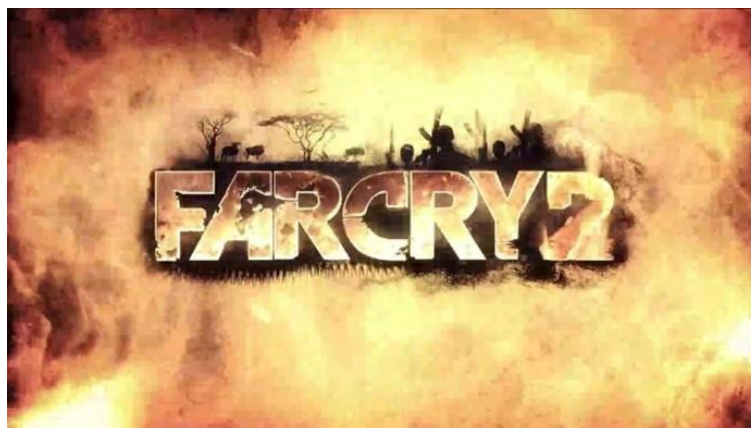


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Far Cry 2: Are You Sure about Being a Hero?

Alberto Oya



The videogame *Far Cry 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2008) was developed by Ubisoft Montreal and released worldwide on October 2008 for Windows-based computers and the home consoles PlayStation 3 and XBOX 360. It follows the first-person shooter formula, so its gaming experience is *primarily* centred on shooting enemies and is set under the first-person perspective of the starring playable character (see Fig. 1). It is the second entry of the *Far Cry* series, but neither its storyline nor its setting is related to the original *Far Cry* (Crytek, 2004). *Far Cry 2* was well received by both the public and critics, succeeding in consolidating the *Far Cry* series as an outstanding and best-seller first-person shooter videogame franchise. As of December 2022, the *Far Cry* series includes six main numbered entries with unconnected storylines —the last one being *Far Cry 6* (Ubisoft Toronto, 2021)— and several spin-offs, expansions and sequels —the best known of which are *Far Cry Instincts: Evolution* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2006), *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013), *Far Cry Primal* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016), and *Far Cry New Dawn* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2019).



Fig. 1. Screenshots of *Far Cry 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2008) (PlayStation 3 version).

Far Cry 2 has some original gaming mechanics which distinguished itself, in a positive way, from other first-person shooter videogames of the time. Notably, *Far Cry 2* has the merit of popularising open-world environments in the first-person shooter videogame genre. In addition to these innovative gaming mechanics, there is another aspect of *Far Cry 2* which I think is far more interesting, making it an outstanding videogame deserved of separate analysis. Here I am referring to its in-game narrative or storyline which, as I will argue, manages to take advantage of the heroic formula so characteristic of the first-person shooter videogame genre in a way that potentially prompts players to reflect on the ethical adequacy of their own decision to immerse themselves in a fictional scenario in which they take the role of a fictional character whose behaviour primarily, if not exclusively, consists in shooting.

Far Cry 2 is set in a fictional African state immersed in a civil war. Players take the role of a mercenary soldier on his mission of travelling there to kill a weapons dealer known as “the Jackal”. At the beginning, the videogame is clear in presenting the Jackal as the person ultimately responsible for the civil war, since he is the one selling weapons to both factions. The videogame thereby moves players to the conviction that killing the Jackal will serve the honourable and praiseworthy purpose of bringing peace and putting an end to the sufferings of war. Unfortunately, the Jackal is in hiding and no clue is given as to his location. Meanwhile, immediately upon their arrival in the country, players are asked by the leaders of both factions to carry out secret, violent war missions in exchange for diamonds which serve as the currency in the videogame, but whose only use is allowing players to customise and buy new weapons. Players work indistinctly for both factions —after all, the starring playable character is just a mercenary. At the beginning, these missions mostly consist in killing important military figures of the opposite faction, but as the videogame progresses, players are asked to engage in sabotage actions such as destroying medicine stocks or depriving part of the country from access to fresh water. It becomes progressively more evident that players, far from resolving or at least relieving the conflict, are actually helping fuel it.

Mainly due to players' success in carrying out these sabotage actions, the conflict seems to be reaching a point of no return. Nonetheless, and rather surprisingly, the two factions end up making a "peace agreement". Players then meet the Jackal, who argues that the agreement will not bring peace to the country but will open the way for the violent militias on either side to impose their despotic and violent control over the country unchallenged —the only victims of which will be the civilians:

"A peace agreement! What a joke. A comedy act. You think these men wanted peace? They wanted privacy, is what they wanted. They wanted the world to stop paying attention to them, so they could go on with their raping and pillaging —in peace, you see".

According to the Jackal, the country is inflicted with an extremely contagious and ultimately fatal disease. This fatal disease is violence. Since it is an incurable disease, there is no turning back for those already infected. No "peace agreement" can revert the situation. The only thing that can be done is to put the sick parts (that is, all those who have already given themselves over to violence, which obviously includes the militias but, as we will see next, also includes the Jackal and even players themselves) into quarantine to prevent them from infecting the remaining healthy parts (that is, the unarmed civilians). The Jackal graphically makes this point when he tells players:

"Now what do you think is going to happen? You already know, the whole world knows. First, they'll take everything they can get their hands on. Rob the banks, the stores. Then the men will be lined up against the wall and shot. They'll chop the children's arms off, and cut the tendons in their necks. And the women... It's a goddam disease, is what it is. It's a cancer —you see it. They can't get enough, they just take and take until it kills them. And once they're gone, someone else takes their place, and they're diseased too. Every cell is infected. And the longer you stay, the deeper the virus goes. In the end, nobody will be left. Just the disease. So, what do you do about this particular situation? Quarantine the patients. Or you just get dirty, along with the rest of them".

In the last mission of the videogame, the civilians try to flee the country by crossing over the border while the militias hunt them down. It is then that players team up with the Jackal in his aim of helping the remaining civilians to reach refuge in the neighbouring country. The videogame offers players a final decision. Either they can choose to manually detonate a bomb, which will temporarily block the militias and give the civilians enough time to cross the border, in which case the impact of the bomb will inevitably kill the starring playable character; or else they can choose to bribe the border guards with diamonds, after which the starring playable character must commit suicide. If players detonate the bomb, then the Jackal will bribe the border guards and then commit suicide; if players bribe the border guards, then the Jackal will be the one to manually detonate the bomb. So no matter what the player's decision, the videogame ends in the same way. In both cases, the Jackal and the starring playable character die and the civilians succeed in crossing the border, while the country remains in anarchy.

This storyline clearly differentiates *Far Cry 2* from other first-person shooter videogames. In videogames of this genre, players are required to take the role of a videogame character who must face the honourable endeavour of fighting an evil force

which threatens to destroy human life. In this way, the shooting gaming mechanics become acceptable inasmuch as they are presented as being the only means to accomplish the praiseworthy purpose of saving human life. Early on in the videogame, *Far Cry 2* follows this heroic formula. Players are asked to kill the Jackal, who is said to be ultimately responsible for the war. The fictional understanding set by the videogame makes it clear that killing the Jackal is not just acceptable but ethically justified inasmuch as his death is the only way to accomplish the praiseworthy purpose of putting an end to the sufferings of war. However, as the story advances, the videogame moves players to realise that the starring playable character they are taking control over is just a mercenary, with no heroic, praiseworthy purpose. It is quite clear that even in the context of a real-life war, destroying medication stocks and depriving part of the country of access to fresh water serves no honourable purpose. Sooner or later, players come to realise that there is no ultimate difference between the starring playable character and the violent militias who are destroying the country. Neither is there any difference between the starring playable character and the Jackal. Rather, they are all part of the “disease” —they are all fatally infected with the sickness of violence, which is why at the end of the videogame the Jackal states that none of them should survive. Even if players choose to bribe the border guards to prevent the starring playable character from being killed by the bomb, the playable character should nonetheless kill himself —otherwise he will be infecting others with his violence, and “it’ll start up again”:

“Every cell of this cancer has to be destroyed. That includes you and me. If we don’t finish this, then this whole mission has been a waste. A farce. It’ll start up again, just like it always does. One shoot is all you’ll need. You’re a terminal case. Same as me. At least we can do something about it”

The last mission, which as explained previously culminates in the death of both the Jackal and the starring playable character while allowing the civilians to cross the border and seek refuge in the neighbouring country, is not a generous, heroic sacrifice on the part of the Jackal and players but simply an attempt to somehow halt the propagation of the situation they themselves have helped create. Players (because of their engaging in sabotage actions for both factions) and the Jackal (because he sells weapons to both factions) are also responsible for fuelling the conflict, and so they are likewise part of the cause for the civilians having to seek refuge. Helping the civilians to cross the border does not change the fact that they would not be having to seek refuge had players and the Jackal simply refrained from unleashing their violence. Facing the consequences of a problem that would have not existed if you had not previously created it does not make you a hero.

Far Cry 2 plays on the apparently paradoxical claim that grounds the narrative or storyline of first-person shooter videogames (and most action films) of serving the praiseworthy purpose of saving humanity by means of the obviously condemnable act of shooting (thereby killing) people. In moving players to realise that there is no ultimate difference between their in-game behaviour and the militias and the Jackal’s behaviour, *Far Cry 2* leads players to reflect on the ethical adequacy of their own decision to immerse themselves in a fictional scenario in which they take the role of a fictional character whose behaviour primarily, if not exclusively, consists in shooting at (and thereby killing) people. However, I would like to emphasise here that *Far Cry 2* is not an overtly moralising condemnation of the shooting gaming experience —after all, the videogame is a first-person shooter and as such the primary interaction of players with the fictional scenario set by the videogame is still via shooting at targets. In fact, what

makes *Far Cry 2* interesting is precisely that while the entire entertaining experience it offers relies on its shooting gaming mechanics, it is nonetheless able to take advantage of the heroic formula so characteristic of the first-person shooter videogame genre to offer a more involved, and consequently more mature, gaming experience.

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