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BIOSHOCK AND PHILOSOPHY

IRRATIONAL GAME, RATIONAL BOOK

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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

1
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.[1] 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.[2] 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."[3] 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.[4] 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.”[5] 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*.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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.”[9] 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.” The narrative twist is obviously a

trap sprung by *BioShock*. The game purposefully manipulates the player's hermeneutic horizon to fit the first narrative by only revealing very little information about Jack, and keeping Atlas's true identity concealed. Then, after the twist, there is a lot of information about Jack's real past and about Atlas.

Additionally, there is a *meta-narrative* twist. *BioShock* shatters the meta-narrative of the player enacting personal gameplay choices through the avatar. In a role-playing game (RPG) campaign like those in *BioShock*, *Halo*, or *Half Life*, players cannot customize their avatar. They must play as a specific character in the narrative of the game—but there remains some sense of freedom and personal choice, because the player is controlling a character who is free. Master Chief in the video game *Halo* seems to be a free agent, so the player does not feel cheated of autonomy. But *BioShock* is quite different, because the presupposition of the avatar's autonomy is purposefully and dramatically taken away.

Players react to *BioShock*'s double twist (narrative and meta-narrative) with the realization that their actions made no difference. They had to get Jack to Ryan's office, and kill Rapture's mastermind, because Jack is an unnaturally bred "slave." Players feel played and controlled themselves, and I think this is the product of the designers of *BioShock* replicating the emotional states of Jack in us. The presupposed meta-narrative is destroyed, and players are left with a new meta-narrative of being totally subservient. The manipulation that players feel is all the more powerful in relation to their presupposition of autonomy: the greater the assumption that Jack is like Master Chief, the more manipulated the player feels. As Peter Parrish and Tim McDonald write, Jack is conditioned to respond to other characters like the gamer is conditioned to respond to

“Mission Control’s” voice of instructions in so many other video games. But then, *BioShock* flips that all on its head.[10]

Personally, I didn’t see the twist coming at all, and when it happened it caused me to reflect on what its repercussions were. Yes, I actually had to stop playing, and take a break—it was that intense for me. Gadamer said that there are always risks in any case of a fusion of horizons. One of these risks is having a completely unforeseen experience, or the risk of being changed yourself by the horizon of the “other”—whether the other is a person, a book, a work of art, or a video game. Is this not precisely what happens at the twist of *BioShock*? The player plods through the game with a certain hermeneutic horizon that the game maintains up until the twist. Then, it pulls the rug out from under that horizon. The game invalidates it.

When successful, *BioShock*’s twist sends players reeling. They are left holding fragments of their naive horizon, and broken concepts of what kind of game *BioShock* was expected to be. When replaying *BioShock*, one can’t help but pick up on all of the hints of the twist throughout the game—like every appearance of the phrase “would you kindly,” and Jack’s ability to use the “genetic key.” We can’t put ourselves back in the mindset we had before the twist, though, at least not without awareness of our naivety and maybe a twinge of nostalgia. If players really let *BioShock* affect them, it will push them to self-critique and self-reflection (the kind Gadamer speaks of in “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection”).[11]

Gaming Freedom: Choosing or Obeying?

The self-reflection that *BioShock* produces leads to a realization of the limitations of RPGs. The player has very

little freedom of choice in *BioShock*, because if the player were to choose not to do as Atlas asks of Jack, then no more of *BioShock*'s narrative could be experienced. You can't just waltz over to another part of Rapture any time you like, or play through the game's levels in any sequence you want. As gamers, we by and large have to do what NPCs ask of us in RPGs. Their "request" is no real request at all. It is a demand, which repays in plot and level progression (along with whatever other payment system exists in the game, be it ADAM, coins, or high scores).

We have the choice of what weapons or Plasmids to use, but the quest and its completion are set—just like Jack's fate to kill Ryan, or (spoiler alert) Booker's fate to become Comstock in *BioShock Infinite*. The *BioShock* series features much fatalism, and since the first *BioShock* also explicitly offers the philosophy of Andrew Ryan—with his stance that not to have a choice means being a slave—then gamers must be slaves. How could it be otherwise? We might choose this or that play style, but we are left obeying NPCs. Fortunately, all of this is merely the narrative and meta-narrative from the plot twist of *BioShock* and not quite its end (there is a similar progression in *Infinite*). In the final moments, these games change.

BioShock and *BioShock 2*, unlike *BioShock Infinite*, have alternative endings. In *BioShock*, the alternative endings provide a third hermeneutic horizon to understand the game. In case I lost you (I don't blame you), the first horizon (beginning with "1960 Mid-Atlantic") generates the assumption that *BioShock* is like other RPGs, but that is demolished by the plot twist and replaced with a second horizon about fatalism. That (second) horizon is then replaced with a new horizon about choice, free will, and freedom: the third hermeneutic horizon.

At first it seems that the Little Sisters are devilish additions because they bolster the illusion of player choice and autonomy in the game. However, at *BioShock*'s conclusion they have a significant impact on the narrative's ending, and so too the meta-narrative's ending. If it had one narrative ending, *BioShock*'s meta-narrative would remain within the second horizon and be philosophically about fatalism and the player's role as a "slave." Instead, the multiple endings provide a meta-narrative about the possibility of real choice.

Players cannot choose anything whatsoever they want in *BioShock*, but there are a few alternative endings to choose among. Harvesting all the Little Sisters (spoiler alert) results in an evil ending, harvesting a few gives a more neutral ending, and saving all of them leads to a happy ending. Jack fights against his psychological conditioning and succeeds in overcoming its control. That victory symbolizes players' freedom to see fitting endings in relation to their choices about what to do with the Little Sisters. Jack had to kill Ryan, but he could live as a "man" by fighting Fontaine. Players too must follow the orders of many NPCs, but harvesting and saving are real free choices. In the end, *BioShock* offers a critique of most other RPGs that present a "free" agent as an avatar. If players can't alter the game's narrative, then every choice leads ultimately to the same ending—in this case players can only "obey!" or give up on finishing the video game. But when players can actually alter the narrative, they operate a real free agent and there isn't an underlying illusion of autonomy.

In the end, *BioShock* seeks to be understood by Ryan's philosophical stance that "a man chooses, a slave obeys." With the first horizon, it masquerades as a game of choice, making the player into a "man"—the kind of meta-narrative typical of other RPGs. The second horizon reveals the fault

of the first meta-narrative, because the player is a mere "slave" if his or her choices don't result in any different consequences. The third horizon finally makes room for the player as a "man" again, due to alternative narratives involving choices concerning the Little Sisters. This whole philosophical path of discovery could never extend to the player in a standard video game campaign where the narrative is unchanging. Indeed, how can we look at RPGs the same after playing *BioShock*?

Shock gamers are always on the lookout for the way games typically appear free but are in fact linear sequences of levels, plot development, exposition, scenes, and possibilities—making them ride over the same rails again, and again, like a roller coaster. That doesn't mean they aren't fun. It's still a roller coaster! But Gadamer would say that we can't go back into our old hermeneutic horizon about traditional video games. Linear games will still feel linear. A real experience means we're changed forever because that old horizon, or state of consciousness, will remain naive to us. It reminds me of Sander Cohen's curse: "I want to take the ears off, but I can't!"

It would take a sandbox game like *Fallout 3* or *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* to let gamers act out the kind of complete freedom they might desire in a game: to do whatever they choose. But that has its own limitations. For instance, in sandbox games the player's experiences aren't as well managed. *BioShock* carefully introduces characters like the Big Daddy, Little Sisters, and Splicers. We see them, and learn about them, before we have to fight them. That builds tension, expectation, and it gives a dramatic conclusion in a way difficult for sandbox games to replicate. *BioShock* plants itself in a kind of middle ground: enough limitation of player choice to create a consistent meta-narrative, but enough freedom to sustain a sense of player autonomy. Which, then, is more satisfying? Carefully designed

encounters within a flowing narrative, or a sequence of events that are self-guided?

Well, would you kindly not look at me for the answer? Just don't forget some existential advice from Ryan: "We all make choices, but in the end our choices make us."

Notes

1. Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," http://consc.net/papers/extended.html. For a critique, and more, on "extended cognition theory," see Frederick Adams and Kenneth Aizawa, *The Bounds of Cognition* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

2. David Chalmers, "Is Your Phone Part of Your Mind?" presentation at TEDxSydney, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksasPjrYFTg.

3. Bernard Perron, "The Survival Horror: The Extended Body Genre," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009). Kindle edition.

4. "Rationalizing Rapture with *BioShock*'s Ken Levine," *Gamespy*, June 25, 2007, http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/bioshock/799319p3.html.

5. Dan Pinchbeck, "Shock, Horror: First-Person Gaming, Horror, and the Art of Ludic Manipulation," in *Horror Video Games*: *Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009). Kindle edition.

6. William Gibbons, "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative, and Dystopia in BioShock," *Game Studies* 11(2011), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/gibbons.

7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006). Kindle edition. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

8. Jerry Holkins, "Rigorous Scholarship," *Penny Arcade*, January 11, 2008, http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2008/01/11.

9. Perron, "The Survival Horror."

10. Peter Parrish, "The Bird, or the Cage: What *BioShock Infinite* Says about Choice and Fatalism." IncGamers. April 8, 2013, http://www.incgamers.com/2013/04/the-bird-or-the-cage-what-BioShock-infinite-says-about-choice-and-fatalism.

11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 18–43.

2
The Value of Art in *BioShock*
Ayn Rand, Emotion, and Choice

Jason Rose

BioShock made a big splash not only for the depth of its subject matter, but also for the way it utilized its video game medium to present its big ideas in a uniquely engaging way. The game weaves many themes into its complicated narrative, complete with shifting identities, science fiction superpowers, and survival-horror overtones. As a result, it can be difficult to pick out what Ayn Rand's (1905–82) philosophy of Objectivism says and what *BioShock* offers in response. Rand, who developed her philosophy of "enlightened self-interest" in novels and essays written in the 1940s and 1950s, was heavily influenced by events in her childhood—the Russian Revolution took her family's business and left them starving. Before becoming a United States citizen in 1931, Rand was so impressed with the skyline of Manhattan when she saw it in 1926 that she cried what she called "tears of splendor."[1] It is no accident that Andrew Ryan's biography reads as almost identical to Rand's.

It is clear that *BioShock* wants to be taken as a spiritual sequel to Rand's philosophical novel *Atlas Shrugged*, revealing a possible fate for John Galt's mysterious hidden utopia, sought after for much of the novel but never fully revealed, as the book ends just before Galt discloses his society and its plans for the world.[2] On the one hand, it seems rather unfair for *BioShock* to bill itself as a reimagining and a critique of Rand's works by making Andrew Ryan's version of Galt's utopian Atlantis a place of

dystopian horror. Are we to think less of Rand simply because *BioShock* depicts a possible result of her ideology as very, very undesirable? In fact, I don't think *BioShock* is guilty of this cheap rhetorical trick, but to explain why, I must first clarify what Ayn Rand herself has to say about art, emotions, and ethics. Then, we can see how *BioShock* makes its philosophical points on these topics through its narrative and gameplay. Finally, this will put us in a better position to judge whether *BioShock* creator Ken Levine is fair in his treatment of Rand.

Ayn Rand on Art, Ethics, and Choice

If you have played and enjoyed *BioShock*, you probably know Rand's Objectivist bottom line: society benefits most if everyone is free to act in their own enlightened self-interest, with "enlightened" here referring to fair play and mutual respect for one's peers. Andrew Ryan refers to "The Great Chain of Industry" as a wonderful metaphor for this outlook on enlightenment-through-capitalism. Frank Fontaine, on the other hand, is an excellent example of the kind of unenlightened selfishness that Rand would never advocate. Starting Fontaine Futuristics to capitalize on the discovery of ADAM on the ocean floor was ambitious, perhaps, but not villainous. Pretending to be a revolutionary figure named Atlas and leading Rapture into a civil war so that he can monopolize the ADAM and conquer the surface world certainly *was* villainous, and no Objectivist would argue otherwise.

Rand wrote novels as well as philosophical essays like those found in her *Romantic Manifesto*, where she applies her Objectivist philosophy to art and literature to explain humanity's need for art. She places great importance on works of art that show us difficult truths in an accessible form (*BioShock* itself is a wonderful example of this). She

even articulates the goal of her own fiction writing—*Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead,* the novels on which *BioShock* is based—as a projection of her ideal humanity. Rand develops her philosophy through fiction because she defines art as a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's perspective. That is, a work of art is an artist's take on what it is to be human. Art, according to Rand, concretizes humanity's fundamental view of ourselves and our existence:

> [Art] tells man, in effect, which aspects of his experience are to be regarded as essential, significant, important. In this sense, art teaches man how to use his consciousness. It conditions or stylizes man's consciousness by conveying to him a certain way of looking at existence.[3]

Artists selectively reproduce the qualities of man that they think are essential to humankind. According to Rand, this is the objective value of art. Rational human beings need art to "bring man's concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allow him to grasp them directly," as if they were something perceivable.[4] We need art to truly thrive, not merely to keep boredom at bay.

Faced with an uncaring universe, human beings need a comprehensive view of existence to function: to integrate values, to choose goals, to maintain the unity and coherence of their lives… to save the Little Sisters or harvest them. We find answers in value judgments like the Little Sister dilemma that ultimately influence every moment of our lives, our every action. This is how artworks (movies, novels, video games, interpretive dance) can do much more than merely stave off boredom. According to Rand, contemplating artworks teaches us how to integrate our values and think about humanity's place in the cosmos.

It seems that *BioShock* is exactly the kind of artwork that Rand would appreciate, even if she would strongly contest its particular claims about her views. Rand saw *Atlas Shrugged* as "the projection of an ideal man, as an end in itself." She had in mind the protagonists of her stories, characters like John Galt, an inventor and philosopher who believes that his society is faltering under collectivist socialist ideals by celebrating mediocrity and enforcing self-destructive policies through oppressive bureaucratic regulation. This should sound familiar. Say it with me:

> "No," says the man in Washington, "it belongs to the poor."
>
> "No," says the man in the Vatican, "it belongs to God."
>
> "No," says the man in Moscow, "it belongs to everyone."[5]

In *Atlas Shrugged*, an industrialist named Henry Rearden develops Rearden Metal, stronger and lighter than any known alloy. The government tries to halt production because other industrialists fear losing money to this new metal, but when the government fails to stop Rearden, it demands that Rearden sell *it* the new alloy at a low price for it to make use of. Disgusted with society's hypocrisy, John Galt invites the best and brightest scientists, industrialists, and artists to join him in a secret society cut off from the rest of the world, where they can be brilliant without interference. You might say that Galt is building a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, and where the great would not be constrained by the small. Without these "Atlases" holding up the world, the economy plummets, scientific progress grinds to a halt, and the "parasites" of the world struggle and fail to fill the very large shoes the go-getters left behind. Rand's message is clear: When Atlas shrugs, the world comes tumbling down.

So let great people be great, because in the long run it's better for everyone.

It is no accident that *BioShock* invites players to imagine the game beginning where *Atlas Shrugged* ends—Rapture, Ryan's version of Galt's hidden super-science capitalist utopia, after roughly a decade of operation. Rand wrote in her notes that she expected Galt in her novel to have "no [character] progression" and "no inner conflict" because he was already "integrated (indivisible) and perfect," which makes Andrew Ryan the perfect foil for Galt in *BioShock*.[6] Ken Levine explains:

> I wanted to make Andrew Ryan a character that people could relate to just a little. He became a monster, but he started out as a guy who wanted something, with a passion for life that he felt he couldn't have anywhere else.[7]

Ryan, unlike Galt, is deeply flawed and, though his will is strong and his philosophy clearly defined, he ultimately engineers his own destruction simply because he *does* change, he *is* plagued by inner conflicts, he *is* only human, and he refused to accept all this until it was too late. As the banner at the entrance to Rapture proclaims, there are no "Kings or Gods" in Rapture—"only Man."

Part of the novelty of *BioShock* is found in how it tells its story the way only a video game can, how it uses the features of its medium to communicate more to the player than just what characters say and do, and how it teaches players truths about human nature by engaging with them on an emotional level—exactly the things that Rand thinks great art is supposed to do. And it doesn't just teach players *while* they play; *BioShock* teaches players *through* the act of play. If *BioShock* were merely read or watched instead of played, it would lose much of its emotional