the frontier.\textsuperscript{187}

The dialectical opposition of individual and community is also present in the nature of the frontier itself.\textsuperscript{188} The frontier is a place initially endless and unknown, eventually conquered and tamed into familiar, confining spaces.\textsuperscript{189} As frontiers are conquered, the nature of the frontier evolves to retain the backdrop to America’s national identity.\textsuperscript{190} Integral to the nature of the frontier is the juxtaposition of civilization in the midst of desolation.\textsuperscript{191} The conflict between the savagery of the untamed frontier and the civilization brought by the settlers further expresses the dialectic opposition of

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 15-17.  
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 15.  
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 17.  
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{189} Rushing, “Mythic Evolution,” 265.  
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 266.  
\textsuperscript{191} Rushing, “Rhetoric of the Western Myth,” 16.
individualism vs. community as the settlers fight to survive and conquer this new frontier in a uniquely American expression. These expansionist behaviors also function as an outgrowth of American Exceptionalism. The inherent superiority of America justifies the intervention and conquering of the frontier, and non-Americans or non-whites, in order to spread the acceptance of American values.

Elements of the Frontier Myth have also been utilized in scholarly work on videogames. This includes work such as the analysis of the use of the cowboy as a character and metaphor in *Red Dead Redemption* by Humphreys, and the discussion of the cultural significance of videogames post the 2008 economic collapse utilizing the American West theme in their setting, narrative, and gameplay elements. The use of the Frontier Myth as an outgrowth of American Exceptionalism in popular media was also studied by Valenzano and Engstrom in an analysis of the television show *Supernatural*. The concepts contained within these myths work together to emphasize the uniqueness of the United States contrasted with the rest of the world. This reinforces the divine nature of its mission to expand the acceptance of superior American values across the world and beyond.

The narrative dimension of videogames functions as a rhetorical text where the transmission of cultural myth can occur. Embedded within the narrative world of *BioShock Infinite* are numerous political and religious messages. The transmission of

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196. Ibid.
cultural myth through the narrative world of *BioShock Infinite* serves to amplify the political and religious messages contained within the game. Through the use of the predominant American cultural myths of American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth, *BioShock Infinite* creates a game world and presents narrative messages that are more relatable to a player’s lived world experience. This enhances the narrative fidelity and narrative coherence, or realism, of the game world, creating a more immersive experience, adding to the persuasive power of the political and religious messages contained within the game. As a videogame, *BioShock Infinite* causes the player to interact with all of these elements through the added quality of gameplay. This interactivity gives videogame narratives unique characteristics from other forms of narrative media, allowing the player to not only experience the transmission of myth, but also experience the potential effects of promoting certain ideologies with myth.

**Realism and Interactivity**

When a player’s interactions with objects in a game reflect how they would be expected to operate in the lived world of the player, this creates immersion into the game world.¹¹⁷ Murray defines “immersion” as the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality.¹¹⁸ In videogames, the ability for a player to be immersed in the other reality of the game is heightened through interaction, but it is also dependent on the realism of the game. If a game is not consistent within itself and does not match enough of the lived experience of the player, then immersion is broken and the player moves from being an active participant within the narrative world of the game, to an outside

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 98.
observer focused on the dissimilarities between the lived world and the game world. Immersion and realism are created through strong narrative fidelity and coherence in a video game, and enhance the persuasive power of messages contained within the game.

The unique persuasive ability of videogames comes from their ability to give the player the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality in an interactive narrative world. Until recently, much of the narrative potential of videogames was limited by the computing power available to consumers and developers. The rapid progression of computer technology allowed video game designers to create more complex worlds better reflecting the lived world of the player, improving the realism and immersive experience. Technology has allowed developers to create video games with much higher levels of realism in their worlds and narratives.

To achieve the level of realism necessary for an immersive experience videogames need to contain certain key characteristics. Shapiro and colleagues break realism down into two major categories: sensory (or story) elements, and imaginative (or conceptual) elements. Story elements include characteristics that contribute to how the narrative elements are perceived, such as look, sound, feel, setting and pacing. Conceptual elements such as typicality, character types, character judgments and emotions, relate more to how aspects of the game line up with a player’s preconceived


200. Murray, Hamlet on the holodeck, 98.


notions of what would happen in a given situation. While story elements largely come down to technical aspects of development, conceptual elements rely on the ability of a game to appeal to the prevailing interpretations of players. Thus, realism is functionally measured by how a video game matches with a player’s projected expectations of an unknown experience. This enables videogames that take place in a setting that a player will never experience to possess narrative coherence and fidelity. This is accomplished by elements in the narrative world responding how the player would expect them to in those circumstances, based on the application of their own relatable experiences to those circumstances.

Realism functions both as the relationship of the game world with the lived world experience supplied by the player, or narrative fidelity, and the internal consistency of that world, or narrative coherence. As videogames are compilations of pre-scripted events and settings, even when offering a number of choices, immersion, and realism exist in a reciprocal relationship with the rules of the game, and the interaction with the player. Likewise, narratives and rules also have a bidirectional relationship. As narratives change, the rules can become different. Changes in narrative can create new goals, new sources of conflict, and even new forms of play. In fact, Ang says, “the best

203. Ibid., 277-283.
204. Ibid. For example, in the *Mass Effect* video game series, players can possess powers which enable them to essentially throw other characters into walls with their minds. While most players probably do not have this power themselves, it is within reasonable experience to expect someone thrown into a wall with significant force, to get hurt in some way. Consequently, characters in the game take physical damage when this occurs. Characters losing health from being thrown into a wall from mind powers is an example of narrative fidelity, as it matches with the prevailing interpretation of players based on their experience. Characters consistently taking damage from this throughout the game, and other factors such as the amount of damage dealt depending on character and wall proximity, are an example of narrative probability, as the world is cohesive within its own rules.
205. Ibid., 277.
evolving stories can even effectively change the rules of the game, something that probably would not be tolerated by a player lacking a story-driven reason.” Rules in games should be fluid as narratives provide an explanation and give meaning to the changes in rules, making the virtual world more believable as the rules of the game and the game world must function in such a way that the player buys into the world of the game.\(^{207}\) Thus, the actions of the narrative can influence the player, and the player can influence the narrative.\(^{208}\) This allows for multiple players, or even a single player, to play through the same game and have different narrative experiences depending on player choices and strategies, which carry the potential to alter messages contained within the game. This interaction between the player and the narrative, gives videogames an added layer of persuasive potential as players are more involved in the narrative process.\(^{209}\)

Kwan, Namkee, and Seung-A describe interactivity as a perceived communication act. They define it as, “a perceived degree that a person in a communication process with at least one more intelligent being can bring a reciprocal effect to other participants of the communication process by turn-taking, feedback, and choice behaviors.”\(^{210}\) It should be noted that in Lee, Park, and Jin’s definition of “intelligent being” can refer to a person, character, software agent, computer, or robot. Thus, this definition can encompass both single player and multiplayer experiences.\(^{211}\) Their definition fits well with a rhetorical analysis because it accounts for each individual having a unique experience based upon their perceived level of involvement, control,

\(^{207}\) Ibid., 320.
\(^{208}\) Ibid., 318.
\(^{209}\) Ibid.
\(^{211}\) Ibid.
observation, or interest. The perceptive element also accounts for each player bringing their own unique perspective to the context of the game. It recognizes that each player will have a slightly different experience based upon how they interact with the different elements of the game, and how they perceive to effect them. Interactivity in videogames services the two way effect between the player and the game, and is inherent to the videogame experience. Interactivity is what sets videogames apart from other passive, yet engaging, forms of media such as movies or television. Realism is a constant characteristic of a game, determined by the player through their interaction with the narrative world. If the game is relatable enough, (has high levels of realism), then the player is immersed in the game, which can heighten the persuasive potential of the messages embedded within the game.

**Text Analysis Process**

A preliminary soak of *BioShock Infinite* suggests performing a mythic criticism to analyze the interplay of politics, religion, and myth in videogames. I coded for instances of American Exceptionalism expressed as either special nation/divine destiny, better than old world, and escaping history through continual progress or betterment. The Frontier Myth was coded for examples of the cowboy and presence of a frontier. These were analyzed with respect to their impact on narrative fidelity and narrative coherence, and their subsequent contributions to relatability and realism through player interaction. I focused my analysis on three primary elements of the narrative world which appeared to contain the mythic elements most clearly: 1. The city of Columbia, 2. The voxophone

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212. Ibid.
213. This consisted of a complete playthrough on Normal Mode, Easy Mode, and 1999 mode (the hardest difficulty setting).
recordings found throughout the game, and 3. Selected visual propaganda found throughout Columbia. Afterwards I discuss how the utilization of cultural myth in *BioShock Infinite* to promote the political and religious practices of Columbia functions as a commentary on the real world political climate in which the game was produced.
Developed by Irrational Games (then named 2K Boston), *BioShock* was released in 2007 to much critical acclaim. Created as the spiritual successor to *System Shock 2*, *BioShock* immersed players in a narrative world ravaged by the effects of war. A FPS, it takes place during 1960 in Rapture, an underwater city deep in the ocean, now a dystopian ruin. Drawing many parallels with Ayn Rand philosophy, Rapture was built as a utopian society by visionary industrialist Andrew Ryan who disavowed any governmental or religious control over scientific, industrial, or artistic progress. This game introduced and established the hallmarks of the *BioShock* franchise: taking place in a world that is fantastic and ridiculous, and having a huge toolset and range of challenges that the player determines how to solve.\(^\text{214}\) *BioShock Infinite* contains the same characteristic hallmarks of the franchise.

*BioShock Infinite* is a story of redemption. The story follows a man, Booker DeWitt (the player) as he rescues a woman, Elizabeth. Booker discovers she is actually his daughter, Anna DeWitt, whom he regretfully gave away to Zachary Comstock when she was a baby.\(^\text{215}\) Booker recues her from Comstock, who rules the floating city of


\(^{215}\) As she is called Elizabeth throughout the game, I will refer to Elizabeth/Anna DeWitt as Elizabeth for the purposes of this analysis.
Columbia through claims of divinity. Booker learns that Comstock is actually himself existing in parallel worlds created from a decision to be baptized. Booker and Elizabeth traverse to the time and place right before Booker’s decision to be baptized when Comstock was created. There, Booker willingly allows Elizabeth to drown him to save her from ever having to experience the evils of Comstock.

The narrative of *BioShock Infinite* contains strong themes of the Frontier Myth and American Exceptionalism saturated with religion. The story takes place in 1912 in Columbia, a city floating in the sky. Columbia is ruled by Comstock who maintains power through a self-proclaimed connection with the divine. Religion controls all aspects of social and political life in Columbia, which includes pervasive racism and xenophobia. This society is infiltrated by Booker, a representation of the cowboy character in the Frontier Myth. The conflict between Booker and Comstock’s Columbia comprises much of the narrative world of *BioShock Infinite*. This analysis explores the different elements of the Frontier Myth and American Exceptionalism represented in *BioShock Infinite*. It begins with representations of the Frontier Myth components, then describes representations of the divine interventionist strain of American Exceptionalism represented by Comstock and Comstock’s Columbia.

**Elements of Frontier Myth in BioShock Infinite**

Branded as “America’s secular creation story,” the Frontier Myth is prevalent throughout social and political life in America. Common elements of the Frontier myth include the character of the cowboy, the erasure of non-whites, the civilizing of an untamed frontier, the use of individual aggression in service to the community, and the

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move to democracy. These elements are represented in *BioShock Infinite* through the characters and narrative world. The iconic character of the Frontier Myth, the cowboy, is represented throughout the game through visual cues, use of language and other representations linked to the narrative world. The erasure of indigenous and non-whites is negatively exhibited throughout Columbia. Columbia’s presence in the sky represents the civilizing of the untamed frontier. The use of individual aggression in service to the community is present in contrasting depictions of Comstock and Booker. The ever present move to democracy is seen through the constant pushes against and threats to Comstock’s monarchal rule of Columbia and its inhabitants from Booker and the Vox Populi. I will first discuss Columbia as the civilization of the frontier, and then the erasure of non-whites demonstrated in Columbia which accompanies civilizing the frontier. Next I will discuss the role of Booker DeWitt and Preston Downs as representations of the Frontier Myth’s cowboy. This is followed by contrasting Comstock’s and Booker’s use of individual aggression in service to the community. The Frontier Myth section concludes with the representations of the inevitable presence of democracy in *BioShock Infinite*.

**Civilizing the Frontier**

In the Frontier Myth the frontier is a space which juxtaposes desolation and civilization. It is a place initially endless and unknown, but eventually conquered and tamed into familiar, confining spaces. In *BioShock Infinite* the sky is the new frontier: endless, unknown, and desolate. The endless, desolate nature of the sky is highlighted by the almost constant ability to observe the endless, empty spaces surrounding Columbia.

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218. Rushing, “Rhetoric of the Western Myth,” 16.
Columbia is the civilization in the midst of the desolation. It is the manifestation of conquering the new frontier, conforming the desolate unknown into familiar spaces.

Columbia has solid ground, cobbled roads, sidewalks, tall buildings, grass, trees, plants, beaches, lakes, waterfalls, gardens, pretty much all the normal things you would expect to find in a city on the ground. The buildings provide the familiar, confining spaces with hallways, rooms, ceilings, walls, all artificial constructs designed to place limits and control the space of the sky. Columbia transforms the uninhabitable sky into a city that functions relatively normally with few abnormalities such as zeppelins, rocket barges, movable/dockable city blocks, edges you can fall off of. All of these abnormalities serve to further demonstrate the taming of the frontier through their alternative forms of transportation, as well as defining the limits of the civilization. Additionally, while there are defined boundaries to the city where you fall off, the city is also capable of moving freely throughout the open frontier of the sky. As Columbia is able to move throughout the untamed lands, it brings its civilization wherever it goes, providing clear representation of the frontier, and the conquering of that frontier.

Erasure of Non-whites

In the Frontier Myth, the expansion into and civilization of the untamed frontier is accompanied by the erasure of indigenous peoples/non-whites. One of the more pronounced aspects of Comstock’s moral framework is the exclusion, and dehumanization of all non-whites, and even the wrong kind of white (i.e. Irish). Like all other aspects of Columbian society, this is justified through religion.

While Columbia initially appears to be rather heaven-like when the player first arrives, its rampant racism is quickly evident. Daisy Fitzroy (black) describes her
experience with this on a voxophone, “When I first see Columbia, that sky was the 
brightest, bluest sky that ever was. Seemed like...heaven. Then your eyes adjusted to the 
light and you saw that sea of white faces lookin' hard back at you...” Originally 
Comstock had intended Columbia to be inhabited only by “deserving” white folk, but 
eventually let in non-whites and Irish to perform all of the city’s menial jobs. Fink says 
on a voxophone recording to Comstock,

I told you, Comstock-- you sell 'em paradise, and the customers expect cherubs 
for every chore! No menials in God's kingdom! Well, I've a man in Georgia 
who'll lease us as many Negro convicts as you can board! Why, you can say 
they're simple souls, in penance for rising above their station. Whatever eases 
your conscience, I suppose.

The exclusion of non-whites from Columbian society is demonstrated through forcing 
them into all of the menial and intensive labor jobs in Columbia. The vast majority of 
these jobs are a part of Fink’s industrial empire. Fink’s menial workers are forced to live 
in Finktown, a filthy ghetto chocked out by the rampant industrial pollution, ravaged by 
starvation, exposure, and lack of medical care. These squalid conditions are not attributed 
to Fink and how he treats his workers, but are continually blamed on the inhabitants as 
resulting from the manifestations of their true animal natures. Through characterizing 
minorities as inherently less civilized than the white man and less than human, they 
justify their dehumanizing treatment of non-whites.

The city is heavily segregated, separating the whites and non-whites as much as 
possible. Examples of segregation as an official policy are scattered throughout

220. Voxophones are recording devices in BioShock Infinite the player finds scattered throughout 
Columbia.
Columbia. The motto of the Columbian Authority, the police force, is “Protecting our faith, wealth and racial purity.” Part of the stated job of the Columbian police force is to protect the racial purity of Columbia. “Racial purity” is listed alongside “faith” and “wealth” signifying equal importance to Columbia and what they believe deserves protection. The Fraternal Order of the Raven is a pseudo-secret society dedicated solely to maintaining the racial purity of Columbia whose members wear KKK-like hoods and robes (purple instead white). In their headquarters, they have a large statue honoring John Wilkes Booth, and have several pictures depicting the assassination of President Lincoln with Booth in heavenly glory and Lincoln with devil horns and glowing eyes. The back rooms and hallways of buildings in Columbia are plastered with signs instructing the minorities how to behave around their superiors, and the only time non-whites are ever seen in whites only areas, they are serving the white people. Additionally, explicitly racist messages are present in kinetoscopes found around Columbia about, “Solving the Irish Problem,” and “Columbia to Sterilize Dimwits and Defectives.”\textsuperscript{221} Columbia demonstrates a fully segregated society in both policy and practice. This segregation is justified as acceptable and right through Columbia’s religion.

This rampant racism is justified by the moral framework established by Comstock’s religion. There are several voxophone recordings of Comstock’s sermons that demonstrate the use of religion as moral justification. He explicitly uses religion to justify Columbia’s treatment of non-whites,

To tax the black more than the white, is that not cruel? To forbid the mixing of the races, is that not cruel? To give the vote to the white man, and deny it to the

\textsuperscript{221} Kinetoscopes are similar to early moving picture boxes found throughout Columbia. They feature alternating silent text frames and moving images, overlaid with a “dramatic” score. They mostly contain propaganda messages, but some contain ads (like for children’s cigarettes) or artistic pieces.
yellow, the black, the red-- is that not cruel? Hm. But is it not cruel to banish your children from a perfect garden? Or drown your flock under an ocean of water? Cruelty can be instructive, and what is Columbia, if not the schoolhouse of the Lord?

Here Comstock equates their actions to the actions of God, and references divine mandate in how they carry out their civilizing on the frontier. He preaches on the hierarchy and responsibility of the races based upon an implied created order,

What exactly was the Great Emancipator [Lincoln] emancipating the Negro from? From his daily bread. From the nobility of honest work. From wealthy patrons who sponsored them from cradle to grave. From clothing and shelter. And what have they done with their freedom? Why, go to Finkton, and you shall find out. No animal is born free, except the white man. And it is our BURDEN to care for the rest of creation.

Comstock justifies the erasure and subjugation of non-whites by again appealing to a divine mandate of created order to justify his imposition of that order. He equates non-whites with animals, justifying treating them as such,

As a boy, I had a dog named Bill. And like all dogs, Bill was a loyal friend. If we had not fed him, Bill would have been loyal. If we had struck him, Bill would have been loyal. Only when the colored man can make that claim will he take his place in society.

By equating non-whites to animals, Comstock highlights the uncivilized nature of the non-white inhabitants of the frontier, and the superiority of Columbian civilization.
Columbia’s implementation of white expansionism is characteristic of the erasure of non-whites component in the Frontier Myth.

The Cowboy Character

In the Frontier Myth the cowboy is a prototypical masculine figure: daring, noble, ethical and romantic. This hero of the frontier is a rugged individual who responds to needs of the community through conflict with some threatening outside force. As a uniquely American hero, the very presence of the cowboy serves as an iconic reminder of American Exceptionalism. *BioShock Infinite* reinforces these notions of American Exceptionalism through the cowboy serving as the player character, and ultimate hero of the game.

Visually, the cowboy is represented several ways throughout the game. As the player character, Booker is rarely seen through the game, aside from his rugged hands, usually holding a gun, constantly present in the player’s display. The few times he is seen, including box art, he wears well worn clothes, a handkerchief around his neck, an underarm gun holster, and has a scarred face with beard scruff. Another cowboy represented in the game, Preston Downs, is only indirectly encountered through his abandoned traveling Wild West sideshow stage, and his bullet banded, black cowboy hats found throughout the game.

The cowboy is also represented through language used in *BioShock Infinite*. Voiced by Troy Baker, Booker has a strong, gravelly voice, and often comes across gruff and simple, but with a well formed understanding of how people operate. Booker is not portrayed as an unnecessarily violent man, and often tries to avoid unnecessary fights.

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222. Rushing, “Rhetoric of the Western Myth,” 15.
223. Ibid., 17.
with those he claims to have “no quarrel.” However, when it comes to protecting Elizabeth or direct violence to himself, Booker is never shown to run from a fight. Elizabeth remarks to Booker after some extensive fighting, “you sure know your way around a fight.” Not only does Booker not run from a fight, but he also possesses exceptional fighting abilities.

Preston Downs is the other primary representation of the cowboy character in *BioShock Infinite*. Preston talks with a bit of a Texas drawl as heard on the voxophones he leaves around Columbia. Preston is prejudiced against most non-whites, but ultimately cares more about how people handle themselves rather than their skin color or heritage. Preferring a straight fight, he tells Daisy Fitzroy on a voxophone found near two dead bodies in a hotel room, covered in blood,

> Ol' Preston is a sportin' man, Miss Fitzroy. I won't steal up on ya while you slumber like these Vox boys here, with their pigstickers...[Pleading]
> [Gunshot] That's one scalp to me. [Screaming] [Gunshot]That's two. Now, when you hear this, I want you to square your affairs, and come die in the sight of the poets. You'll need a white man's weapon-- give this a try.

Here, Preston Downs exemplifies the honor typical of the cowboy. He disparages Daisy Fitzroy’s sneaky fighting tactics, and willingly tells her that he’s not going to stoop to the same level, and wants to fight her himself. He also demonstrates his prejudice against non-whites by equating clean, honest fighting with a “white man’s weapon,” contrasted with the Vox sneaking around with knives, pigstickers. Preston is also shown here to know his way around a fight though his killing of two people secretly sent to kill him, and his open boast of how he’s going to kill Fitzroy.
In addition to demonstrating his code of honor, typical of a cowboy, Preston also vocalizes his service to community,

Mr. Comstock, when next we meet, it won't be to parley. See, I went out to that Hall a' Heroes to scalp your 'False Shepherd' for you. Turns out, though—DeWitt speaks Sioux. He helped me swap words with this cripple child I've been uh...looking after. Now after hearing how the kid has fared in your city-- I'm thinking, when we take your pelt, I'll let him hold the knife.

Preston Downs justifies the use of individual aggression against Comstock and his men, in service to the community by looking after and protecting the crippled Sioux boy. He uses the mistreatment of the boy by Comstock as a justification for the use of violence as justice on the boy’s behalf. Preston even seeks to extend the justice gained through violence to the boy himself by suggesting to let the boy scalp Comstock himself. This use of violence as a form of justice and protection of the community from an outside evil, is one of the prominent characteristics exhibited by the cowboy in the Frontier Myth.

While Preston represents the cowboy character in the Frontier Myth, Booker is ultimately the prototypical frontier hero. He’s a rugged individualist who uses violence to protect others, namely Elizabeth, and bring justice to the Founders and Vox for their wrong doings. He’s a man of his word and expects the same of others. This is exemplified when he goes to great lengths to secure weapons for the Vox Populi in exchange for the First Lady zeppelin from Daisy Fitzroy. Booker is surprised when she tries to have him killed instead of upholding her end of the bargain. Booker is a consummate cowboy hero, demonstrated by his strong sense of service to community. His desire to protect Elizabeth, not only causes him to fight off all of the Founders and
Vox forces, but ultimately to sacrifice his life to prevent Comstock from ever existing. Once Booker realizes that he is the source of the outside evil that threatens Elizabeth, he follows through on his desire to protect her and the community from that evil by sacrificing his own life before Comstock can exist. This satisfies one of the main characteristics of the cowboy in the Frontier Myth.

**Individual Aggression in Service to the Community**

One of the hallmarks of the Frontier Myth is civilizing the untamed frontier. In order for the frontier to be civilized, the community must be protected from numerous threats. The cowboy hero uses individual aggression to serve the needs of the community, typically manifesting as defending the community from an outside force with physical violence. This can also encompass other forms of sacrifice on the part of the individual for the good of the community. Individual aggression can also be used against the community. On the frontier, everyone has to rely on everyone else to survive, thus the aggression of one against the community can have disastrous consequences. In *BioShock Infinite* Comstock and Booker represent diametrically opposed manifestations of individual aggression in service of the community: Comstock a perverted form, Booker a heroic form.

Comstock perverts the virtue of using individual aggression for the needs of the community through using individual aggression to promote and maintain his own power and control. In addition to the dehumanization of all non-whites, he orders his police force to systematically kill any members of the Vox Populi, an anarchist-rebel group of minorities formed out of their oppression. Comstock also uses personal aggression to maintain his power and control. We learn from a voxophone recording of Lady Comstock...
that he had over 40 political rivals assassinated. Comstock had Robert and Rosalind Lutece assassinated and killed Lady Comstock himself to eliminate everyone who knew the truth behind his divine prophecies and divine birth of his “seed,” Elizabeth. He covered up his misdeeds either by hiring Fink to kill them so it’d look like an accident, or fabricating stories that he’d incorporate into his mythos and parade them around as service to community (i.e. he blamed Lady Comstock’s murder on Daisy Fitzroy, her black servant, who then fled and became leader of the Vox Populi).

Booker, conversely, demonstrates the heroic form. Throughout the game, he selflessly defends and protects Elizabeth from all the dangers they encounter, usually by killing any and everyone who tries to get in their way. This includes self-reform as he evolves from a man on a mission to bring her back to New York, to someone who willingly would sacrifice himself to keep her safe. This selfless individual aggression for the sake of Elizabeth culminates in his own death when Booker comes to the realization that he is Comstock, and the source of all the evils that she endured. Booker willingly allows Elizabeth, and multiple other versions of her, to drown him the moment before his baptismal decision that leads to the creation of Comstock so that he can protect her from ever having to experience any of Comstock’s cruelty.

Comstock represents a perversion of the individual aggression featured in the Frontier Myth. He either keeps his aggression secret, or claims it to be in service of Columbia in order to preserve the myth of his own divinity and maintain his control over the people. Booker is a representation of the cowboy hero in his use of individual

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224. Interestingly, Lady Comstock’s actual name is never mentioned or revealed in *BioShock Infinite*, and referred to only as “Lady Comstock” in Columbia.
aggression to protect the community, Elizabeth, and eventually everyone who suffered and died at the hands of Comstock.

The Inevitable Presence of Democracy

Another component of the Frontier Myth is the spread of democracy. In BioShock Infinite the spread of democracy is depicted in the nature of Comstock’s authority in Columbia, and the threats to his authority in the Vox Populi and Booker DeWitt. These threats to Comstock’s authority ultimately depict the inevitable spread of democracy depicted in the Frontier Myth.

Comstock initially gained his position of controlling Columbia through his successful petitioning of the United States Congress to fund its construction. Comstock claims the idea and vision for Columbia to be of divine origin from the archangel Columbia, and he used this alleged connection to the divine to establish a religious monarchy, with himself as the sole authority in the city. After the Boxer Rebellion, Comstock used Columbia to annihilate Peking (Beijing) as a retaliatory action, which was disavowed by the United States. In response, Comstock declared independence from America. Originating as an American colony, Comstock utilizes American icons, such as the founding fathers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin to justify his claims that his form of government is the true form intended by the founding fathers. His form of government is the antithesis of democratic rule, functioning as a totalitarian, religious monarchy. Comstock does not tolerate any religions other than the Church of Comstock, and has any political rivals or serious challenges to his authority assassinated. Columbia was originally envisioned by the United States government as beacon of American democracy and goodwill around the world, but Comstock instead
transformed Columbian to represent the antithesis of the spread of democracy found in the Frontier Myth.

Comstock’s religious monarchy is shown to be vulnerable to the ever present move towards democracy contained within the Frontier Myth. There are two main threats in BioShock Infinite that challenge his authority. The first is the Vox Populi, an underground movement formed out of the mistreatment of non-whites in Columbian society. Labeled as anarchists, the Vox Populi’s mission is to kill Comstock and destroy his government. This movement gains traction until, armed by Booker DeWitt, Columbia breaks into all out war between the Founders and the Vox. The Vox succeed in destroying Columbia, but are also shown to be as ruthless and exclusive as the Founders through their indiscriminate slaughter of any they deem to oppose them. They are not interested in restoring democracy, but rather focus on vengeance.

The second threat to Comstock’s monarchical authority is from Booker. Booker, depicted as the cowboy hero, represents a uniquely American, challenge. Booker is not shown as an extremist like the Founders or Vox, but brings justice, showing the danger of anti-democratic rule through his exposure of the perversions of both Comstock and the Vox. Booker is instrumental in bringing Comstock’s regime down through arming the Vox, killing Comstock, and preventing Comstock from ever existing. In contrast to the Founders and Vox, Booker is the only side shown to be uncorrupted. This lack of corruption plays into his cowboy status, a uniquely American hero. This representation in BioShock Infinite reflects the Frontier Myth’s persistent notions of the superiority of American democracy, and the spread of democracy that accompanies conquering the frontier.
Elements of American Exceptionalism in BioShock Infinite

The Frontier Myth is a foundational myth of the United States. American Exceptionalism in *BioShock Infinite* is rooted in this foundational myth. As Bercovitch argues, founding myths establish, “a moral framework within which a certain complex of attitudes, assumptions and beliefs can be taken for granted as being not only proper, but right.”\(^{225}\) This moral framework lays the foundation for many of the beliefs and ideologies that constitute American Exceptionalism. The Frontier Myth in *BioShock Infinite* functions as founding myth, and creates the basis for many of the expressions of American Exceptionalism seen in the game. *BioShock Infinite* relies heavily on the myth of American Exceptionalism and its overlap with the Frontier Myth in constructing its narrative world and story.

American Exceptionalism is represented in *BioShock Infinite* by Zachary Comstock and the floating city of Columbia. Their representation emphasizes the divine components of American Exceptionalism almost exclusively, and promotes a religious interventionist strand of American Exceptionalism. This section will explore the presentation of Comstock’s divine interventionism through the components of American Exceptionalism.

Comstock as Divine Interventionist

Like the Puritans settling America, Comstock settled Columbia to create a “New Eden” to establish his own ideal religious society. His mission is rooted in a divine mandate and justified by religious myth, including claims of his own personal divinity.

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He uses this divine authority to establish Berkovich’s moral framework to justify and promote his vision of an ideal society.

*Special Nation, Special Destiny*

The “special nation, special destiny” component of American Exceptionalism is born out of the idea that America’s founding was directed by God who chose the United States to have a special role in history. This same ideology is the basis of the divine claims of Comstock and Columbia. In an expository sermon excerpt on a voxophone Comstock says,

> And then, the archangel showed a vision: a city, lighter than air. I asked her,

> "Why do you show this to me, archangel? I'm not a strong man. I'm not a righteous man. I am not a holy man." And she told me the most remarkable thing:

> "You're right, Prophet. But if grace is within the grasp of one such as you, how can anyone else not see it in themselves?

Comstock claims Columbia has divine origins, simultaneously linking himself to that divinity through the archangel calling him “Prophet.” He uses the claim of Columbia’s divine origins to jumpstart his own claim to the divine, intertwining himself in the narrative of the divine origin of Columbia.

Columbia’s divine origin gives it divine purpose and destiny. In another voxophone recording Comstock claims Columbia to be the “schoolhouse of the Lord.” This label is used to justify Comstock’s racist policies. He gives examples of God’s cruelty to demonstrate how “cruelty can be instructive.” By claiming the same intentions as God, Comstock justifies his actions as well as bestowing eternal significance and approval to all that is done in Columbia. On another voxophone Comstock calls
Columbia, “another ark for another time.” By equating Columbia with Noah’s ark, Comstock establishes Columbia as a refuge for the righteous from the impending destruction of God’s judgment. In one of Comstock’s main prophecies, he indicates that Columbia is also the harbinger of God’s fiery judgment on the “Sodom below.”

Columbia’s divine destiny is also rooted in Comstock’s prophecy about Columbia’s role in God’s impending judgment: “The Seed of the Prophet shall sit the throne and drown in flame the Mountains of Man.” This speaks of a future time when Columbia will destroy the world below under the leadership of Comstock’s offspring. This establishes both the divine dynasty of Comstock, and the divine destiny of Columbia. These co-established divine destinies for Comstock and Columbia provide the foundations for the moral framework which Comstock imposes. This framework functions exclusively as an extension of a religion which centers on Comstock.

Comstock’s divinity is founded on the belief that he is a prophet who regularly receives divine visions of the future. His position of divine prophet is promoted and reinforced throughout Columbia. The city is littered with posters of Comstock that read, “Our Prophet, Father Comstock,” kinetoscopes containing propaganda messages about “Father Comstock’s Gift of Prophecy,” and praising his ability to see and know the future. This continual display of Comstock-as-prophet propaganda reinforces his role as divine leader of the citizens of Columbia.

Comstock uses his divine authority to establish his own religion, the Church of Comstock, complete with its own scriptures, “The Word of the Prophet.” This is the official religion of Columbia and the only religion allowed to be practiced in Columbia. At one point Booker and Elizabeth come across a Chinese woman praying at a small,
hidden, Buddhist shrine. Booker remarks, “Comstock doesn’t like idols being worshiped that ain’t him.” Their surprise of seeing something other than Comstock worshiped in Columbia is accompanied with the acknowledgement of Comstock’s absolute religious authority in Columbia. Comstock’s religious absolutism begins immediately upon arrival in Columbia. All new arrivals to Columbia enter through the Church of Comstock, and must accept baptism into Comstock’s religion “in the name of the Prophet, in the name of the Founders, and in the name of the Lord,” in order to enter the city.

A major component of Comstock’s religion, and divinity, is the prophecy, “The Seed of the Prophet shall sit the throne and drown in flame the Mountains of Man.” The centerpiece of this prophecy, and the future of Columbia, is Elizabeth, “The Seed of The Prophet,” or “The Lamb.” By tying the special destiny of the city to a prophecy requiring power of the city to remain in his family, Comstock cements his divine role over the city, and further entwines himself and Columbia. Thus, the “special nation, special destiny” component of American Exceptionalism functions as “divine nation, divine destiny,” and Comstock’s role facilitates the inclusion of, “divine person, divine destiny.” These divine claims are the basis upon which Comstock justifies his actions and Columbia’s existence.

Comstock’s divinity is almost uniformly accepted by the white citizens of Columbia, and rejected by the minority residents. As the player enters the city, citizens standing under a gigantic, majestic statue of Comstock claim that the statue, “fails to capture his divinity.” Others are overheard attributing the nice weather on their Independence Day celebration to Father Comstock’s foresight. Even when Comstock is not shown to be invincible, it’s assumed that it’s just a part of his plan. After the destruction of a large portion of the giant angel tower in the middle of Columbia where
Elizabeth was held is seen by the citizens, they still defer to Comstock’s divinity: “Why didn't the prophet foresee this? He tells us what he deems wise. It's okay, it's okay.” Even in the face of the destruction of one of the primary symbols of Comstock’s divinity, the people refuse to recognize it as a sign of Comstock’s fallibility.

Aside from the white man who claims to be “a progressive, like you,” and the secret “Columbia Friends of the Negro” abolitionist society run out of a white couple’s house, the only real opposition to Comstock’s infallibility and divinity come from the Vox Populi. In several areas throughout Columbia, first only in secret Vox hideouts, but later scattered around the city after the start of the war, is graffiti protesting Comstock’s claimed divine authority. One vandalized “Father Comstock, Our Prophet” sign has his eyes painted over, and “SEE” written over them so they read, “Father of Lies, you SEE nothing!” Another sign painted in blood reads, “Tell us prophet, did you see us coming?”

Comstock’s divinity is openly denied by the Vox, but widely accepted by the citizens of Columbia, accepting his “divine person/nation, divine destiny” presentation.

Comstock’s prophetic visions are ultimately shown to not be divine, or prophetic, as explained in a voxophone recording of Rosalind Lutece, “Brother, what Comstock failed to understand is that our contraption is a window not into prophecy, but probability.” Comstock’s divine prophetic visions turn out to not be of divine origin, but rather from a machine built by two physicists, Rosalind and Robert Lutece. Furthermore, this same machine was used to steal Elizabeth, the centerpiece of Comstock’s most prominent prophecy, from a parallel world. Thus the “Seed of the Prophet” isn’t actually Comstock’s child. The true origin of Elizabeth and the sudden appearance of a baby are covered up by claiming a miraculous seven day gestation, further adding to Comstock’s
divine narrative. When the truth behind these two vital pieces of Comstock’s divinity, the actual source of his “prophecies” and the truth about Elizabeth, is threatened, Comstock murders Lady Comstock and has the Luteces assassinated. These murders are then covered up with lies that further Comstock’s agenda. These actions destroy the credibility of Comstock’s claims of divine authority and guidance, the basic tenants of his manifestation of “special nation, special destiny.”

*Qualitatively Different from the Old World*

While Comstock’s lies are eventually exposed by Booker and Elizabeth, they are not known by the populace of Columbia who believe in the divinity of Comstock, and the divine mission of Columbia. The divine destiny of Columbia serves as the basis for how they view themselves as qualitatively different form the old world. For Columbia, the old world is America. They seceded from “the so-called Union,” when the United States Congress denounced Columbia’s decimation of Peking (Beijing) in response to the Boxer Rebellion. As Columbia’s existence and destiny is divinely ordained, the United States’ opposition to Columbia’s action could not be tolerated.

Comstock believed that America’s founding was directed by God, and had a divine destiny, but gradually America turned away from its divine calling. He says in one of his sermons,

> And when the Angel Columbia gave unto the Founders the tools to build the new Eden, they did so without hesitation. For 85 years, they prepared the way of the Lord. But when the Great Apostate came, he brought war with him, and the fields of Eden were soaked with the blood of brothers. The only emancipation he had to offer was death.
Here, Comstock acknowledges America’s divinely inspired foundation, and identifies the arrival of the “Great Apostate” as the turning point in America’s fulfillment of their divine mission. In Comstock’s world, the “Great Apostate,” refers to Abraham Lincoln, referenced here with the “85 years” of preparing the way for the Lord. On other voxophones Comstock preaches that Lincoln’s act of emancipating the slaves is a major turning point for America away from their divine mission through their opposition to God’s created order of the races. The vilification of Lincoln is also reflected in the glorified depictions of John Wilkes Booth, and demonization of Lincoln, including the painting of Lincoln’s assassination with radiant glory surrounding Booth, the glowing eyes and horns on Lincoln, and a demonic Lincoln looming over a battlefield. This is furthered by the discriminatory policies and attitudes of Comstock that are practiced in Columbia, and preaching direct opposition to Lincoln’s emancipation of the slaves.

As America was not American enough, Columbia assumed the role Comstock believed that America should have filled. Thus, Columbia became the new, “New Eden.” Columbia as the “New Eden” is juxtaposed with the rest of the world, especially America, as the “Sodom below.” Comstock, preaching on the origins of Columbia said,

As the months and years turned to memories, so did the men of Congress turn to righteousness. And through the technology of men, the dollars of Washington, the Lord worked his will upon Columbia and raised her high above the Sodom below. In this, Comstock links the divine origins to their role as exemplar through the contrast with the “Sodom below.” The “Sodom below” is a frequented theme in Columbia used to highlight their separation and distinctness from America and the rest of the world which is beneath them, literally and figuratively.
Columbia’s American roots are present throughout the city in various forms. The founding fathers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin are incorporated into the Church of Comstock and citizens regularly pray to them. The Columbian flag features 13 horizontal red and white stripes and a single white star on a blue background, similar to the American flag, and they also celebrate their seceding from the United States, their Independence Day, every July 6th. Yet, for all the similarities, Columbia views itself as very distinct, and better than America, the old world. This distinctiveness primarily stems from the idea that Columbia, not America, is the nation truly following a divinely inspired destiny.

*Escape the Trappings of History*

Comstock believes that Columbia will be able to escape the trappings of history if they follow their divine mandate, as given to them in the form of Comstock’s prophecy, “The Seed of the Prophet shall sit the throne and drown in flame the Mountains of Man.” Comstock believes that the archangel told him that Columbia will survive only as long as his offspring are in power. Thus, one of Comstock’s main foci is securing his lineage, however he is unable to have a child with Lady Comstock. He says on a voxophone recording,

> The archangel tells me that Columbia will only survive so long as my line sits the throne. Yet Lady Comstock produces no child. I have done what a man can do, yet there is no child!

He is unable to produce offspring naturally because his use of the Lutece’s machine has made him sterile, not because Lady Comstock is unable to like he claimed, so he uses the Lutece’s machine to secure an offspring from a parallel world. As the future of Columbia
resides with this child, Elizabeth, he locks her away in the massive angel tower in the middle of the city to keep her hidden, and to study and control her transdimensional powers. Comstock also creates the character of the “False Shepherd” who will come and “lead The Lamb astray” to pre-empt any attempt by Booker DeWitt to rescue his daughter, and disrupt the prophecy. Comstock eventually has everyone killed who has knowledge of the true origins of Elizabeth in order to secure his divine mythology, and prevent her from ever learning the truth.

In addition to the singular focus on The Seed of the Prophet, and the prophecy, the people of Columbia believe they also have achieved the utopian society that is impervious to the degradation of all previously great societies. Part of the component of escaping the trappings of history in American Exceptionalism is the idea that America has not yet achieved its true greatness, but constantly desires to better itself to achieve its potential. Columbia already believes themselves to have reached the apex, describing the city as “heaven.” Their fundamentalist society features very polite, proper people, honor payment systems in stores, and enforcing God’s created order of the races with whites subjugating the other, more animal, races.

Comstock and Columbia as Interventionist

The divine destiny and central prophecy of Comstock and Columbia feeds into a strong interventionist expression of American Exceptionalism. Columbia exists as a “city on a hill,” literally floating above America in the clouds, and figuratively through moral superiority and belief in achieving the true potential that America could not. Their idyllic fundamentalist society, justified and perpetuated by divine mandate, fuels their interventionist mission which existed since Columbia’s inception. A kinetoscope on
Columbia’s founding displays a frame which reads, “Columbia begins her journey to spread America’s vision to the world!” Comstock’s original vision for Columbia included representing to the world what America could and should be. Part of that included violent intervention, as demonstrated during the annihilation of Peking (Beijing) following the Boxer Rebellion. Congress opposed this violent interventionist action and recalled Columbia. Comstock immediately seceded from the United States, and Columbia disappeared into the clouds. Comstock believed America to be the “new Eden” preparing the way for the Lord. This was a divine interventionist mission expressed through the active assertion of its greatness politically and culturally, for a divine end. By opposing his divinely inspired actions America indicated to Comstock that it could no longer fulfill this mission. He re-branded Columbia as the “New Eden” and assumed America’s former role of preparing the way for the Lord. The juxtaposition of Columbia as the “New Eden” with the “Sodom below,” furthers the interventionist rhetoric of Columbia as a missionary nation.

The divine origins and mission of Columbia, is also intertwined with the divinity of Comstock in his role as the prophet given the vision of Columbia by the archangel. Comstock uses this divine mandate to justify the establishment of the moral framework he believes to be right, which the citizens of Columbia accept as proper and right. The establishment of their way of life by Comstock, a prophet, allows them to infer divine direction and approval for this way of life. Comstock’s divine link is also the source of the prophecy which enables them to escape the trappings of history, which, in conjunction with their moral code, serves to make them qualitatively different than America. This functions together to create the projection of a utopian society, one that
justifies their superiority to America and the rest of the world. Columbia’s superiority and the divine mandate through Comstock’s prophecies are used by Comstock justify their intervention in the world.

In *BioShock Infinite*, Columbia’s ideal society is exposed as less than superior, Comstock’s divinity is discovered to be of human origin, and their divine mission is thwarted through the actions of the Vox Populi and Booker DeWitt. Once armed by Booker and Elizabeth, the Vox Populi express their own interventionist mission by plunging Columbia into all out war. They violently assert their ideology and desire to destroy the Founders and their way of life by indiscriminately slaughtering the Columbian people, reducing the city to burning ruins as retribution for their mistreatment. Through their destruction of Columbia the Vox demonstrate their mission isn’t any better or preferable to Comstock’s. Both Comstock and the Vox Populi’s interventionist expressions are also violently opposed by Booker’s rugged individualism in protection of Elizabeth. Ultimately, Comstock, Columbia, and the Vox are all erased from existence through the willing sacrifice of Booker’s own life.

**Summary**

*BioShock Infinite* produces the uniquely American cowboy hero in Booker DeWitt. As a cowboy character, Booker displays rugged individualism in his use of violence to protect Elizabeth from Comstock and the Vox, ultimately sacrificing his own life to ensure her safety. The Frontier Myth functions in the frontier setting of *BioShock Infinite* as a founding myth. Through claims of divine mandate, Comstock utilizes this to establish an ideal society steeped in a heavily religious strand of American Exceptionalism. This strand of American Exceptionalism manifests through divine
interventionist rhetoric and practices. Comstock as the divine interventionist violently collides with Booker’s rugged individualism resulting in the elimination of Comstock, and his divine interventionist strand of American Exceptionalism.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

_BioShock Infinite_ presents a narrative world where religious interventionist politics serve as a metaphor for the disease at the heart of America, which only the destructive force of secular libertarianism can solve. Through the presentation of Zachary Comstock’s vision of a pure America, the game rejects a divine interventionist interpretation of American Exceptionalism and the application of divine myth to America’s origins and destiny. Through the presentation of a secular America represented by Booker DeWitt, _BioShock Infinite_ promotes a reluctant secular interventionist expression of American Exceptionalism, born out of the rugged individualism of the cowboy employing violence in service to the community. This speaks to the larger insertion of religion in politics as justification for policy action, and draws parallels to the proliferation of the God Strategy and modern day Tea Party movement in American politics. It also endorses a brand of secular politics—young atheist libertarianism—as an alternative political expression.

Through the vehicle of narrative _BioShock Infinite_ constructs an argument on the role of the divine in American Exceptionalism, and, by extension, political and social life. The two primary representations of American Exceptionalism in _BioShock Infinite_ are Comstock and Booker. I will begin by discussing the role of Comstock in _BioShock Infinite_ as an indictment of the problem with infusing religion into politics. Then I will
discuss Booker as a promotion of secular politics as the solution to this religious invasion of the political. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for further research.

**Comstock Throws a Tea Party**

The presentation of Columbian society easily evokes a parallel to the Tea Party movement. Comstock’s belief system has its foundations in America’s own supposed divine origins and destiny that America ultimately failed to fulfill. For Comstock, Columbia is the fulfillment of America’s divine destiny in the way that it should be fulfilled, a representation of a pure America. As a representation of a pure America, Columbia is filled with numerous American symbols. These include the similarity of flags, shared founding fathers, national colors, and patriotic expressions. Like Columbia, many in the Tea Parties desire to create a pure America and return it to what they see as its founding principles. This desire manifests in persistent calls to return to some mythical age of American Exceptionalism only achievable through policy decisions rooted in the “founders’ intent” of the Constitution. This ideology, coupled with strong rhetorical support of the divine origins of America and divine inspiration of the founding fathers, results in the deification of the Constitution, and the founders who crafted it. This is echoed through Columbia’s strong belief in their own founder, as well as America’s, divine origins, divine destiny, and actual worship of America’s founding fathers.

In forming a pure America in Columbia, Comstock attributes many of his policies to the intentions of the founding fathers. This includes his notions that a pure America also means racially pure, resulting in rampant racism and xenophobia. The Tea Parties likewise claim their policies reflect the true intentions of the founding fathers, and are often criticized as being racist and xenophobic. Their membership is overwhelmingly
older white males, and they are in favor of policies to increase border security, and reduce immigration. Additionally, they promote policies that disproportionately hurt blacks and other minorities.226

The Corruption of Politics with Religion

While the notions of the Tea Parties as a racist, xenophobic, monolithic religious political movement are largely reinforced in Bioshock Infinite, the resonance of this message speaks to a larger growing opposition to religion in politics. Specifically, the dangers of expressions of American Exceptionalism rooted in the divine.

One of the results of rooting American Exceptionalism in the divine is overlapping religious doctrine with political policy and expression. In Columbia, Comstock transformed patriotism, a sociopolitical ideology, into a religious duty, going so far as to make it an actual component of his religion. The transfusion of patriotism into expected religious duty, frames current political arguments in such a way that opposing the presence or role of God or Christianity in American politics is considered a faithless, treasonous act. To deny the role of the divine in the founding of America, in the framing of our constitution, the deification of our founding fathers, to even question the notion that God has a special plan just for America, is akin to questioning the very existence of God or the claims of Christ. The overemphasis of religion in politics transports political discussions into the realm of the religious. Debates on the merits of policy options

devolve into theological arguments about the will of God, or misguided claims of biblical accuracy and support.

This moral absolutism is what justified the dehumanization of the “other” in Columbia, is what justified slavery and racism in America, and is the same justification used to discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community. The argument against legalizing same-sex marriage is a moral one, which ultimately posits that the legalization of same sex marriage will ruin the nation, destroying the moral fiber of this country. The argument is rooted in the idea that God says it’s a sin so it cannot be allowed to be legal. This is an interesting focus, one that is hypocritical as there are other behaviors labeled as sins that are legal in America (i.e. adultery, gluttony, lust, greed). Nevertheless, the argument relies on the acceptance of a prescribed moral code that society is supposedly built upon. Like Comstock, they argue that legalizing same-sex marriage will cause America to turn away from God, and abandon the divine destiny given to America. At their roots, Comstock (in the game) and the anti-homosexual lobby (in the real world) rely on the same arguments, and these arguments do not appear to resonate well with the younger demographic who plays videogames.

The absolutism that inevitably comes from believing that policies are biblically mandated, stifles discourse, destroys compromise, and eliminates democracy. Like Comstock, those who claim to have divine inspiration, or to just be following God’s word, are using religion as a political tool in order to gain and maintain their power, paving the way for them to push their moralist agenda. This begins with the myth of America’s divine origins, and manifests on the moral framework that belief justifies constructing. As Bercovich noted, moral frameworks established from divine foundations

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create a system which justifies behaviors not only as proper, but right, that otherwise would not be tolerated, such as the dehumanization of blacks and homosexuals. To argue against those policies, is to argue against the moral framework “established” by God, and thus, is to question God (which, they also view as heretical, because questioning threatens their power).

The Tea Parties have shown the destructive force that the refusal to compromise or even entertain discussions of compromise can bring. This is a message which resonates with a younger demographic, who largely do not support or subscribe to Tea Party ideology. The “pure America” that Comstock created did not allow for dissent, or discussion, or any sort of deviation from the divine path he violently enforced on Columbia. Ironically, the “pure America” the Tea Parties strive to establish, views dissent as unpatriotic, and enforces a version of Christianity as the unofficial religion of America. This strays from what the founders’ vision for America, which in the game is represented by Booker.

**Booker, the True American Cowboy**

*BioShock Infinite*’s promotion of a secular America would arguably resonate particularly well with the primary demographic of videogame players. Where Comstock presents the problems that come with the fusion of religion and politics, Booker presents a secular solution to those problems. Comstock’s pure America is destroyed with Booker’s true America. The problem with the divine is solved through the violent,

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secular actions of a cowboy. Booker’s presence and role in BioShock Infinite demonstrates that the game does not focus its attack on political parties, rather, on political ideologies. Booker is not a liberal hero. He is pro-gun, patriarchal, does not endorse government-based solutions, and always reverts to violence to solve his problems. As such, BioShock Infinite is not an attack on conservatism, or even on the Tea Parties. Its primary argument is to draw attention to political groups who emulate Comstock/Columbia’s behaviors and attitudes, and demonstrate how the ideologies behind those behaviors and attitudes are dangerous.

This argument resonates with young atheist libertarianism, a movement that contains many of the hallmarks associated with conservatism, but contains a strong emphasis on taking God and religion out of politics. Other aspects of their ideology are also represented through Booker. For example, Booker’s use of violence, particularly guns, to solve problems, as well as the almost continual presence of Booker’s right hand holding a gun on the display, reflects their strong pro-gun stance and support of open carry laws. His work as an anti-union Pinkerton parallels their typically anti-union positions and views of unions as bloated organizations that are no longer useful or effective. The young atheist libertarian’s embrace of patriarchy is represented through Booker’s role as patriarchal protector of Elizabeth. They also tend to be pro-inclusion but are not in favor of large scale government solutions preferring individual hard-work, as echoed through Booker acting as a lone agent fighting against an exclusive government. These parallels all speak to the resonance of BioShock Infinite with not only a younger, liberal demographic, but also to a younger conservative demographic who are also opposed to religion’s involvement in government and politics.
Videogames provide a unique opportunity to communicate political messages to a demographic typically indifferent to such messages. As these messages are traditionally communicated through speeches or other media, videogames can potentially raise consciousness on important issues in a more influential way than speech or other media with this age group. *BioShock Infinite* contains religious and political messages that would resonate with this group. This is particularly true of *BioShock Infinite*’s opposition to the presence of religion in politics, a view held by an increasing amount of people in this demographic. It also presents characterizations of the Tea Parties that would be likely to resonate, and largely go unchecked. This presents the opportunity for videogames to be a powerfully persuasive tool for the communication of social and political messages to a demographic that would be less likely to receive them otherwise, or at all.

**Further research**

Potential research could focus on further exploring the utilization of cultural myth in videogames, analyzing the messages they communicate. This would include answering what other cultural myths are used, and which myths are the most commonly used. This could also extend into analyzing the presentation of American politics, and the consistency of that presentation within and between videogame genres. This could be coupled with an analysis of the voting habits and political beliefs of players before and after playing to determine any sort of behavioral or attitudinal changes. It would also be interesting to study ideological presentations in games created by a single developer. Are the ideologies consistent within each developer? Is there a difference between American and foreign developers? Do they align with prominent ideological shifts? Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the nature of the ideological communication between
developer and player. The developer communicates ideological messages to the player, but is the transactional communication of the player interpreted as an interest in the ideological messages, or simply as an interest in the gameplay style and mechanics?

Another possible area of further research would be to study the prominence and role of the cowboy in videogames. Also further exploration of the use of American Exceptionalism as a justification for racism and violence in FPS war genre games like the Call of Duty series, Battlefield series, or Homefront. Another interesting application would be the interactions between cultural myth and player choice as videogames are developed to allow for more player choice with actual in-game consequences. Additionally, further study could be conducted on the promotion of young atheist libertarian ideology in videogames, and it’s correlation to the rise of the political ideology. It would also be interesting to explore divine interpretations of American Exceptionalism seen in other media such as the political drama, House of Cards.


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