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### American Utopia - Comparing the Far-Right politics of BioShock: Infinite and Trump's America

What the Hell is Going on in the United States of America?

Since 2015, the United States and the rest of the world have been under the grip of a Donald Trump presidency. Beginning his campaign stating that Mexicans are rapists; to calling white supremacists "good people" thereby legitimizing and emboldening multiple supremacist groups; and is now impeached president who has lost not only the presidency but also at the time of writing 267, 000 Americans to a pandemic which could have been prevented. In the 2020 American Federal Election, Donald Trump received more than 72 million votes; he increased his number of votes received by more than 10 million compared to his election win in 2016 (Riccardi 2020; FEC 2016). The idea that Trump and his rhetoric have "lost" in America is false. While he lost the electoral college and the popular vote, the millions of increased votes signify the desire for an American ideal that is a window to the past. The "Making America Great Again" (MAGA) messaging hit a cord with a majority of white America who believed that white influence was in decline, and therefore, a direct threat to white existence (Major et al., 2016). This idea of "White Genocide" as a meme (Ward 2018) on conservative media channels such as radio, television, and social media actively shaped society in the minds of white Americans creating an in-group (Whites) and out-group (Degenerates) – a feature of American society that has always been present in one form or another. However, this renewed energy reignited the idea

of a "utopian" America: one built on the nostalgia of a more prominent and visible state of white supremacy built to exclude anything that does now and will not conform.

While many white supremacy ideas are eclectic in their philosophy and rhetoric, creating a model of this version of American Utopia distills these concepts that allow for comparisons between the model and the real. BioShock: Infinite is a 2013 narrative-driven first-person shooter developed by Irrational Games under the direction of Ken Levine; this is third installment in the BioShock series. The game is set in the floating city of Columbia: a state built on the ideals of American exceptionalism, romanticism, and utopianism. The player is sent to Columbia as Booker DeWitt, an investigator who is mysteriously tasked to find Elizabeth as a means of wiping away a debt. Throughout the levels, the player along with Elizabeth explore the segregated society as a violent uprising between Columbia's racial and economic classes begin to overturn the white bourgeois. As we begin to dive into Columbia's society, we can begin to understand the game as a model of white-supremacist societies and delve into the ideas of what makes the state of Columbia a Utopia. It is clear that the society of Columbia is a dystopia, and to claim that it is not is false. The same statement could be said about the United States. However, we can begin to understand and compare BioShock: Infinite and Trumpian America more effectively by analyzing what the white supremacist views as the utopian society and begin to dive into the cesspool of these parallel ideologies by comparing the polarized politics of citizens, the police and support of the state, and the games of politics.

What is Utopia?

Before we can begin to understand the disparities between BioShock's Columbia and Trump's America, we need to understand the concepts of utopia. Originating in Thomas More's book "Utopia," the concept encompassed an idealized state of More's moral philosophy including

the abolition of private property, the enforcement of slavery, and the despise of atheism (More 1513). Etymologically, Utopia's coinage by More involves a double meaning. The pronunciation of the letter u in the word shifts the definition: pronounced "Outopia," the meaning refers to "no place"; but if stress on the letter is shifted to "Eutopia,," the interpretation shifts to a "good place" (Sargent 11). This phonetic shift in vowel sound completes our understanding of the definition: a utopia is a good place, that at the most basic level does not and might not ever exist. To contrast Jane McGonigal's "Reality is Broken," when we begin to analyze what makes a "good" alternate reality, does said simulation have to be good in order to fix the broken reality we already face? They state, "When and where do we need alternate reality? Which situations and spaces call for it – and when are we better off leaving reality alone?" (McGonigal 145). If there is an opportunity to analyze reality using video games and critical play as a model for our observed reality, then the chance should be taken to pay attention at all costs. If reality is on fire, one does not simply ignore the fire and say "everything is all right." American reality is broken. The United States has become heavily polarized; violent protests by far-right groups have killed counter-protestors using vehicles as weapons (Myer 2017), and Trump has not conceded the 2020 federal election citing allegations of a fraudulent election (which are false) (@realDonaldTrump 2020). If we can begin to model this broken reality using gameplay narrative, we can then apply those learnings to create a better society for the future.

### A Population Divided, A Society Fractured

Like that of the United States, Columbia is fraught with a violent past that informs and shapes the present-day society. From viewing kinetoscopes and listening to voxophone personal recorders scattered throughout the city, we can originate Columbia's beginning as a tool for the US government to spread the ideas of American values across the world. After amassing power,

Columbia invades Peking in the Boxer rebellion to stand up for American values. After the US government condemns the actions of Zachary Comstock, the leader of Columbia, the floating city in pursuit of a "True America" secedes from the union. Of these moral ideas, the societal originalism that occurs in Columbia informs the philosophies of society. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson act as god-like figures for the city's ultranationalist identity and state religion that positions the white, affluent class as the righteous. Figures like Abraham Lincoln are demonized in Columbian society as the emancipator who went against American ideals. Comstock states in a voxophone recording, "No animal is born free, except the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation." (Zachary Comstock, Comstock Center Rooftops). From the leadership down to the citizen, segregation is built into the society's rhetoric where it is morally justified and an American duty to discriminate against the "other." In Raffle Square, the player is met with a raffle draw. As the curtains rise, stage displays of minstrel caricatures appear – vaudeville art depicting black face and monkeys frame a distressed interracial couple pleading for mercy. "C'mon are you gonna throw it?... or are you taking your coffee black these days?" says the presenter to the player (Jerimiah Fink, Raffle Fair). The player then must choose to throw a baseball at the couple or the presenter. If they choose to throw the ball at the presenter, they are gifted with a bonus item later in the level; if they choose to throw the ball at the couple, they are gifted by the presenter's henchman as thanks; if they decide not to throw the ball at all, they are rewarded nothing. This example of choice in a polarized society is often fraught with the reward of power; however, when a central path is taken through pacifism, the oppressor still reaps reward – the couple at the raffle fair is without justice. As we can see in the America of today, polarizing the populace can win elections to secure political power and influence. However, political polarization is nothing new: the dissonance of White America in

the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s led to widespread indignation amongst the white populous that, to their understanding, were being removed from all powers. As the parties began to polarize by race, Republicans sought opportunity in the conflict by appealing to white idealism and reshaping the Republicans as a party for White America:

Competition for votes, combined with a taboo against explicitly racist appeals to race, encouraged Republican elites to articulate a constellation of "cultural issues," many of which implicitly refer to race, to strengthen their base and increase voter turnout, especially in closely divided campaign (Olson 714).

In 2016, and throughout the presidency, Trump and Republican operatives utilized White fears using the “demise of White culture” trope – their only option to win is to oppress the racialized and persuade the white centrist to choose inaction versus the Democratic opposition. Using Twitter and other forms of media events like "Trump Rallies," the Trump presidency and its allies created media narratives, one that signaled immigration as the demise of White America. Trump as an active user of Twitter has stated in response to the refugee crisis in Europe, "We don't want what is happening with immigration in Europe to happen with us!" (@realDonaldTrump 2018). These memes that play on immigration and fear occur on any platform Trump can use. Fears around the fall of white society play out at in-person rallies, on television like Fox News primetime with the aid from personalities like Tucker Carlson, and more. Inciting fears of violence, members of Trump's cabinet and other Republican operatives have made similar remarks drawing the trope of white genocide. "We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies," was a quoted retweet of a far-right political cartoon by Congressman Steve King (R-Iowa) about the increased movement of Syrian and African refugees into Europe (@SteveKingIA 2017). Steve Bannon, a renowned white supremacist and

former Trump chief advisor, used plot references of white genocide from the 1937 novel “The Camp of the Saints” to inform Trump on immigration policy, eventually leading a ban on travel from Muslim and African nations (Blumenthal & Rieger 2017). Segregationist policies like Trump's travel ban mirror that of the miscegenation seen in the raffle fair; these forms of information are spread as entertainment with the underlying goal of polarizing the viewer thereby normalizing of white supremacist. The public reaction to these laws is like a rallying cry. Emotionally charged, wielding phones and red hats while shouting to rid the country of immigrants touting signs like "respect our laws or we will deport you," (VinZant 2019) Trump supporters have fun supporting Trump. Shrouded with red, white, and blue star-spangled decoration, the citizens of Columbia actively participate in the charge display of racism; they line up and enter the raffle to have the chance of the first throw at the interracial couple; they exclaim their joy of waiting all year for the event; they actively egg the player to throw the ball at the couple and participate in white supremacy. Like that of the voxophone and Twitter, the recordings and sounds of the past that allow for understanding how fractured white supremacist societies function when the media is binged in the present. Just like the raffle fair and the presenter on a stage, social media and the white public's corralling ensures participation in the system. Advertisements around Columbia in the level direct the player and citizens to the meeting like that of Trump's Twitter. However, cracks in the white upper class remain open to challenge the state's authority. In the Comstock Center Rooftops, the player enters the Montgomery Residence after a shootout with police. Inside, the player is subjected to a couple arguing about uprisings – the couple argues, trying to justify the rebellion uprising, only for the player to interrupt. They identify the player as the suspect police are looking for but do not intend to inform the whereabouts. In the room adjacent to the couple, a Black citizen of

Columbia lays asleep in a room donned with a portrait of Abraham Lincoln in a positive light – on the kitchen walls, posters detailing "Columbia Friends of the Negro Society," an organization dedicated to equality based on race. White society in Columbia like the United States is divided. There are tensions within the upper populace that reject Comstock, but many still do not trust the revolt from the black population. Like that of America today, these tensions arise in white discourse and centrist talking points relating to protest Trump. The centrist attempting to use pacifism is seen only to themselves as taking the high road, when they ultimately remain silent to the justice needed for the marginalized.

### The Cult of Comstock & the Cult of Trump

In the level Comstock Rooftops, the player delves into the underbelly of Columbia's fascist groups and clubs. The Lansdown residence is a house like the Montgomery residence; this house resides in the same level as the Montgomery residence, acting as a juxtaposition between the polarized society. Upon entering the premises, a mysterious chest embellished with an eye and swords with the Latin script "Audemus Patria Nostra Defendere" or "We dare to defend our homeland." In the following portion of the level, the player arrives at the Fraternal Order of the Raven: a far-right white violent cult focused on maintaining and enforcing the state of white supremacy. Statues and portraits of John Wilkes Booth glorify the assassin, and paints Booth as an angel of American exceptionalism. Stain glass windows of Abraham Lincoln are coloured red with the president donning devil horns; the opposing stain glass bathed in gold portraying George Washington in saintly robes. Indigo and white star-spangled seals decorated the walls and the floors of the establishment stating "Protecting our Race." In a voxophone recording found in the parlor room of the establishment, Comstock states:

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. (Zachary Comstock, Comstock Center Rooftops)

The Founders, the main political party in Columbia, act as the enforcers of the state; and the Fraternal Order acts as the militia exerting political violence to the people. Under the guidance of the Founders, the police, military, and the Order are under their control; militias and far-right groups that operate externally to an extent in the pursuit of enforcing the hard ideologies of Comstock's white supremacist agenda. As these groups try and maintain order in white society, these groups attempt to undermine and control the spread of the revolution. The Vox Populi act as the main enemy to the state. Starting as a revolution aimed at equality, the protests heated where their new motive is to overthrow the xenophobic ideologies of Columbian society. The Vox are organized by Daisy Fitzroy, a former indentured servant to Zachary Comstock and his wife. Daisy utilizes the Vox Populi movement aims at subverting white supremacist narrative through protest that ultimately accumulates into a violent uprising the player attempts to navigate throughout the latter half of the game. The Founders using police, militias, and other means of force, focus their duties on suppressing any uprising. Violence against the predominantly non-white proletariat and other forms of protest are identified through narratives from police non-player characters (NPCs) and advertisements around Columbia. As the player travels from the Town Center to the Raffle Fair, the player comes across police banter focusing on the skyhook tool that allows the player and NPCs alike to attach:



Policeman 2: If we're going to flush the Vox out of the sky-line system, we gotta have the best

Policeman 1: They got any openings in the group? I'd love to bust some Vox Skull. (Policeman NPCs, Town Centre)

Violence is not only stated by characters; propaganda and other forms of pro-cop advertisements fill Columbia's streets and buildings. In the heart of the racially and economically ghettoized borough of Shantytown, Columbia police operate their impound and headquarters that organizes information on the Vox Populi. Adorning the interior walls are the same seal stating "Protecting Our Race," police employees house the same chests seen in the Order of the Raven clubhouse, and posters citing the police as protection of "Faith, Wealth, and Racial Purity," (Bull House Impound, BioShock: Infinite). Like that of other utopias, dividing the population and conquering through fear and violence is utilized to suppress the populace's ability to be persuaded against the flock. Historically in the United States, the police were created not as a force to serve and protect the population but as a means of control over slave populations (Durr 875. This ensures that if any slave were to escape or begin rebellion, police at the behest of white property owners could quell their property. What we begin to see in Trump's America is the use of "Law & Order" to reinforce Trump's utopian narrative to suppress the marginalized while validating the apparent stability of American utopia. In the summer of 2020, protests sparked across the United States after multiple instances of police brutality and violence on African Americans were documented and spread over social media. 3 police officers were fired after photos found them jokingly posed in chokehold positions days after Elijah McCain died from chokehold injuries after a violent arrest (Nieberg 2020); police violently break Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in DC for a photo-op of holding a bible in front of a church (Colvin & Superville 2020), and the

largest police union supported Donald Trump as the Republican candidate for the 2020 election riling suburban fears of “urban rioters” (Feuer 2020). Tensions reached a high point with the Kenosha protests when 17-year old Kyle Rittenhouse shot protestors killing two after finding a Facebook group titled "Any patriots willing to take up arms and defend our city tonight from evil thugs" (Beckett et al, 2020). A proposed 'Blue Lives Matter' supporter, Rittenhouse's along with other far-right militia groups pick up the gun believing it was their duty to protest the United States. It was this ideology that called upon whites to preach “Blood and Soil” in Charleston, SC that resulted in a car plowing into anti-fascist counter-protests. When the Trumpian idea of utopia is at risk, law & order is a beckon to protect the white ethnostate. Far-right groups act as counter-protests buffer for the police, allowing divide and conquer tactics to weaken the protests of Trumpian politics. The Police in ideological coordination act rather passively towards these far-right groups as the social downfalls of going against police consensus surpasses the need to suppress a far-right extremist group. Rather than providing a neutral ground to society, the police join the Boogaloos and Proud Boys as counter-protesters against BLM like that of the Founders corraling the police, the military, and the Fraternal Order against the Vox Populi. The police in American society act as a cult for Trump and ultimately, they are ideologically parallel to the far-right groups seeking control and order.

### Politics as a Game

Utopia: a "good" place that does not exist and may never exist becomes more real the longer one begins to research the ideas that engineered this glasshouse. Like a game, politicians such as Comstock and Trump divide and conquer by creating narratives that build the idea of utopia not as a realization of making something great, but rather as a game of simulation. As Comstock creates narratives within the population through propaganda and use of far-right

militias and police, Trump weaves a narrative to his followers of dangerous protestors, foreign intruders, and the hope that if his followers play into the idea of MAGA, the United States will truly rise to be great again. Caillois identifies the simulation as a game of performance:

[The simulation] leads to the art of spectacle, which express and reflect a culture. The individual anxiety and panic conquers man's discernment and will. He becomes a prisoner of equivocal and exalting ecstasies which in the end destroy him. (Caillois 78)

In the end, Comstock is defeated; he fails at obtaining his utopia; he is murdered, and the society of Columbia falls into civil war. Society ultimately fails. Similar plot lines follow Trump as he has lost the 2020 election; he has been removed by the people peering from outside the simulation; he has been removed by a smaller amount who realized that they were trapped in the simulation. However, while Trump may be leaving the position of Player 1 (The President), the loyal followers that remain engaged in the simulation continue to fight for the chance to make America great again... again. By studying other utopias like Disneyland, French literary critic Louis Marin investigates the phantasm of “perfect realities.” The fantasy of the utopia is crafted not just by an authority, but by the participant-performer's rhetoric; the participant's behaviors reinforce the rules and protocols of societal structures ultimately leading to moral decay (Marin 288). Therefore, BioShock: Infinite as a game not only acts as a model for far-right governments and societies, but it acts as a metaphor of what American Idealism can become in the face of far-right demagogues and their willing participants. The simulation of America's greatness is a narrative of mythology to recreate the nostalgic supremacist past. The underlying metaphor of exceptionalism unravels in creating these degenerate utopias of Comstock's Columbia and Trump's America. It is a metaphor that is a warning to the player that creating a utopia like a

game relies less on the simulation of reality itself but the laws of the simulation dictated by the participants within the game. Only until we look from outside the phantasm do we finally understand the coercive nature of the symbols of utopia. Disneyland is but a castle from the parking lot; Columbia is but a city in the sky; and Trump but a red hat. Only until one delves into the narrative infrastructure does the ideological discourse transcend myth into reality. Therefore, the political ideology and the discourse of Trump's America act like that of a game by allowing the player to participate and play or watch from the sideline and experience the spectacle. Like that of Columbia in BioShock, the game is never over. The game can be replayed. There can be expanded content – Trumpian politics will be transformed in the next republican nominee and expanded to net a wider voter pool to win the next election and rebirth the nation. There is always another lighthouse and another reality as there is always another demagogue to fill the legacy of Trumpian orthodoxy.

### Will the Circle be Unbroken?

The United States has a political open wound; its blood is diseased triggering a septic shock to American democracy. Like BioShock: Infinite, the participation of the population, the policing of the state, and the leaders' games themselves contribute to the circulation of societal decay. Games as models to understand utopia and the politics that maintain the simulation's illusions are useful ways to understand these intolerant societies and how the complexities of American utopias begin to root and grow. A critical playthrough of BioShock: Infinite illuminates Trump's ideas of utopia by comparison of these societies, police, militia groups, and more; Flanagan states in their essay Critical Computer Games:

Games are frameworks that designers can use to model the complexity of the problems that face the world and make them easier for the players to comprehend...In some cases, a game may provide the safest outlet available for exploring devastating problems and conflicts (Flanagan 249)

The moral decay of society ultimately destroys Columbia, but the terminally ill America must continue its battle with the intolerant left. How does one heal the open wound left open in the United States? One might think that the election of President-Elect Joe Biden has resolved the intolerant fascist. However, the intolerant fascist remains embedded like a tick in America's body, and like a tick, one does not simply allow it to suck blood; it is a parasite. Philosopher Karl Popper identifies the paradox of tolerance where unlimited tolerance assists in the dismantling of tolerance; if a branch of the population preaches intolerance, that said population must not be tolerated for the sake of an open and just society (Popper 548). For America to move forward, the Trumpian view of America cannot be reconciled. It cannot be rehabilitated into a softcore Republicanism the likes of what Diet Coke is to Classic. In the game, Elizabeth removes American idealism at the root by removing Comstock's ability to exist. Is the United States' a tolerant enough society to do the same by removing Trumpian politics from the political system? In four years, the United States might fall to the same fate as the floating city, and like the game, the American has the ball in their hand. Choose wisely, Americans.

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