

SERIES EDITOR: **WILLIAM IRWIN**  
EDITED BY **LUKE CUDDY**



**BIOSHOCK**  
**AND PHILOSOPHY**

**IRRATIONAL GAME, RATIONAL BOOK**

**BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES**

This book has not been approved, licensed, or sponsored by any entity or person involved in creating or producing *Bioshock* products or works.



# **BIOSHOCK AND PHILOSOPHY**

**The Blackwell Philosophy and PopCulture Series**  
*Series editor William Irwin*

A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, and a healthy helping of popular culture clears the cobwebs from Kant. Philosophy has had a public relations problem for a few centuries now. This series aims to change that, showing that philosophy is relevant to your life—and not just for answering the big questions like “To be or not to be?” but for answering the little questions: “To watch or not to watch *South Park*?” Thinking deeply about TV, movies, and music doesn’t make you a “complete idiot.” In fact it might make you a philosopher, someone who believes the unexamined life is not worth living and the unexamined cartoon is not worth watching.

**Already published in the series:**

**24 and Philosophy: The World According to Jack**  
*Edited by Jennifer Hart Weed, Richard Brian Davis, and Ronald Weed*

**30 Rock and Philosophy: We Want to Go to There**  
*Edited by J. Jeremy Wisniewski*

**Alice in Wonderland and Philosophy: Curiouser and Curiouser**  
*Edited by Richard Brian Davis*

**Arrested Development and Philosophy: They’ve Made a Huge Mistake**  
*Edited by Kristopher Phillips and J. Jeremy Wisniewski*

**Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See**  
*Edited by George A. Dunn*

**The Avengers and Philosophy: Earth’s Mightiest Thinkers**  
*Edited by Mark D. White*

**Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul**  
*Edited by Mark D. White and Robert Arp*

**Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins Out There**  
*Edited by Jason T. Eberl*

**The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy: Rock, Paper, Scissors, Aristotle, Locke**  
*Edited by Dean Kowalski*

**The Big Lebowski and Philosophy: Keeping Your Mind Limber with Abiding Wisdom**  
*Edited by Peter S. Fosl*

**BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book**  
*Edited by Luke Cuddy*

**Black Sabbath and Philosophy: Mastering Reality**  
*Edited by William Irwin*

**The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News**  
*Edited by Jason Holt*

**Downton Abbey and Philosophy: The Truth Is Neither Here Nor There**  
*Edited by Mark D. White*

**Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks**  
*Edited by Christopher Robichaud*

**Ender’s Game and Philosophy: The Logic Gate is Down**  
*Edited by Kevin S. Decker*

**Family Guy and Philosophy: A Cure for the Petarded**  
*Edited by J. Jeremy Wisniewski*

**Final Fantasy and Philosophy: The Ultimate Walkthrough**  
*Edited by Jason P. Blabuta and Michel S. Beaulieu*

**Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords**  
*Edited by Henry Jacoby*

**The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy: Everything is Fire**  
*Edited by Eric Bronson*

**Green Lantern and Philosophy: No Evil Shall Escape this Book**  
*Edited by Jane Dryden and Mark D. White*

**Heroes and Philosophy: Buy the Book, Save the World**  
*Edited by David Kyle Johnson*

**The Hobbit and Philosophy: For When You’ve Lost Your Dwarves, Your Wizard, and Your Way**  
*Edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson*

**House and Philosophy: Everybody Lies**  
*Edited by Henry Jacoby*

**The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason**  
*Edited by George Dunn and Nicolas Michaud*

**Inception and Philosophy: Because It’s Never Just a Dream**  
*Edited by David Johnson*

**Iron Man and Philosophy: Facing the Stark Reality**  
*Edited by Mark D. White*

**Lost and Philosophy: The Island Has Its Reasons**  
*Edited by Sharon M. Kaye*

**Mad Men and Philosophy: Nothing Is as It Seems**  
*Edited by James South and Rod Carveth*

**Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in Brain Surgery**  
*Edited by William Irwin*

**The Office and Philosophy: Scenes from the Unfinished Life**  
*Edited by J. Jeremy Wisniewski*

**Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy: Brains Before Bullets**  
*Edited by George A. Dunn and Jason T. Eberl*

**South Park and Philosophy: You Know, I Learned Something Today**  
*Edited by Robert Arp*

**Spider-Man and Philosophy: The Web of Inquiry**  
*Edited by Jonathan Sanford*

**Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?**  
*Edited by Mark D. White*

**Supernatural and Philosophy: Metaphysics and Monsters...for Idjits**  
*Edited by Galen Foresman*

**Terminator and Philosophy: I’ll Be Back, Therefore I Am**  
*Edited by Richard Brown and Kevin Decker*

**True Blood and Philosophy: We Wanna Think Bad Things with You**  
*Edited by George Dunn and Rebecca Housel*

**Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality**  
*Edited by Rebecca Housel and J. Jeremy Wisniewski*

**The Ultimate Daily Show and Philosophy: More Moments of Zen, More Moments of Indecision Theory**  
*Edited by Jason Holt*

**The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles**  
*Edited by Gregory Bassham*

**The Ultimate Lost and Philosophy: Think Together, Die Alone**  
*Edited by Sharon Kaye*

**The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy: Respect My Philosophah!**  
*Edited by Robert Arp and Kevin S. Decker*

**The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Shotgun. Machete. Reason.**  
*Edited by Christopher Robichaud*

**Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test**  
*Edited by Mark D. White*

**Veronica Mars and Philosophy**  
*Edited by George A. Dunn*

**X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse**  
*Edited by Rebecca Housel and J. Jeremy Wisniewski*

# **BIOSHOCK AND PHILOSOPHY**

**IRRATIONAL GAME,  
RATIONAL BOOK**

**Edited by  
Luke Cuddy**

**WILEY Blackwell**

This edition first published 2015  
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK  
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at [www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell](http://www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell).

The right of Luke Cuddy to be identified as the author of the editorial material in this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

**Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty:** While the publisher and editor have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services and neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for damages arising herefrom. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for*

9781118915868 P

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Texture of metal © Zeffss1 / iStock

Set in 10.5/13pt Sabon by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

# Contents

Hacking into This Book (Introduction)	vii
<i>Luke Cuddy</i>	
<b>Part I Level 1 Research Bonus: Increased Wisdom Capacity</b>	<b>1</b>
1 <i>BioShock's</i> Meta-Narrative: What <i>BioShock</i> Teaches the Gamer about Gaming	3
<i>Collin Pointon</i>	
2 The Value of Art in <i>BioShock</i> : Ayn Rand, Emotion, and Choice	15
<i>Jason Rose</i>	
3 SHODAN vs. the Many: Or, Mind vs. the Body	27
<i>Robert M. Mentyka</i>	
4 "The cage is somber": A Feminist Understanding of Elizabeth	38
<i>Catlyn Orogitano</i>	
<b>Part II Tears, Time, and Reality</b>	<b>49</b>
5 Rapture in a Physical World: Did Andrew Ryan Choose the Impossible?	51
<i>James Cook</i>	
6 Would You Kindly Bring Us the Girl and Wipe Away the Debt: Free Will and Moral Responsibility in <i>BioShock</i>	58
<i>Infinite</i>	
<i>Oliver Laas</i>	
	v

7	<i>BioShock</i> as Plato's Cave <i>Roger Travis</i>	69
8	<i>BioShock Infinite</i> and Transworld Individuality: Identity across Space and Time <i>Charles Joshua Horn</i>	76
9	Shockingly Limited: Escaping Columbia's God of Necessity <i>Scott Squires and James McBain</i>	86
	<b>Part III The "Union" and the Sodom Below</b>	<b>95</b>
10	"The bindings are there as a safeguard": Sovereignty and Political Decisions in <i>BioShock Infinite</i> <i>Rick Elmore</i>	97
11	Propaganda, Lies, and Bullshit in <i>BioShock's</i> Rapture <i>Rachel McKinnon</i>	107
12	The Vox Populi Group, Marx, and Equal Rights for All <i>Tyler DeHaven and Chris Hendrickson</i>	114
	<b>Part IV The Circus of Values</b>	<b>127</b>
13	Infinite Lighthouses, Infinite Stories: <i>BioShock</i> and the Aesthetics of Video Game Storytelling <i>László Kajtár</i>	129
14	Have You Ever Been to Rapture?: <i>BioShock</i> as an Introduction to Phenomenology <i>Stefan Schevelier</i>	139
15	"Evolve today!": Human Enhancement Technologies in the <i>BioShock</i> Universe <i>Simon Ledder</i>	150
16	Vending Machine Values: Buying Beauty and Morality in <i>BioShock</i> <i>Michael J. Muniz</i>	161
	Notes on Contributors	168
	Index	173

# Hacking into This Book (Introduction)

*Luke Cuddy*

When you see Rapture through the eyes of a Little Sister in *BioShock 2* for the first time, you see the evolving grandeur of the *Shock* games, an evolution that began with *System Shock* and has culminated in *BioShock Infinite*. As the Little Sister, you see an idealized reality, including a steep and long ascending staircase lined with teddy bears and some alphabet blocks, the surrounding white drapes lit brilliantly from above—all of this, of course, being interrupted by the occasional flashes of a much darker reality. Then there is Columbia, the breathtaking world of *Infinite*, a world that grows more mysterious as the gameplay grows more interactive.

It's not just the artistic complexity of the settings that makes the *BioShock* games an enthralling and immersive experience. The characters and storylines fascinate us as well. Center stage is Andrew Ryan, creator and ruler of Rapture. A male counterpart of Ayn Rand, Ryan was deeply dissatisfied with Soviet rule and left for America at a young age to seek something that the “parasites” could not corrupt. Even the mobs with less complicated backstories capture our attention: no player can forget the Motorized Patriots of Columbia, huge malevolent robots with wings that look like George Washington (no, this is not a Vigor-induced hallucination). Those are only a couple of examples. From the God complex of SHODAN to the Big Daddies to Elizabeth's tears to Comstock's self-proclaimed prophecy, the *Shock* games deliver compelling characters and absorbing plots.

The *BioShock* series pushes the genre of first-person shooters forward by expertly weaving role-playing elements into the game design. Ken Levine has rightly been hailed as a visionary, and the games have

deservedly won numerous awards. Levine's attention to detail in developing worlds and weaving stories results in a series ripe for philosophical speculation. Players might wonder whether *BioShock* really does serve as a legitimate critique of Ayn Rand's philosophy, or whether Booker ever had free will, or whether humans in the real world will ever be able to shoot lightning out of their hands. These questions and more are explored in this volume alongside the theories of not solely Rand but Aristotle, de Beauvoir, Dewey, Leibniz, Marx, Plato, and others from the Hall of Philosophical Heroes. The answers go beyond mere musings on a message board.

You shall know the false philosopher, like the false prophet, by his mark: a claim to knowledge without justification. But you will find no false philosophers among the authors of this volume, each of whom is not only a philosophy expert but also a *BioShock* connoisseur. After reading this book, you will never look at *BioShock* in the same way again. Indeed, if this book leads you to read more philosophy, you will graduate from Little Sisterhood and you will no longer look at life the same way either. So, would you kindly turn the page and continue reading until the end of the book?

**Part I**

**LEVEL 1 RESEARCH**

**BONUS**

**INCREASED WISDOM**

**CAPACITY**



# ***BioShock*'s Meta-Narrative**

## What *BioShock* Teaches the Gamer about Gaming

*Collin Pointon*

The assassin has overcome my final defense, and now he's come to murder me. In the end what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No. A man chooses. A slave obeys... Was a man sent to kill? Or a slave?

Andrew Ryan's words from *BioShock* confront the main character, Jack, with the challenge of deciding whether he is a free "man" or a "slave." The challenge is especially difficult for Jack because he (spoiler alert, and more to come) was artificially created and psychologically conditioned to do whatever he is told—provided that the trigger phrase "would you kindly" accompanies the demand. Ryan's unforgettable speech and his last moments reveal the truth of Jack's identity for the first time. In the narrative of *BioShock*, this moment is earth-shattering.

Simultaneous with this game narrative is another narrative: the story of the player's interaction with the video game. The added narrative is what we'll call the "meta-narrative," because it encompasses the game narrative as well as the player's participation in it. What is fascinating is that the meta-narrative is also interrupted by the plot twist in Ryan's office. Ryan is as much addressing the player as he is Jack. In fact, the manipulation of Jack is symbolic of *BioShock*'s manipulation of player expectations. *BioShock* makes the player expect one game experience in order to falsify it not once, but twice. This roller coaster of meta-twists makes players philosophically

reflect on how games are created to affect them in strategic ways. Understanding how *BioShock* effectively manipulates players will take us through a variety of territories: cognitive science, philosophy of mind, philosophical hermeneutics, philosophy of video gaming, and philosophy of free will. It's all a testament to the brilliance of *BioShock* and a demonstration of how video games can teach us—even change us.

## Mind Games

If you're like me, you just cannot get that image out of your head of Ryan screaming "Obey!" while Jack kills him. It still gives me chills. Indeed, all of the "Shock" games (*System Shock*, *System Shock 2*, *BioShock*, *BioShock 2*, and *BioShock Infinite*) have unforgettable moments. How video games like *BioShock* can affect us psychologically can be best understood through some recent ideas that scholars and philosophers have put forward.

The notion of the "extended mind," or "extended cognition," was popularized by the contemporary philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers.<sup>1</sup> This theory states that our cognition (or mind) includes not just the brain, but also the body and the surrounding environment. In one example, Chalmers makes the case that his iPhone is part of his mind because he relies on it to remind him of the important events, personal contacts, and other information that he has "offloaded" onto it.<sup>2</sup> He even suggests that if it were stolen, the thief would have perpetrated not only mere property robbery, but also significant mental harm—literally to Chalmers' mind! Whether or not you agree, it still stands that, according to extended cognition theory, *BioShock* can be a literal extension of your mind into a new environment—in this case, *BioShock's* game world.

Undeniably, *BioShock* affects my mind, infusing it with philosophical ideas, and it affects my body, causing me to jump or making my skin crawl. We can tease apart these two effects hypothetically (the conceptual and the physical), but of course they are, practically speaking, always wrapped up together. Scholars have often remarked on the intensity of the cognitive and bodily responses that video games stimulate. On the physical side, Bernard Perron seems to connect extended cognition theory with video games when he writes of the

“blurred distinction” between player and avatar. He even calls horror video games an “extended body genre.”<sup>3</sup> However, gamers know that these designations are not specific to the horror genre alone. Video games as a whole are an extended body art form. For instance, sometimes when I’m gaming, I catch myself craning my neck, as if that physical act will somehow aid my avatar as I have him peer around a corner in the game world. That is proof of the extent of immersion (and *flow*) that video games achieve on a definite visceral and bodily level.

As a natural extension of my body, video games become a natural extension of my mind, too—that would have to be the case with extended cognition theory. As an example of an intellectual or conceptual stimulus within *BioShock*, consider the serious ethical dilemma surrounding the Little Sisters. The player can “save” the unnatural children or “harvest” them for extra ADAM. It seems like an easy choice for a utilitarian gamer, yet the act of harvesting looks (and sounds) violent enough to trigger self-loathing—enough to encourage many to refuse ever to “harvest.” During the player’s first chance to decide, Dr. Tenenbaum pleads: “Bitte, do not hurt her! Have you no heart?”

Empathy with digital characters or non-player characters (NPCs) has spectacular repercussions for philosophy, ethics, and cognitive science. Serious interest around player acts in video game worlds is strongly supported by Perron’s observation that “mirror neurons” in our brains trigger responses not only when we perform an action, but also when we observe *another* performing that action. So, when a Splicer tries to harvest a Little Sister, and when Tenenbaum pleads with us, we are having cognitive reactions indistinguishable from those we would have if the same events took place in the “real world.” Attacking Splicers triggers real fear, Little Sisters trigger real compassion, and these mean that video games can be spaces of real physical and conceptual judgments.

## **Rapture: How *BioShock* Hooks You**

Since modern theories of mind explain why our brains are so vividly affected by video games, the next step for us is to examine how *BioShock* specifically stimulates us. Put another way: it’s time to transition to what the game does, now that we know what our brains do (more or less).

*BioShock* grabs our attention; it hooks us into many unforgettable moments. Take for instance Ryan's speech mentioned earlier. Part of its memorability comes from the alluring presence and intense language of Andrew Ryan—whom the designers of *BioShock* modeled on characteristics of Ayn Rand, her philosophy, and her fictional characters.<sup>4</sup> Another part is the dynamics of the scene itself, like the player's loss of control over the avatar Jack, the dim lighting full of shadows, and the ominous background music.

Recall the first time Jack injects himself with a Plasmid. Suddenly, the player loses control of Jack and has to endure watching him stab himself in the wrist with a massive hypodermic needle. Jack then shouts in pain, his hands writhe in agony, and electricity arcs over and underneath his skin. Atlas says over the radio: "Steady now! Your genetic code is being rewritten—just hold on and everything will be fine!" Oh thanks, Atlas, how reassured I now feel, especially as Jack screams then tumbles off a balcony. The scene is horrifying on two levels: first, because of the unsettling sights, sounds, ominous music, and unease it triggers in the player about what will happen next; second, because of the player's inability to control or alter Jack's actions. The ability to control a character's actions is rare in other art forms like film, plays, and the fine arts. Player control (of one or more avatars, as well as viewpoints and camera angles) is a quality of video games that provides their designers an added opportunity for artistic choices. These choices might further singular or multiple ludic, thematic, aesthetic, narrative, or emotional goals. In the Plasmid episode from *BioShock*, the inability to control Jack intensifies the emotional horror of the scene, it bolsters the narrative of Rapture as a place of advanced technological innovation with disturbing consequences, and it explores the theme of the limitations of player autonomy.

Dan Pinchbeck calls the mechanisms in a game built to provoke particular player reactions "managed schemata."<sup>5</sup> For instance, forced camera angles in horror video games are managed schemata that incite tension, unease, and claustrophobia. The *Shock* games make great use of these elements. But managed schemata can be even more elaborate and quite subtle. Take William Gibbons' detailed account of the musical component of *BioShock*.<sup>6</sup> His analysis shows the impressive thought behind *BioShock*'s soundtrack, which includes providing an atmosphere of uneasiness, as well as moments of deep irony. Catchy, carefree, and upbeat music like Bobby Darin's "Beyond the

Sea” and Patti Page’s “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window” are diegetic pieces in the video game that perform multiple levels of meaning and commentary. On one level, they merely enhance the feel of that time period. On another, they perform an ironic commentary on the narrative of the video game. (Whether Jack notes this irony is unclear, since he doesn’t give us many clues to his thoughts and opinions, unlike Booker DeWitt in *BioShock Infinite*, who often talks to himself.) An informed player will pick up on the irony of the song lyrics as they relate to specific scenes in the dystopian underwater city. It is easy to see how these game-to-player cues formulate another kind of narrative, over and above the narrative of Jack’s battle through Rapture: what I call the meta-narrative.

Gibbons analyzes the meta-narrative formed by *BioShock*’s music, noting that it relates, among other things, the irony of American post-war optimism, consumerism, and carelessness. Our focus, though, will be on *BioShock*’s meta-narrative as it pertains to the gamer and gaming, including the twist in Andrew Ryan’s office and the utilization of the player’s ability or inability to control her avatar: Jack. In order to understand this particular meta-narrative properly, though, managed schemata won’t quite be enough. We’ll need a philosophical fusion of horizons.

## Horizons and Expectations in the Mid-Atlantic

When we say that we “understand” something, what exactly does that mean? This was the guiding question of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1900–2002) philosophical life, and his books *Truth and Method* and *Philosophical Hermeneutics*.<sup>7</sup> Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, so analyzing the way in which we interpret (or understand) written texts, art, or other human beings is a hermeneutic activity. The perspective in which the player begins *BioShock* might be called a certain *hermeneutic horizon*. A hermeneutic horizon consists of the wide variety of possibilities for interpreting something. Consequently, we are always working within evolving hermeneutic horizons as we go about in the world—and since each person has a unique set of life experiences, his or her hermeneutic horizon is slightly different from others’.

Beginning to play *BioShock* is not a matter of a player having an utterly blank slate of expectations. Rather, players have a hermeneutic

horizon that consists of conscious and unconscious ideas of what the game is, how it works, what to do in it, how it will affect them, what they want out of it, and so on. Seemingly mundane presuppositions (Gadamer called them prejudices), like “one joystick is to move and the other is to look” and “this game will involve shooting,” are ideas that make up the hermeneutic horizon. They can be so obvious that gamers are not even conscious of them. In fact, what is hard is to recall a time when they had to learn these presuppositions—something obvious when a gamer watches a non-gamer attempt to play a video game for the first time. Seriously, just ask your grandma to play *BioShock* sometime for a laugh (or is she actually a closet hardcore gamer?). Other presuppositions appear a little more complicated, like the presupposition of the avatar’s freedom of choice.

As players progress through the video game, their hermeneutic horizon is shifting and altering in relation to the game—just like when you fumble around with a finicky controller and eventually realize that the batteries are dead. Tutorials, maps, and hints all aid in altering a player’s hermeneutic horizon to fit the game space, helping the player understand how to interpret the game world properly so that maneuvering through it becomes second nature. A similar mechanic is at work in books like this one, where page numbers and chapters form a system for easily navigating and negotiating its content (well, that’s the hope). Either way, tutorials or page numbers are signs to the audience concerning how to interpret something—they are hermeneutic indicators.

Gadamer often likened the dynamic of text and reader to a conversation between two people. In a conversation, brand new ideas can pop up that were never in the minds of either person individually. Their conversing is a *fusion of horizons* where a new space of possibilities suddenly comes into existence. This is also the case with video games. Players deeply engaged with interpreting *BioShock*, as they play it, find out more about the game and about themselves. It’s an experience perfectly captured by Jerry Holkins, gamer and co-creator of the web comic *Penny Arcade*:

I can’t resist it. I always feel the strong compulsion to build upon whatever I enjoy, to understand it better. I can’t listen to a song without harmonizing with it, and I can’t play a game without imbuing it with sheaves upon sheaves of personally relevant contextual information.<sup>8</sup>

Gadamer would have been pleased to hear this. He might also have added that this process is always at work in us. When we drive a new car, for example, our actions are pre-structured by our past driving experiences. When we play a game, it is already couched in our personal expectations for it.

Just as rereading a book triggers brand new ideas and interpretations, even though the words remain the same, replaying games repays in diverse and unforeseeable ways. Perron seems to unwittingly invoke Gadamer at one point, writing that there is a “fusion” of player and game in “intentions, perceptions, and actions.”<sup>9</sup> It is a pity, then, that Gadamer’s hermeneutics is not referenced more in video game criticism, because the essence of hermeneutics is the important ambiguity between the interpreter and the interpreted—so too the player, the avatar, and the game world.

When *BioShock* begins, a certain narrative forms out of the expectations of the player (his or her hermeneutic horizon) and the operations of the game. It begins simply with the text “1960 Mid-Atlantic.” The player’s horizon shifts to accommodate this fact, like not being so surprised that Jack can smoke in the airplane (since it is 1960). What follows in *BioShock* is the development of a narrative where it is assumed that Jack is entering Rapture for the first time in his life. Later (spoiler alert), it is revealed that he is not.

## The Meta-Narrative: Twisted Horizons

“Did that airplane crash, or was it hijacked? Forced down. Forced down by something less than a man. Something bred to sleepwalk through life...” When Andrew Ryan exposes Jack’s real identity, Ryan is falsifying both the narrative of Jack coming to Rapture for the first time and the meta-narrative of the player operating a free agent as an avatar. The *first narrative* built around Jack is demolished and replaced with a second one: the narrative of a man bound by fate. In this case, though, rather than the traditional gods wielding divine powers as puppeteers—as in the uplifting tale of Oedipus or the cruise home of Odysseus—it is a con man using psychological techniques and advanced technology. Jack is supposed to be a tool, not a man, or, as Fontaine calls him, an animal bred to “bark like a cocker spaniel.”