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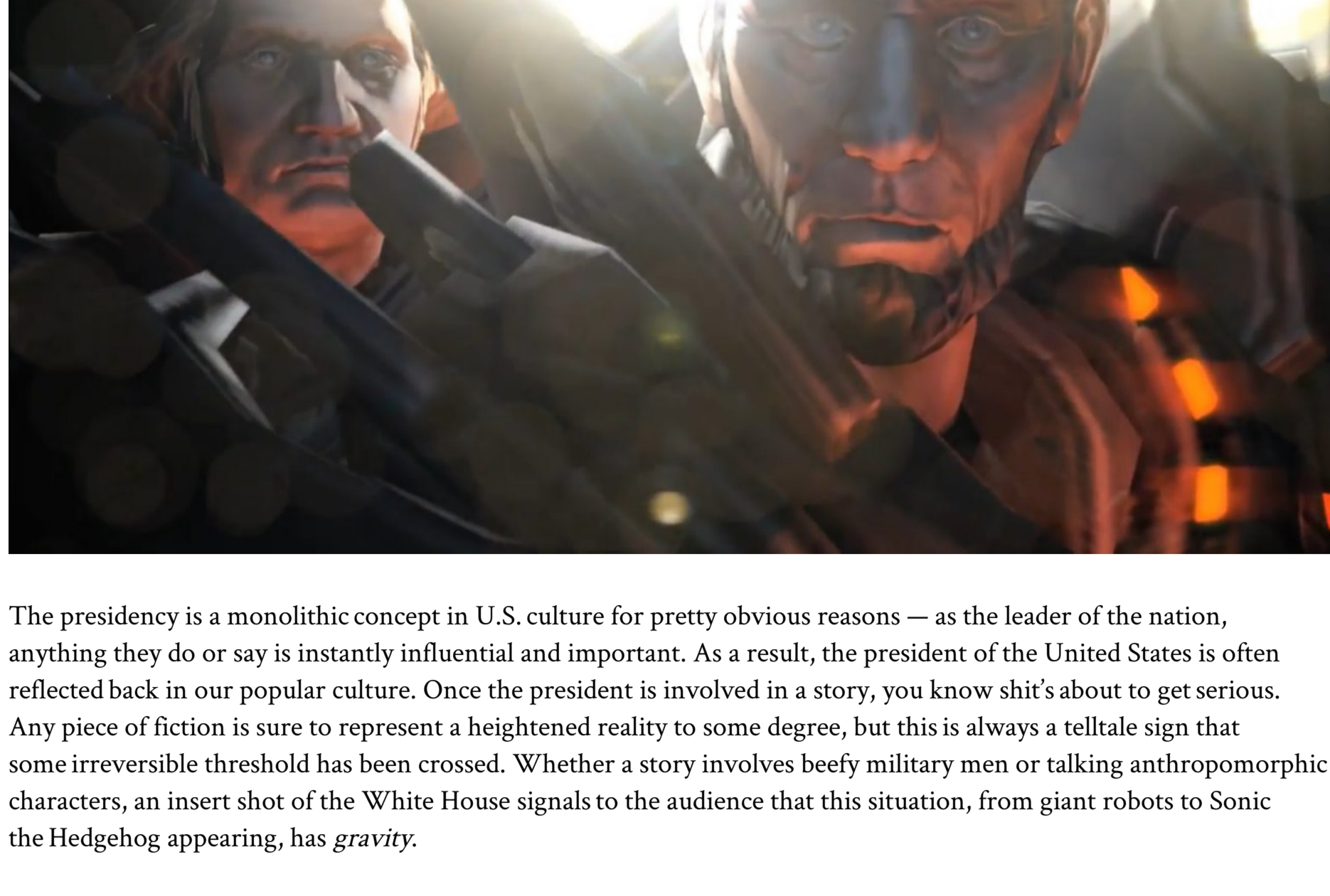
Video Game Presidents Were Meant to Be Funny (Until They Weren't)

Bad dudes indeed!



Chris Compendio · November 6, 2020

7-minute read

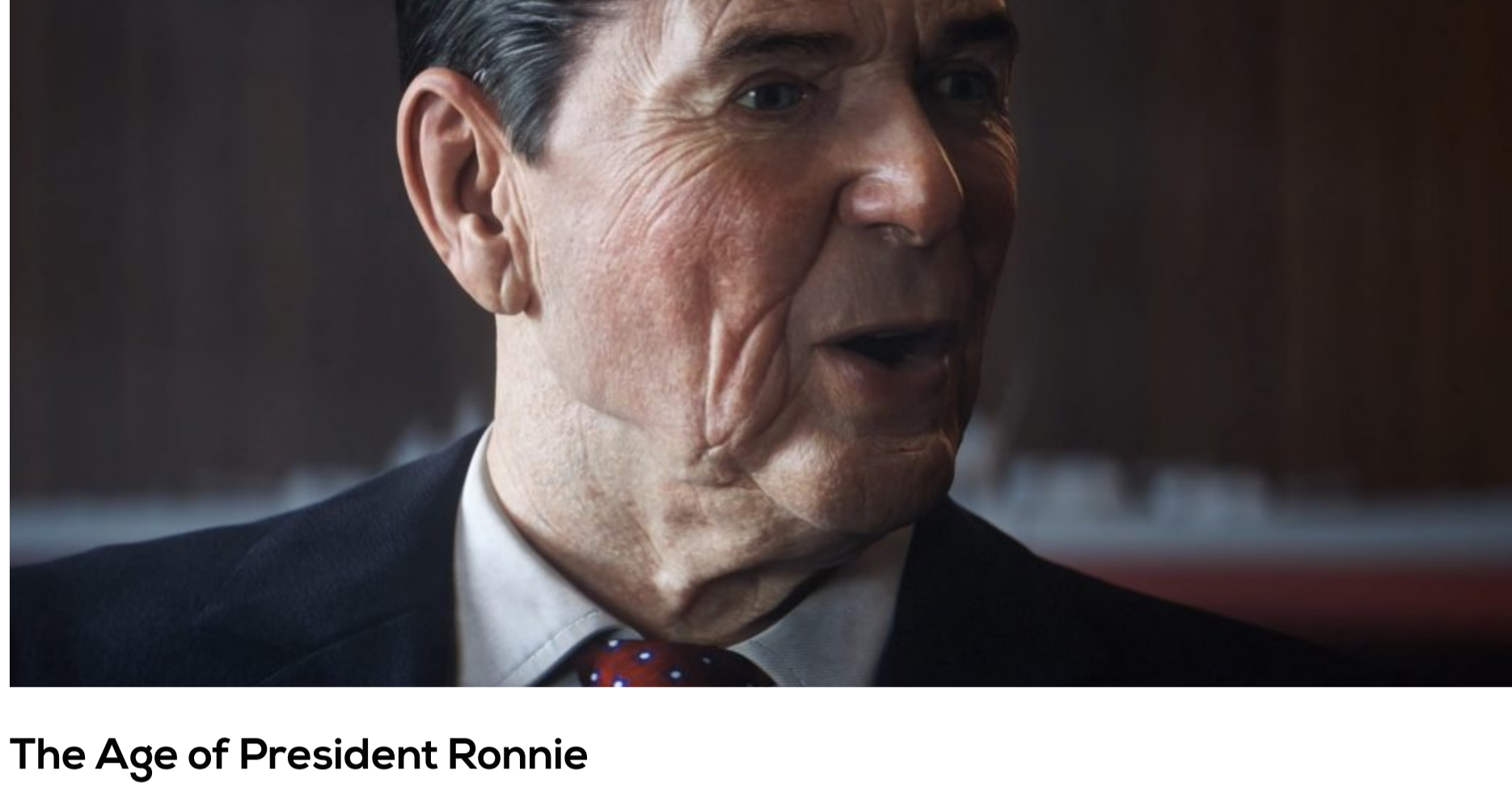


The presidency is a monolithic concept in U.S. culture for pretty obvious reasons — as the leader of the nation, anything they do or say is instantly influential and important. As a result, the president of the United States is often reflected back in our popular culture. Once the president is involved in a story, you know shit's about to get serious. Any piece of fiction is sure to represent a heightened reality to some degree, but this is always a telltale sign that some irreversible threshold has been crossed. Whether a story involves beefy military men or talking anthropomorphic characters, an insert shot of the White House signals to the audience that this situation, from giant robots to Sonic the Hedgehog appearing, has *gravity*.

In video games in particular, though, any story directly involving the president tends to be completely ridiculous and outlandish. Whether this is causation or correlation depends on which game. Whatever the case, the presence of the federal government in a plot acts as a good scale for measuring its absurdity. It's also hilarious and entertaining — by putting the freaking president in the plot, whom we often call the most powerful person on Earth, players can grasp that whatever story they're participating in, as stupid as it may be, holds total eminence over anything else in the fictionalized version of our real country, or more likely, the entire world.

The question is whether or not we still find playing the president card to be funny. The earliest 8-bit and 16-bit progenitors of this plot beat were far from intentionally political. They only used them for inciting incidents. While high fantasy games have the player saving the princess, these stories filed the serial number off to have you saving the president. But as video game technology advanced and stories began adding complexity and texture, so too did the roles of politics. Certain stories showed ambition in presenting thrilling stories with political intrigue. They were a pastiche of political thriller films and television before them.

Today, in the midst of a social media age where people around the world are wired to every going-on in the world, modern day stories cast a different aura. Gaming communities are informed and active. We dig deeper into political discourse. Higher authorities are not always, if almost ever, seen in a positive light. And in the age of Trumpism, using the President in a story has become less of a plot device and more an invitation for problematic elements.



The Age of President Ronnie

The late 1980s arcade and NES game *Bad Dudes Vs. DragonNinjas* is built from a simple, two-sentence prompt: "President Ronnie has been kidnapped by ninjas. Are you a bad enough dude to rescue Ronnie?" It's a delightfully silly concept challenge — one that grounds you in the bizarre world where "rampant ninja-related crimes" is totally a normal thing. Your own familiarity with Ronald Reagan will instantly alert you to the direness of the situation. At this point in video game history, however, there are few hints of self-awareness or discourse on trickle-down economics. Instead, you have to control buff dudes with baditude punching their way through legions of ninjas.

The game ends on a pixel rendition of Reagan offering his thanks: "Hey dudes thanks, for rescuing me. Let's go for a burger.... Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

To observers both in and out of the States, it was funny to see real-life presidents in those fictional scenarios. Watching depictions of these powerful people engaging in farce upended their images and diminished their iconography as giants in American culture. It's why parodies such as *Saturday Night Live* presidential impressions have made such lasting impacts. And it's what made *NBA Jam* such a silly delight, with the original 1993 version including Bill and Hillary Clinton as secret playable characters. *NBA Jam* was already exaggerated in nature. Seeing the most well-known figures in the country making superhuman slam dunks was a funny novelty perfectly in keeping with that aesthetic.

It certainly helped that these games came in a period where intertwining humor and the presidency became the norm. Reagan himself already softened his image with one-liners during public engagements. Events like the White House Correspondents Dinner with comedians and entertainers allowed presidents to basically partake in comedy roasts. Essentially, these early presidential depictions in games are a hallmark of an era when Americans were told their executives are humble, relatable, and harmless people like them.

Post-Modern Presidencies

It's hard to tell a dramatic story about real presidents as they cultivated these "relatable" personas and images. That's partly why so much political fiction in the 1990s and 2000s focused on made-up figures. It was allegories galore with idealistic media like *The West Wing*, *The Contender*, *24*, or even *Dave*. Meanwhile, action movies would often have a fictional president as an authoritative or even heroic figure — think *Air Force One*, *Deep Impact*, and *Independence Day*. The former was more focused on authentic and plausible stories; the latter was more outlandish. Yet all held idealized and mystified views of the presidency. Video games during this period were a bit of both, trying to add some political commentary, while also incorporating genre. And it shouldn't be a surprise that Hideo Kojima, who perhaps in this context is a bit of a twisted video game version of Aaron Sorkin, attempted to break ground with *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*.



It doesn't take much effort to mine the absurdity from *MGS2*: Solid Snake's clone-slash-twin brother Solidus Snake is the former President of the United States, George Sears, who leads the terrorist group Sons of Liberty in kidnapping then-president James Johnson. It's a dramatic story that demands to be taken seriously, even when including characters like the nanomachine vampire guy named... Vamp. But it goes further than *Bad Dudes* with its damseling of the President; thanks to cutscenes and graphics, Kojima could tell a story of scandal, secret organizations, and militarism. And all of it questioned who really holds political power in our world.



Then you have *Metal Wolf Chaos* by FromSoftware, of *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* fame, making the president the hero. Think of it as *Air Force One*, but instead of Harrison Ford doing *Die Hard* on an airplane, it's the commander-in-chief with an armored mech suit. Fictional President Michael Wilson, descendent of Woodrow Wilson, fights a military coup begat by his own vice president, "liberating" parts of the country through the game until a dramatic final showdown that involves the threat of nuclear destruction.

Around this same time in history, you even have the president in the aforementioned *Sonic the Hedgehog* games. Though this fictional head of state is more-or-less just a buddy to Sonic and Shadow the Hedgehogs. Being a key figure as these anthropomorphic animals does still help save the entire damn world. It was during this span of time that fiction began to dig in deeper into the myths of American politics — but fiction during the same time also tried to argue that the president can and even should be cool.

Ronnie's Return

The early 2010s returned games recalling some earlier examples. *Conduit 2* for the family friendly Nintendo Wii ended with presidents Lincoln and Washington stepping out of a portal in futuristic suits of alien armor. It felt like *NBA Jam* by way of *Metal Wolf Chaos*. The soapy *Resident Evil 6* skipped the damseling of the POTUS and instead fridged him, with Leon Kennedy putting down a zombie president to serve as his motivation for the rest of the game. And *Saints Row IV* had players themselves control a super-powered president fighting aliens. One could say this was more so to highlight just how over-the-top this open-world series became over the years.

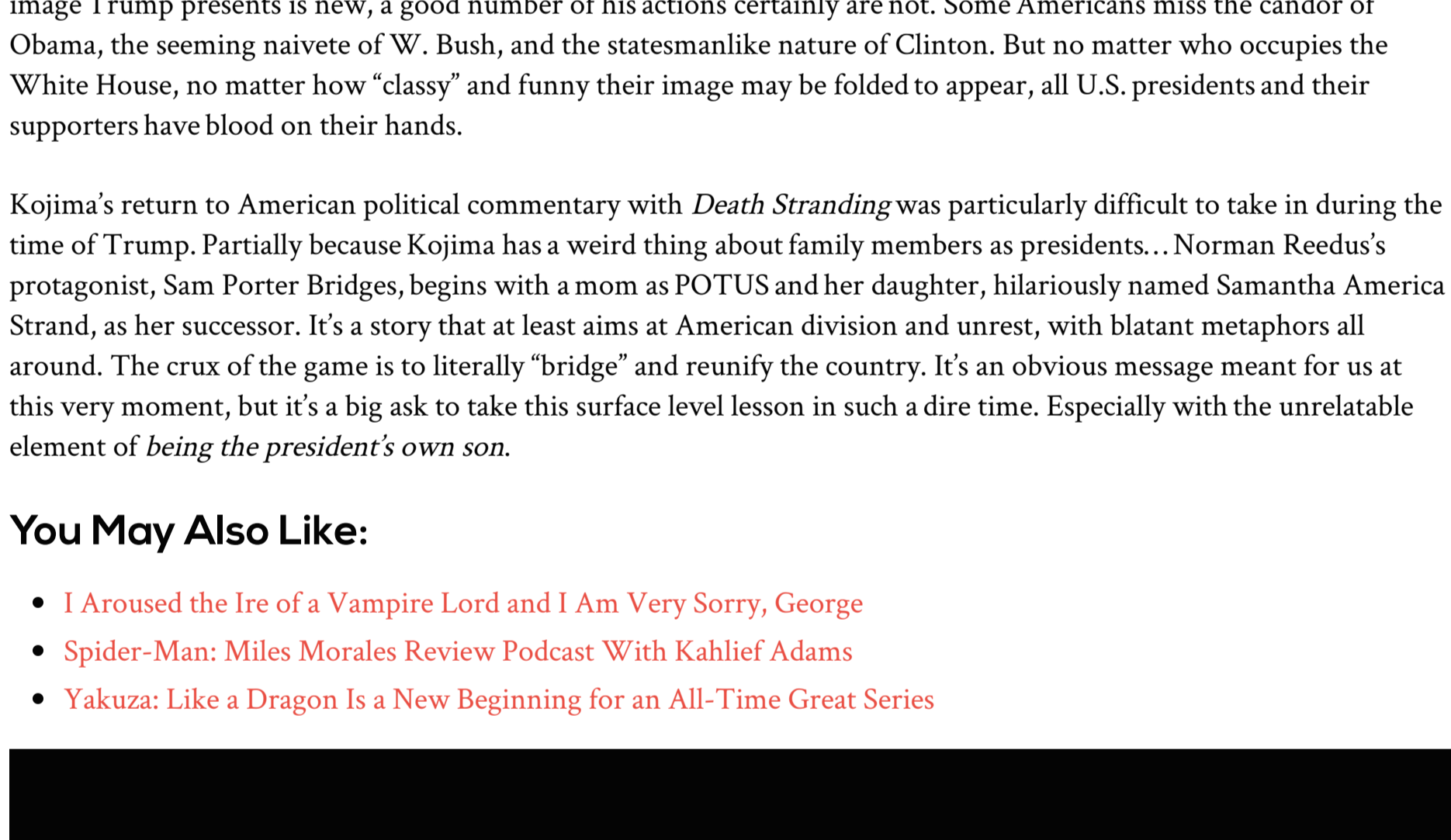
But as the country barreled toward a Trump presidency, perspectives on the office began to shift. Many in the United States still hold onto those idealized images of the office in a way Trump's nakedly contemptuous conduct makes it impossible to even pretend exists. New, fictional incarnations instead harken back to the time where the public image of a president might still be "witty," "classy," and even "cool."

But for younger, more left-leaning people, the Trump presidency only serves to show just how far that idealization has gone. Amidst the injustices and atrocities committed by Trump and co., we are reminded that while the public image Trump presents is new, a good number of his actions certainly are not. Some Americans miss the candor of Obama, the seeming naivete of W. Bush, and the statesmanlike nature of Clinton. But no matter who occupies the White House, no matter how "classy" and funny their image may be folded to appear, all U.S. presidents and their supporters have blood on their hands.

Kojima's return to American political commentary with *Death Stranding* was particularly difficult to take in during the time of Trump. Partially because Kojima has a weird thing about family members as presidents... Norman Reedus's protagonist, Sam Porter Bridges, begins with a mom as POTUS and her daughter, hilariously named Samantha America Strand, as her successor. It's a story that at least aims at AMERICAN division and unrest, with blatant metaphors all around. The crux of the game is to literally "bridge" and reunify the country. It's an obvious message meant for us at this very moment, but it's a big ask to take this surface level lesson in such a dire time. Especially with the unrelatable element of *being the president's own son*.

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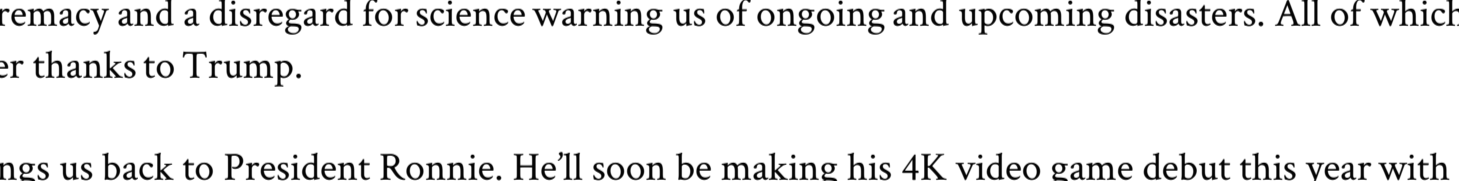
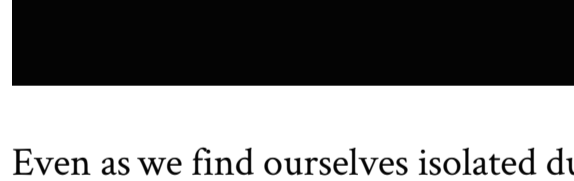


Even as we find ourselves isolated during a pandemic, not unlike the conditions in *Death Stranding*, it's difficult and even dangerous to try and find common ground with our fellow citizens. Particularly when the "division" is related to white supremacy and a disregard for science warning us of ongoing and upcoming disasters. All of which were spread further thanks to Trump.

Call of Duty: Black Ops – Cold War. Reagan. He'll soon be making his 4K video game debut this year with Treyarch's *Call of Duty: Black Ops – Cold War*. Reagan has already been deified about as much as any other modern president, but those wired in today are much more cognizant of his true, devastating legacy. Upon the revelation that Reagan was a character in this game, anti-Reagan *Call of Duty* Twitter memes popped up fairly quickly.

"Economic Turmoil Crack to Inner Equality" or "ignore the AIDS crisis" or "Sell Missiles to Iran" are directly. Much of the press to send crack to inner inequality that permeates AMERICAN society today can be traced ably back to the Reagan presidency. And yet here Reagan is, giving ostensible hero status to Woods, Mason, and Hudson their directives. *Cold War* might not be a mere nostalgic trip back to this era, but it's hard to imagine the series being critical of this particular figure, since the game is still about you blowing stuff up.

Looking back at how presidents have been depicted in video games, it's hard to say any individual case has aged well. Although many in the country still yearn for a "normal" president, it is impossible to deny that all our past leaders carry heavy baggage. It's hard to laugh at jokes from an ex-president when looking back at their legacy. Any image of a pixelated Donald Trump doing a slam dunk has lost any novelty — and no longer do we want to go for a burger with President Ronnie.



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