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### The Rapture at the World's End: Non-optional Choice and Libertarian Idealism in New Media

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## **The Rapture at the World's End: Non-optional Choice and Libertarian Idealism in New Media**

Stephen Joyce

### **Abstract**

Central to the experience of new media is the idea of interactivity, even though this dovetails problematically with both arguments for grassroots agency and neo-liberal economic philosophies alike. This paper examines the 2007 computer game *Bioshock* in relation to its thematic employment of the ideals of market libertarianism as depicted in the novels of Ayn Rand and its strategic use and withholding of agency at critical moments in the gameplay. It argues that *Bioshock* not only uses the techniques of traditional narrative forms to address the culturally significant issue of the impossible alliance between traditionalism and libertarianism under a conservative banner but also uses the interactive medium to generate a genuinely new aesthetic experience in which the logic of free choice in the narrative, ideology, and medium are simultaneously brought into juxtaposition. This moment marks a landmark development in digital narrative and opens new possibilities for the art form.

You didn't come here to make the choice. You've already made it.  
You're here to try to understand *why* you made it.

*The Matrix*

In *The Matrix* trilogy, from which the above quote is taken, humanity has been forced into unwitting slavery by machines and all hope rests with the hero, Neo, who must make the decisions that will save or damn the world. Yet in seeking to make people free, Neo confronts the paradox that his own path is fixed; choice, the hallmark of liberty, is denied the one who offers it to others. This dilemma echoes the audience's experience of the medium: viewers are bound by the filmmakers' decisions and while we may actively interpret we cannot participate in the action. Like the captives in the matrix, we act only in our minds while the action on screen responds to choices that have already been made. We made our only available

decision when we bought the ticket; everything that happens after that is, like Neo's destiny, pre-programmed.

In linking choice, dystopia, and mass media, *The Matrix* trilogy attests to a growing trend in American culture of questioning the limits of freedom, exploring the potential for catastrophic social breakdown, and examining the media's role in controlling the individual's horizon of possibility. However, cinema's ability to address these questions is circumscribed by the limitations imposed on the audience by the medium. According to Jay David Bolter:

Cultural critics of media...often assume that the audience, including themselves, will not have access to the means of production. They must expect that their critique will influence practice only indirectly. For this reason, they often concentrate on forms of what they call 'resistance', the means by which apparently passive consumers of these cultural products can divert or distort them to meet their own cultural needs. (22)

In a sphere where freedom of choice is reduced to freedom of interpretation, unsettling questions about individual autonomy can only be posed through metaphorical identification with the protagonist rather than direct experience. It is here that new media forms, whose interactive nature directly engages the audience's agency, offer significant potential for exploring important aesthetic and cultural issues, yet this potential should not be confused with poststructuralist theories of the open text. As Jean Burgess argues, "the democratization of technologies discourse from the 'grassroots' converges perpetually with emerging neo-liberal business and economic models under which consumers (or 'users'), particularly of technology, are considered to possess and exercise more creativity and agency than before" (201). Neo-liberalism, or perhaps more accurately market libertarianism, is predicated on the free individual making rational choices in an unconstrained world, which ironically is often confused with the goals of postmodernism. This ideological confusion is symptomatic of the contradictions gripping American politics and whose effects have rippled into the culture industry, producing questions that shape contemporary art.

This paper studies the 2007 computer game *Bioshock* in relation to both the paradoxes of the modern American conservative movement, with its antithetical libertarian and traditionalist wings, and the struggle to develop both narrative and player agency in computer games. *Bioshock* follows the misadventures of the protagonist Jack in the underwater city of Rapture, a monument to libertarian ideals now overrun by splicers (humans driven mad through over-indulging in genetic manipulation) after a battle between the city's founder, Andrew Ryan, the criminal Fontaine, and the working-class hero Atlas. Guided by Atlas, the player explores the ruined city in pursuit of the tyrannical Ryan, only to discover that she

is a pawn in the ongoing battle between Ryan and Fontaine. Like *The Matrix* trilogy, *Bioshock* presents a dystopia inextricably linked to the (non)existence of choice, but through a brilliant twist of the audience's expectations of agency *Bioshock* creates a moment of cognitive dissonance that shatters the magic circle surrounding narrative and play, confronting the player with a disconcerting encounter between incompatible beliefs. The significance of this encounter and the use of the medium to construct it form the subject of this article.

## Studying games

Before analysing *Bioshock* it is necessary to address certain formal issues about how games should be studied. For many scholars, the crucial question is whether games can be examined as narratives or gaming experiences:

Broadly speaking, the former has argued that games can be studied through recourse to existing literary and humanities methods of understanding texts, whilst the latter has argued that this cannot be since a computer game is not a conventional text at all but an activity more akin to play or sport. (Dovey and Kennedy 22)

This narratology-ludology debate was introduced by Espen Aarseth in *Computer Game Studies: Year One*, when he declared that "Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played." Following this line of thought, ludologists have favoured defining the rules of game genres and the experience of play over traditional studies of narrative, character, and theme. As Celia Pearce has argued, there is a basic tension between narrative and play because "the authorial control, which is implicit in other genres, tends to undermine the quality of the user experience" (146). Game developers should therefore be seen as "context creators" (153) rather than authors and "the function of narrative in games is to engender compelling, interesting play" (144). Other games studies scholars such as Jesper Juul ("Games") and Gonzalo Frasca ("Simulation") have similarly emphasised that games cannot primarily be studied as narratives. The most crucial difference, as expressed by Espen Aarseth, is that "in a game there must be choice...not only that, but the choices would have to be crucial. In a game everything revolves around the player's ability to make choices" ("Quest Games" 366). In relation to *Bioshock*, this approach is partially supported by the game's developer, Ken Levine, who stresses that, "games are *not* story. Games are gameplay. Games are interactive," and that while the aesthetic and story evolved over time, the core design principles never changed. The developers thus had a clear idea of gameplay experience they wanted players to have before settling on a coherent narrative.

However, the relationship between narrative and gameplay is strongly determined by the game's form. Sandbox games offer players broad freedom to shape their avatars and choose their own goals, but *Bioshock* is a hybrid of first-person shooter and the more structured action-adventure genre:

In action adventure games, the avatar is provided by the game. He or she is characterised by the game's backstory, and their physical capabilities are, to a large extent, predetermined...the avatar's path through the game world is generally quite pre-set: a particular set of puzzles or obstacles need to be confronted and overcome in a given order. (Burn and Carr 20)

Because a key element of narration is controlling the flow of information, the fixed sequence of events and predetermined characters in action-adventure games incubate a focus on narrative. Indeed, plot and character are essential because the primary reward for surmounting the various obstacles is more story information. In *Bioshock*, new levels can only be accessed once crucial story-related tasks have been accomplished; this tight structure controls the flow of information and makes narrative central to gameplay.

*Bioshock* is not a traditional narrative experience, however, but is more akin to the 'labyrinth' described by digital narrative theorist Janet Murray. After characterising the typical digital narrative as either an overly structured maze or an open-ended rhizome, Murray speculates on the idea of a labyrinth: "The potential of the labyrinth as a participatory narrative form would seem to be somewhere between the two, in stories that are goal driven enough to guide navigation but open-ended enough to allow free exploration" (135). *Bioshock* constructs such a labyrinth with a multi-layered narrative: Jack's pursuit of Ryan proceeds along a predetermined route but surrounding this we have the hazier narrative of Rapture's fall told through discovered audio diaries, the city's décor and various aspects of the mise-en-scène, and the telling use of period music. The significance of the art direction is underscored early in the game by the prominent use of the song "If I Didn't Care," memorably used in the classic science-fiction film *Blade Runner*, a film noted for its superb use of décor and lighting to immerse viewers in a dystopian world. As the song plays, with a threatening splicer hoarsely singing along in the darkness, we may notice abandoned steamer trunks and signs on the floor reading "We're not your property!", "Let it end, Let us ascend!", "Ryan doesn't own us," and "Rapture is DEAD." The flickering lights emphasise the sense of malfunction, while a departure board signals that all departures have been cancelled. In ironic juxtaposition, we discover a model of the city in a glass case with the inscription: "Rapture, Nov. 5 1946. One man's vision. Mankind's salvation." While some players may charge blindly down the straight path of the main plot, the game signals that those who explore their surroundings and infer the

backstory of Rapture from the scattered fragments will enjoy a more enriching experience.

Rather than assert a strict division between narratology and ludology, a labyrinth like *Bioshock* is more amenable to a nuanced approach that draws on studies of narrative and cinema. Indeed, game studies are rapidly moving beyond the ludology-narratology debate, which Jan Simons calls “a quite sterile and obsolete game that nobody can ever win.” Henry Jenkins has argued that we need to view game designers as narrative architects, who “design worlds and sculpt spaces” (121) and while they may not strictly control the time sequence of information, “a game designer can somewhat control the narrational process by distributing the information across the game space” (126), just as *Bioshock* presents Rapture’s background story through mise-en-scène and found audio diaries. Ludologist Jesper Juul has noted a similar trend towards embedding narrative in artefacts in the game world (“Introduction”) while Gonzalo Frasca has rejected ‘radical ludology’ that denies any place to narrative and questioned the existence of narrativists who deny the importance of play in computer games (“Ludologists”). What is lacking, however, are specific case studies that show how narrative and gameplay combine to produce aesthetic experience and this is where *Bioshock* breaks new ground. Despite the clear narrative progression, *Bioshock* always works to develop player agency. Whereas other games insert cinematic cutscenes to develop their narratives, *Bioshock* rarely uses this technique; even when characters engage us in dialogue, we remain in control and can choose to explore the room while their voices continue in the background. This almost permanent control immerses the player in the gameplay, yet *Bioshock*’s most celebrated moment comes when this experience is brought into shocking collision with the narrative and the player’s expectations. This moment cannot be replicated in other art forms because it depends crucially on the interactive nature of the medium.

### **Rand’s Rapture**

*Bioshock* opens with a plane crash in mid-ocean; the player’s avatar, Jack, swims to a nearby lighthouse where he is confronted by an overbearing statue of a frowning man bearing a scarlet banner proclaiming “No Gods or Kings. Only Man.” The image disorients one on two levels: first, the words proclaim a humanist ideal but preface them with a phrase of intolerant exclusion that rejects alternative beliefs and ideas of social organisation; second, the figure proclaiming these ideals glares down at the avatar, and by extension the player, with an expression of angry contempt—man, it seems, is not welcome in his own kingdom. The game thus

establishes one of its primary aesthetic techniques—the ironic juxtaposition of ideal and reality—a technique that pervades the use of soothing period music (Gibbons), the naively optimistic 1950s-style advertising for a city in ruins, and the clash between Ryan’s hopes for Rapture and the crumbling city we encounter. Banners celebrating “Liberty, Creativity, Commerce,” hang in rooms full of rubble. Statues in a graveyard pay homage to the Great Chain of Industry. Amid the desuetude of the farmer’s market a sign reads: “A man creates. A parasite asks ‘Where is my Share?’” Such slogans link the vision of the city’s founder, Andrew Ryan, with Ayn Rand’s seminal novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the bible of Objectivism and radical market libertarianism. The technique of ironic juxtaposition is apposite for the game’s narrative engages a perplexing yet critical development in contemporary American society: the emergence of an impossible alliance within modern conservatism between traditionalists and libertarians, between a group committed to the status quo and one explicitly demanding a radical overthrow of the current social order in the name of an ideal society. That these two worldviews co-exist under one banner is a political paradox and *Bioshock*’s aesthetics pivot on the disjunction between the two.

Like the heroes of Rand’s novel, Andrew Ryan has retreated from the world to build his utopia, a city on the ocean floor free from the interference of church and state, where the free market is the only organising principle:

I believe in no God, no invisible man in the sky. But there is something more powerful than each of us, a combination of our efforts, a Great Chain of industry that unites us. But it is only when we struggle in our own interest that the chain pulls society in the right direction. The chain is too powerful and too mysterious for any government to guide. Any man who tells you different either has his hand in your pocket, or a pistol to your neck.

Yet the Rapture we experience has become defined by theft and murder, confronting us with the question of what is inherently wrong with Ryan’s philosophy.

In the graveyard in Arcadia, the game leaves a witty clue: each gravestone presents the inscription “Also interned John Maynard Keynes, beloved son of Adam and Ada Smith.” Keynes, perhaps the most influential economist of the twentieth century, argued that government had an essential role in regulating the market’s destructive excesses, ideas rapidly taken on board by Western governments after the Great Depression. However, the rise of totalitarianism and the accompanying horrors of war led some to reject any government intervention. In 1944, Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek published the bestselling *The Road to Serfdom*, which located the roots of Nazism in socialist plans for a strong state and warned that both Britain and the USA were unwittingly treading the same path

with every misguided centralisation of economic power. For Hayek, “The guiding principle that a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy remains as true today as it was in the nineteenth century” (262). It was left to Ayn Rand, though, to revitalise the ideas of Zeno the Stoic, who in Isaiah Berlin’s words argued that “If men are rational, they do not need control; rational beings have no need of the State...or of any organised institutional life” (23). Rand’s landmark 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged* united a belief in human rationality with arguments for market libertarianism and a powerful critique of government; this libertarian ideal drew increasing support after Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential candidacy, while Milton Friedman developed economic models based on libertarian principles and in *Capitalism and Freedom* a political philosophy that connects democracy with the proper working of free markets. Since the Reagan presidency, libertarian ideals have become an entrenched part of American discourse, with key influencers such as former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan and vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan both espousing libertarian ideals, giving *Bioshock*’s treatment of them a cultural significance not commonly accorded to computer games.

Rand’s philosophy is partly a response to totalitarianism but also has close links to Marxism, illustrating the harsh truth that we grow to resemble the things we despise. Like Marxism, Objectivism posits economics as the driving force of society and discerns a false consciousness that blinds people to material reality. Whereas Marxism sides with the workers, however, and sees the false consciousness as a bourgeois discourse that causes the proletariat to succumb meekly to inequality, Rand sides with industrialists, “the highest type of human being” (407), and sees the false consciousness as the rhetoric of altruism and community that constrains the productive power of the great through the whimpers of the weak. Having grown up in Russia from 1905-1925, Rand had seen the worst of the Revolution and much of her philosophy is informed by yet diametrically opposed to Marxist beliefs. One of the most powerful sections of *Atlas Shrugged* comes when the heroine, Dagny Taggart, learns of a company that was destroyed after adopting the creed “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (645). As explained by a homeless former employee, any rational person under such a system would learn to maximise benefits by minimising abilities and exaggerating needs. It doesn’t take long for the employees to succumb to the necessities of the environment they have created: “Do I have to tell you what happened after that—and into what sort of creatures we all started turning, we who had once been human?” (646). Rand performs a powerful reversal here, using one of the basic tenets of Marxism, that man’s consciousness is structured by the economic order of society, into a critique



of the Marxist ideal by showing that individuals acting in their own rational self-interest would rapidly turn such a society into a nightmare. The *Bioshock* universe plays with this idea in *Bioshock II*, which features an attempt to set up a Marxist-style utopia in the ruins of Rapture, only for it too to become a dystopia.

The philosophy that underpins Rapture is what Rand calls that of a “trader.” In *Atlas Shrugged*, the heroes argue that there are only two ways to get something from another person: by violence and deceit or through a fair exchange of value for value. Income tax is theft at the point of a gun; the free market is a fair exchange of productive capacities. A person’s wealth is thus not merely an indication of success—it is a reflection of moral worth, for one can only trade one’s own values in material form and those richest in values are those richest in goods. “The words ‘to make money’ are the essence of human morality” (407). But this philosophy also has deep roots in both Marxism and fascism. Rand’s aggrandising of economics in human affairs, her perception of a false consciousness between how society is actually run and the morality that guides it, and apocalyptic desire for a social collapse to prompt a cleansing revolution all combine to give Objectivism a peculiarly Marxist flavour, while her heroes are Nietzschean supermen, possessed of a superior morality to the petty souls still clinging to Christian pieties. Those who cannot live up to her ideas are even denied their humanity, as when Dagny Taggart kills a guard in cold blood: “Calmly and impersonally, she, who would have hesitated to fire on an animal, pulled the trigger and fired straight at the heart of a man who had wanted to exist without the responsibility of consciousness” (1105). The décor of Rapture is thus fittingly adorned with propaganda signs and statues while in Orwellian fashion ubiquitous radio announcements promote Objectivist ideas. One of the primary, and entirely apt, criticisms of Objectivism that emerges in *Bioshock* is thus that it is intolerant; for Andrew Ryan, as for Ayn Rand, freedom is a totalitarian value.

### ***Bioshock’s conservative critique***

Joseph Packer has argued that “*Bioshock*...allows the player to interact with a system that embraces the logic that underlies Rand’s philosophy” (211) and that the game critiques unregulated capitalism as the foundation of a moral society. As the player is attacked by denizens of Rapture shouting Objectivist slogans such as “parasite,” we try to understand how Rapture’s ideals have resulted in a netherworld of insanity and violence. In Packer’s reading, “*Bioshock* makes the argument that the violent Objectivists need not represent morally depraved individuals at root, but rather have succumbed to the necessities of the environment they have created, just as the player must in order to succeed in the

game” (216). However, what is most interesting is an aspect that has not been addressed—this critique stems not from a socialist desire for economic justice but from a traditional conservative perspective. The repeated use of irony in *Bioshock* thus points to the larger irony of the economic beliefs of modern American conservatism being critiqued by the values of traditional conservatism, a paradox no less puzzling because these two are currently political bedfellows.

Rapture’s fall begins with the discovery of ADAM, a genetic mutagen that enables people to alter their physical capacities at the expense of growing mental instability and addiction, turning Rapture’s citizens into the crazed splicers inhabiting the city. Early on our guide Atlas tells us, “Plasmids changed everything. They destroyed our bodies, our minds. We couldn’t handle it. Best friends butchering one another, babies strangled in cribs. The whole city went to hell.” In the absence of government regulation there is no way to prohibit the use of ADAM. An audio diary from Andrew Ryan informs us that:

There has been tremendous pressure to regulate this plasmid business. There have been side effects: blindness, insanity, death. But what use is our ideology if it is not tested? The market does not respond like an infant, shrieking at the first sign of displeasure. The market is patient, and we must be too.

The uncontrolled demand for ADAM leads to the creation of Little Sisters, orphaned girls who are implanted with sea slugs to generate ADAM and who are protected by Big Daddies, lumbering giants in ancient diving gear who kill anything that threatens the girls. The focus on medicine and the body is reinforced by the choice of a plastic surgeon, Dr. Steinmann, as the player’s first significant opponent. Around the Medical Pavilion hang advertising posters proclaiming “With ADAM, there’s no reason not to be beautiful!” However, through audio diaries it becomes clear that Steinmann dreams of using the genetic reshaping power of ADAM to turn himself into the “Picasso” of plastic surgery. “ADAM gives us the means to do it. And Ryan frees us from the phony ethics that held us back. Change your look, change your sex, change your race. It’s yours to change, nobody else’s.” The final sentence contains a sinister ambiguity around the word “yours”—is Steinmann referring to the client or to himself as the surgeon with the prone patient beneath his knife? In Steinmann’s offices we find two portraits of a patient called Winston Hoffner, one before the operation and a mutilated one afterwards signed in blood “J. Steinmann.” In Twilight Fields Funeral Homes, after passing a gaudy price list, we find a female splicer weeping over Hoffner’s coffin. Most revealing, though, are the pictures of women marked for plastic surgery with

Steinmann's signature on each in blood above a sign in blood on the floor declaring: "Above all do no harm."

The ironic juxtaposition of the Hippocratic Oath with Steinmann's work reveals the logic of the game's critique. Libertarians emphasise the individual's rational choice and thus dispense with the need for customs, institutions and ethics, but traditional conservatism considers these things repositories of collective wisdom and experience that transcend the intelligence of the present. These ideas received their most influential articulation in Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" in 1791, in which Burke argued that Jacobin philosophies should not spread to England because "the people of England will not ape the fashions they have never tried, nor go back to those which they have found mischievous on trial" (2.1.41). Burke, the godfather of Anglo conservatism, argues that traditional rights are preferable to abstract human rights because they are sanctified by custom, law, social order, and history. "A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors" (2.1.56). The Hippocratic Oath is doubly significant within this worldview because it not only represents the wisdom of the ages but also a strong metaphorical link between the human body and social organisation. Burke's writings on society, like those of many conservatives, are full of references to health and disease, indicating that society is an organism we do not fully understand and with whose inner workings we should be wary of tampering. Radical libertarians like Ryan may resent government interference in private decisions such as the use of ADAM, but the Federal Drug Administration's stringent drug trials exist because of experiences hard-won from disasters such as thalidomide; from this perspective, social and political institutions are vital organs emerging from collective experience that preserve the health of the body politic and unnecessary surgery on these organs can have disastrous consequences.

The conflicts in *Rapture* are fundamentally structured not around capitalist and socialist ideas but between radical market libertarianism and traditional conservatism. The Neptune's Bounty level opens with a crucified smuggler above a suitcase containing bibles. Whereas Burke maintained that "We know, and what is better, we feel inwardly that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and all comfort" (2.1.146), *Rapture* criminalises religion and executes those caught peddling divine wares. Whereas traditional conservatives defend rural, agrarian-based communities with a close relationship to nature, *Rapture*, the city under the ocean, is a defiance of nature. Ryan even subsumes nature to his personal account:

On the surface, I once bought a forest. The Parasites claimed that the land belonged to God, and demanded that I establish a public park there. Why? So the rabble could stand slack-jawed under the canopy and pretend that it was paradise earned. When Congress moved to nationalise my forest, I burnt it to the ground.

In the Arcadia section of the game, the player works to prevent Ryan destroying the trees on which Rapture depends for oxygen. In the Fort Frolic level we finally meet the “uncensored artist,” Sander Cohen, for whom murder is a form of art and who hires Ryan’s security officer, Sullivan, to execute his musical rival. As Sullivan is Rapture’s de facto police chief, the incident demonstrates what happens when law and order are privatised; justice becomes a mercenary that serves the highest bidder, not the principles and laws decided on by the community.

The radical vision of market libertarianism becomes increasingly apparent if we compare it to the work of the other name on Rapture’s gravestone, Adam Smith. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith famously coined the idea of the “invisible hand” through which individual self-interest creates the greatest productivity for society as a whole, an idea on which Ryan’s “Great Chain of Industry” is clearly based, but Smith’s thought was more nuanced. Like Marx, Smith understood that capitalism, by introducing the skilled division of labour, had simultaneously multiplied productive capacities and social stratification: “the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour” (20). Whereas Rand saw talent as creating a meritocracy, Smith recognised that talent is often conditioned by upbringing and training, which implies a required levelling in the matter of education at least. More importantly, Smith was no champion of the merchant classes:

Our merchants and master manufacturers complain much of the bad effects of high wages in raising the price, and thereby lessening the scale of goods, both at home and abroad. They say nothing concerning the bad effects of high profits; they are silent with regard to the pernicious effects of their own gains; they complain only of those of other people. (86)

No wonder Adam Smith appears in the graveyard of Rapture as the deceased father of the hated Keynes! Like Burke, Smith saw capitalism as a powerful instrument that needed to be contained lest it devolve into the dog-eat-dog world of Rapture. The traditional conservative critique of capitalism the game manifests is that a society based purely on values derived from the free-market would lack other qualities necessary for survival. As historian Tony Judt puts it:

Smith argued that capitalism does not in itself generate the values that make its success possible; it inherits them from the pre-capitalist or non-capitalistic world, or else borrows them from the language of religion or ethics. Values such as trust, faith, belief in the reliability of contracts, assumptions that the future will keep faith with

past commitments and so on have nothing to do with the logic of markets per se, but they are necessary for functioning. To this Keynes added the argument that capitalism does not generate the social conditions necessary for its own sustenance. (340)

It is against this scandalous impurity of the free market ideal that libertarians rage and that Rand sought to fix by imagining a morality based solely on the logic of markets. *Bioshock* undermines Rand's ideas by showing the need for the traditional values that the godfathers of Anglo conservatism, Edmund Burke and Adam Smith, emphasised. From a Marxist perspective, an industrial product marketed to a global public as 'anti-capitalist' may be inherently problematic (Aldred and Greenspan 2011), but there is no paradox because *Bioshock* is not anti-capitalist, it merely illuminates the possible consequences of a philosophy that substitutes libertarian values for those that have traditionally held society together. The only reason this is not immediately obvious is that traditionalism and libertarianism now form the two halves of conservatism, but this illogical connection is a product of reality and not a fault of the game's design.

### **Choice and the medium**

Thus far the analysis has drawn on ideas from cinema, literature, and the history of ideas, but *Bioshock*'s most ground-breaking moment comes when it makes full use of the new medium to charge its philosophical debates. At the core of libertarianism is the idea of rational choice, just as the heart of gaming is giving players the freedom to choose. Although *Bioshock*'s structure follows a fixed path, the game continually strives to give its players challenging decisions. This section will focus on three: fighting Big Daddies, saving or harvesting Little Sisters, and the decision to kill Andrew Ryan.

By far the toughest opponents in the game are the Big Daddies that protect the Little Sisters. As the player needs ADAM, defeating these guardians is essential, but unlike other opponents Big Daddies will not attack unless one attacks them first. This introduces a strong element of strategy as the player must choose optimal locations, lay traps, and select the right methods of attack. Indeed, the player's first fight with a Big Daddy is likely to end in swift death because nothing hitherto has prepared us for such speed and ferocity. Learning how to cope with their brute force, damaging attacks, and hardness is one of the most challenging and thus rewarding aspects of the game. The player has many options –mines, tripwires, electrical shocks in water, etc.–but the tactics are down to the player and many questions and comments on fan forums are explicitly devoted to strategies for taking down Big Daddies in specific game locations.

Defeating a Big Daddy leads to the game's celebrated but imperfect moral choice (Schmeink 2009; Sicart 2009) regarding the Little Sisters, whom we may save and so receive 80 ADAM or harvest (and thus kill) and collect 160 ADAM. Atlas tells us that we need as much ADAM as we can get, and it is true that *Bioshock* repeatedly teaches the player to be wary of sympathy. Early on we see a female splicer weeping over a baby carriage, only for her to start shooting at us when we approach; the corpse weeping over the coffin of Winston Hoffner similarly attacks the moment she notices our presence. When we enter Arcadia, a voice shouts, "Hey, can you help me man? Can you help me out? Oh, Jesus, God!" Upon investigating, we are attacked by a new, more dangerous type of splicer who has been laying a trap for us. However, with regard to the Little Sisters the game gives strong clues on our first encounter that we should save rather than harvest. The geneticist Tenenbaum, who now regrets her role in creating the Little Sisters, begs us to save them and explicitly says, "I will give you a reward, somehow." This message is repeated in an onscreen game notice: "Tenenbaum has promised to make it worth your while." The décor provides further hints. The helpless Little Sister cowers before us beneath a sign in blood reading "Splicer," a message that strikes us as a direct accusation. If one looks up, one can also see a banner reading "The Great Will not be Constrained by the Small," which asks us to buy into Ryan's ideology and harvest her. The crucial role of these small children can itself be read as a critique of Rand's philosophy, as she nowhere explains how her core assumption of human rationality extends to children, who cannot seriously be held responsible for the consequences of their life choices. Yet rejecting Rapture's ideology here does not come at a cost as we know that we will be recompensed; for every three Little Sisters saved, the player receives a gift of 200 ADAM to make up the difference, along with assorted extras, meaning that the decision has no real in-game consequences aside from the final cutscene. Thus the game's reward system is not fundamentally biased in either direction; the only tangible difference is the narrative epilogue. The game thus offers the player a gaming choice rather than an ethical dilemma because the acid test of a moral decision is that it must come at some personal cost—if killing the Little Sisters made the game easier by giving the player increased health or endurance, choosing to save the Little Sisters would have increased player frustration and made each decision increasingly difficult and therefore more of a moral quandary.

Nevertheless, the decision increases the player's feeling of agency and this sense of control is essential; it is not a game unless the outcome hinges on the player's decisions. It is here that *Bioshock* brilliantly manipulates our expectations of the medium. As we progress through Rapture, we find clues to a story whose ending we

cannot yet see. Ryan's ex-girlfriend Jasmine Jolene leaves a diary that hints at a child: "That creepy Dr. Tenenbaum promised me it wasn't gonna be a real pregnancy, they'd just take the egg out once Mr. Ryan and I had...I needed the money so bad," while the screaming we hear before entering her room suggests she was killed by Ryan for assisting Fontaine. At certain moments our avatar is haunted by pictures from his past, while Ryan repeatedly asks in radio messages, "Who are you?" It is only shortly before the climactic showdown with Ryan that the truth emerges. The game sets out expectations of a major boss battle with ominous music, flashing red lights, and plenty of free items and vending machines. However, we then enter a room with pictures of Jasmine Jolene, Ryan, Fontaine, Tenenbaum and Dr. Suchong, along with a photo of our avatar, Jack, and the words "Would You Kindly?" scrawled in blood. On the table sit our avatar's family photos along with tapes of Suchong using the phrase "Would you kindly?" as a trigger phrase to control a child that his statistics reveal is being force-grown: "Baby is now a year old, weighs 58 pounds, and possesses gross musculature of a fit 19 year-old." The alert player will already be aware of what Ryan soon reveals, that Jack is Ryan's son, force-grown and sent to kill Ryan by Fontaine, who has been controlling us under the guise of Atlas by using the phrase "Would you kindly?" throughout the game.

This knowledge changes the player's calculations by taking away the agency that is central to the gameplay experience. Before this, we were prepared to kill Ryan because of the nightmare he created in Rapture; now that killing Ryan would be a pre-programmed act ordered by the criminal Fontaine, we instinctively reject control over our freedom to choose. But the game takes our options away by introducing one of its rare cutscenes. Ryan emerges from his office and controls our avatar using the phrase "Would you kindly?" Instead of a challenging fight, the player is reduced to a passive spectator. Ryan's restated core beliefs now resonate powerfully: "In the end, what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No. A man chooses, a slave obeys!" Although we have spent the whole game fighting Ryan's philosophy, we are suddenly in sympathy with him. We wish to choose rather than be slaves of the game's programming, but the cutscene takes away our freedom. The defenceless Ryan orders us to kill him while our avatar obeys helplessly and the player watches in passivity, unable to choose or influence the game's key event.

Clint Hocking calls this a moment of "ludonarrative dissonance" which leverages "the game's narrative structure against its ludic structure." The ludic rules tell us to gain power and progress, yet the narrative suddenly reveals that we have all along been powerless to choose. In Hocking's view, this disjunction

between game and story “all but destroys the player’s ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest (which I almost did) or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story.” However, this ludonarrative dissonance is precisely why *Bioshock* deserves so much critical attention and aesthetic praise. The shocking power of the moment comes from the collision between the thrust of the narrative and the nature of the medium. The narrative has taught us the dangers of radical libertarian philosophies, which are based on rational individuals making free choices; as Packer argues, “playing the game to completion presents a contradiction that exposes the extreme nature of Ryan’s demands for complete liberation, and points towards a less totalising perspective on the value of individual liberty” (221). Yet computer gaming as a medium is predicated on increasing the liberty of the player to make decisions that influence events, otherwise what we experience is just a film with occasional button-pushing. *Bioshock* slams the player’s irresistible desire for meaningful choice into the immovable object of Rapture’s libertarian dystopia, creating a paradox for the player, whose own desires for the game suddenly mirror Ryan’s desires for Rapture, causing us to question all that we have experienced. The final part of the game, in which we follow Tenenbaum’s instructions to kill Fontaine, provides no sense of liberation as the player is still following orders rather than choosing her destiny. Fontaine’s death produces no ethical problem as the narrative makes clear that he deserves punishment—only Ryan’s death creates a moral problem as it brings the player’s desire for agency into shocking juxtaposition with Ryan’s vision of total freedom.

*Bioshock* has typically been read as a critique of unbridled capitalism, but theories of cognitive dissonance caution us not to take the narrative’s overt critique at face value when compared to the power of Ryan’s death scene. Cognitive dissonance posits that human beings like to feel their beliefs are consistent and when confronted by a paradox will alter their ideas to resolve it, but how they are altered depends on the individual. Will the player reject Ryan’s philosophy and thus her own desire for total freedom in gameplay, or will the player accept that her desire for gameplay autonomy coincides with Ryan’s philosophy and thus criticise the depiction of Rapture? The game constructs a nexus between two arguments, one political and the other to do with the medium. In terms of gaming, we may read *Bioshock* as a question from developers to players: complete player agency may end up in a chaotic world with no narrative focus teeming with trolls intent on doing as much mischief as possible, whereas relinquishing fundamental choices to the game designer creates a more structured narrative experience at the cost of being able to influence the outcome. Which would you prefer? By the same token, *Bioshock* also



poses a political question: complete individual liberty may create a dystopian anarchy, but how much of your freedom to choose are you willing to part with? In bringing these questions together so that one reflects the other, *Bioshock* illuminates new aspects of both the medium and contemporary politics alike.

## Conclusion

Computer games are perhaps the most dynamic form of new media, but one temptation scholars should be wary of is the desire to establish a total separation between games and prior art forms such as cinema or literature. As *Bioshock* shows, games may profitably draw on both for inspiration in constructing narrative, character and theme as well as using décor, lighting and music to convey atmosphere and tone. Indeed, *Bioshock* has had a significant influence on the development of video games: its stunning visuals and exploratory ethos have helped establish immersive world-building as a key element of gaming construction, as in more recent games like *Dishonored* (2012), while its use of embedded in-game artefacts as tools of narration has been widely copied across the industry, with games as diverse as the *Dead Space* series and *Tomb Raider* (2013) imitating this method of exposition. Moreover, it is this conjunction between world exploration and narrative that has been most influential in actualising the idea of a labyrinth, both open enough for free exploration and goal-driven enough for plot and character to develop.

Given the significance of narrative and world-building in the game, the analysis in this paper suggests *Bioshock* may thus be read in a traditional cultural studies fashion as a comment on the growth of a radical libertarianism that seeks sweeping social transformation under the banner of a conservative party. *Bioshock* thus stands as a significant cultural testament to the contradictory currents in modern American politics, many of which stem from the divide between those who favour stability and those who, with quasi-religious fervour, want to transform the USA into a libertarian state, the Rapture at the world's end. By locating this schism within conservatism, rather than between right and left, *Bioshock* illuminates cultural fault lines whose existence parades daily across the news desks and op-ed pages of mainstream media with little recognition of their extraordinary existence.

If one aspect of this study is the argument that computer games should not be read as culturally trivial, a more important aspect is that they also offer aesthetic possibilities that cannot be experienced through traditional media. A film version of *Bioshock* would be unable to convey the shock of our loss of control during Ryan's death sequence as film audiences expect to have no control over events; only in a new interactive medium does the unexpected switch to a cutscene carry

significance, especially in a game that has previously worked hard to offer the player control. By synchronising this with the main themes of the narrative, *Bioshock* creates a genuinely new kind of aesthetic moment that paves the way for understanding and developing the medium. The game's landmark status is thus thoroughly deserved for with its blend of narrative, representations of important contemporary ideological positions, and reflections on the challenges of combining narrative and agency in an interactive art form, it has opened the door to new techniques and an original vision for what new media can do.

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