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**To Build the Impossible:
Narratology and Ludology in the *BioShock* Trilogy**

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by

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Dedication

To Alex: for putting up with my late night gaming sessions, incessant questions, and constantly having to remind me which button was crouch.

Abstract

To Build the Impossible: Narratology and Ludology in the *BioShock* Trilogy

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In 2007, Irrational Games released the steampunk first-person shooter *BioShock*. Months after the game's release, Clint Hocking wrote a blog post entitled "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*." The essay brought the debate between narratology and ludology in game studies from the realm of academics, theorists, and developers, to the average gamer. No longer were players and critics analyzing a game based on just its gameplay and/or aesthetics. Now there was the pre-conceived notion that video games should aim to have its narratives element reflect the ludological components as well.

The primary objective of this thesis is to explore the relationship between the narratological and ludological components in the *BioShock* trilogy that went into creating its unique experience as a player-driven narrative. I will be performing three case studies,

comparing and contrasting *BioShock*, *BioShock 2*, and *BioShock Infinite* in regards to ludonarrative synchronicity.

Rather than using Hocking's term, "ludonarrative dissonance," which is loaded with negative connotation, I will analyze the games based on their attempt to reach "ludonarrative synchronicity." This term of my own signifies moments when the narratological elements of a game converge with the ludological elements in a harmonious fashion. Unlike Hocking's word choice, ludonarrative synchronicity does not seek to find fault in a game from the outset.

The strength of analyzing the *BioShock* trilogy in depth, rather than focusing on a group of separate, unrelated titles, is two-fold. First, *BioShock*'s creator Ken Levine's stated goal was to build a game in which the players were not an observer of narrative, but a participant. The other advantage of having three related games to analyze is that it allows for multiple points of comparison and correlation that appear in all three games.

I will detail specific narratological and ludological aspects of each game for those who have not played them, followed by an examination of three key points of comparison between the three games where the intersection of narratology and ludology are prominent within the entire trilogy. Those three key points, not necessarily exclusive of one another, are theme, level design, and immersion.

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Introduction

In 1893, the floating city of Columbia was completed, a striking symbol of American exceptionalism. Its founder, Zachary Hale Comstock, built Columbia to embody the political and religious ideals (as he saw them) of the Founding Fathers. However, Comstock's Eden fell into disagreements with the United States and officially seceded in 1902, floating up into the clouds and away from "the Sodom Below."¹

For ten years, Columbia went undisturbed by its neighbors stuck on sinful soil. However, under Comstock's brutal rule and forced adherence to his ideals, a massive rift formed amongst the citizenry. Minority and non-Christian workers rebelled against the elite, who depended upon their backbreaking service to live their carefree lives. The rebellion went from an underground movement to an overt revolt. Comstock's daughter, Elizabeth, known as the proverbial Lamb and future savior of Columbia, witnessed these atrocities. Though her unique powers were initially what led to the scientific breakthrough necessary to build Columbia, Elizabeth grew autonomous and used her abilities to destroy her father and his cloud city.

In 1946, in the depths of the Atlantic, a business magnate's dream was finally founded. Andrew Ryan constructed his Objectivism-based utopia as an escape from the

¹ Zachary Hale Comstock, "A Reward Deferred," *Voxophone*. Monument Island. July 5th, 1912.

parasites of the surface world: the communists of Russia, the socialists in America, and the religious fervor that Ryan felt halted the sciences and arts.

What is the difference between a man and a parasite? A man builds. A parasite asks, "Where is my share?" A man creates. A parasite says, "What will the neighbors think?" A man invents. A parasite says, "Watch out, or you might tread on the toes of God."²

Therefore, Ryan built the impossible: Rapture. For over a decade, though cut-off from the rest of modern society, the underwater city thrived. Then, Rapture became a nightmare. Its laissez-faire policies created an irreversible economic gap and soon the lower class had had enough. It became clear though, after one failed revolt, that the less fortunate needed their own non-economic source of power. Frank Fontaine, thought killed in the failed coup, controlled the use of plasmids in the city. These concoctions known as ADAM gave their users superhuman abilities. Now hiding amongst the poor under the alias Atlas, Fontaine created an army of ADAM-junkies, driven insane from the plasmids. A Rapturian's financial status no longer mattered. If you bled, you'd be dead.

In 1997, a one-bedroom apartment in Cambridge, MA became the first home for an inelegant start-up. Game designer Ken Levine, along with his partners Jonathan Chey and Robert Fermier left their jobs at Looking Glass Studios to form their own video game company, Irrational Games.³ For Levine, his newfound freedom finally gave him the opportunity to achieve his own seemingly impossible dream. He wanted to build a game

² Andrew Ryan, "A Man or a Parasite," *Audio Diaries*. Hephæstus.

³ Harold Goldberg. *All Your Base Belong To Us* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2011), 192.

in which the “players were not an observer of narrative, but a participant.”⁴ Ten years later the now much larger, Boston-based studio produced the blockbuster hit *BioShock*. Its “thoughtful mechanics, intricate world building, and a smart engaging plot” garnered *BioShock* waves of praise.⁵

All seemed well for Irrational Games after the critical and financial success of both the sequel, *BioShock 2*, and the “prequel”, *BioShock Infinite*.⁶ Nevertheless, just short of a year after *BioShock Infinite*’s release, Ken Levine stripped down the studio to a team of fifteen developers led by himself. According to an anonymous employee, the fall of Irrational Games was due to “unfettered creative freedom, lower-than-expected sales, the butting of heads between Levine and his employees and the unrealistic expectations of big-budget game development.”⁸

In the end, Irrational Games suffered the same fate as the utopias they had created as games. Their lofty goals were unachieved due to exceedingly high expectations and the clash between the stories they wished to tell and the tools available to express them.

⁴ Ken Levine, “From Shodan, to Big Daddy, to Elizabeth: The Evolution of AI Companions” (presentation, BAFTA, London, UK, March 11, 2013).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Chronologically, in the *BioShock* universe, *Infinite* is a prequel. However, the ending of *Infinite* establishes the idea of parallel universes and therefore the events that occur in *Infinite* can take place before, after, or during the storyline of *BioShock 1 & 2*.

⁷ Also referred to as simply *Infinite*.

⁸ Chris Plante, “The final years of Irrational Games, according to those who were there,” *Polygon*, March 6, 2014, <http://www.polygon.com/2014/3/6/5474722/why-did-irrational-close-BioShock-Infinite>.

However, the restructuring of Irrational Games was not the end for *BioShock*. Irrational Games' external company, 2K Games, retained the rights to produce more titles for the franchise. Their Marin-based studio, which was the core team behind *BioShock 2*, would be the site of any future *BioShock* games.

However, 2K Marin and Irrational Games are not the only companies capable of producing what *BioShock* represented. Before the release of *BioShock Infinite*, Levine addressed fans directly via a blog post on the game's website:

There are two core principles for us that define a *BioShock* game. First, it has to be set in a world that is both fantastical and yet grounded in the human experience. Second, it has to provide gamers with a large set of tools, and then set them loose in an environment that empowers them to solve problems in their own way.⁹

The primary objective of this thesis is to explore the relationship between the narratological and ludological components in the *BioShock* trilogy that went into creating its unique experience as a player-driven narrative. In the following chapters, I will provide a literature review covering the debate between narratologists and ludologists within game studies and the concept of ludonarrative dissonance. The methodology chapter will provide the definitions of several imprecise gaming terms, along with my research approach for my three case studies. In order to decipher how the narratological and ludological components interact within each game from the *BioShock* franchise, I will answer the following questions. First, what are the narratological and ludological

⁹ IG. Ken, "A Message from Ken Levine," *Irrational Games*, August 12, 2010, <http://irrationalgames.com/insider/announcement-from-ken-levine/>.

components for each game? Once defining and breaking down these components, the next question to answer is how the elements of the narrative tie into the gameplay in regards to theme, level design, and immersion. My results chapter will compare and contrast the ludonarrative synchronicity of each game to the franchise as a whole and I will conclude with a discussion of the function of ludonarrative synchronicity in our current gaming climate.

Literature Review

Before exploring in detail how I will conduct this analysis, it is imperative to establish an overview of previous writings on the subject of narratology, ludology, and their interaction to have better contextualize where my research differs. First, we need to form a basic understanding of the definitions of ludology and narratology in regards to video game studies.

LUDOLOGY AND NARRATOLOGY

Ludology or ludic studies come from the term *ludus*, Latin for game or play. Falling in line with the works of Matthew Payne, instead of favoring the “fun” connotation of play, I will be focusing on how ludology is an extension of a “rule-based notion of play.”¹⁰ You can analyze chess through a ludological lens and even a simple children’s game like tag has ludological implications. In video game studies, ludology focuses upon the gameplay, both in the diegetic and non-diegetic sense. The actions of the player such as moving the joystick and the movement of the player’s avatar are both under the purview of ludological study.

Like ludology, narratology’s application pre-dates video games. Tzvetan Todorov coined the term narratology in his *Grammaire du Décaméron* in 1969, but its origins date further back. Narratology is meant to be “a specific way of understanding narrative that

¹⁰ Matthew Payne, “The Ludic Wars: The Interactive Pleasures of Post-9/11 Military Video Games” (doctorate’s dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2011), 15-16.

was developed out of structuralism and Russian formalism,” influenced by the works of Vladimir Propp, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes.¹¹

Narratology is not, despite common misuse, an umbrella phrase for the general study of narrative in dramatics and literature.¹² As such, the use of the term narratology in video game studies is only proper when it applies specific narratological methods.

Narratology differs itself from other forms of literary criticism:

It is a systematic, thorough, and disinterested approach to the mechanics of narrative, an approach in stark contrast to those approaches that observe or seek out “value” in some narratives (and not others) or provide hierarchies of narratives based on spurious categories, such as the “genius” of an author artiste.¹³

Just as narratology and even the use of the term narrative amongst its theorists struggle to find a singular definition, the application of narratology for examining video game texts can vary in form. Difficulties in defining the use of narratology in video game studies can lead to the need for justifying the application of the term in one’s writings, as to avoid misunderstandings. In “Interaction and Narrative,” Michael Mateas created his own useful terminology.

I chose to use the term “narrativist” as opposed to the more natural “narratologist” to refer to a specific, anti-game, interactive narrative position. While the narrativist position is often informed by narratology, this is not to say that all narratologists are anti-game or that narratology is intrinsically opposed to game-

¹¹ Paul Cobley, “Narratology,” in *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szemen, 2005, <http://litguide.press.jhu.edu/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

like interaction.¹⁴

Etymological struggles such as this are at the heart of the ludology/narratology debate. “The fact that [they] don’t understand each other’s statements” exacerbates the perceived conflict between ludologists and narratologists, that these two types of theorists are exclusive forms of video game studies.¹⁵ In short: [they] don’t agree on what ‘story’ means, and [they] don’t agree on what ‘game’ means.”¹⁶

Take for instance, Greg Costikyan’s “I Have No Words & I Must Design.” For Costikyan, a game is a “form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in pursuit of a goal.”¹⁷ He also defines a game by what it is not: a puzzle, toy, or story. “Gaming is NOT about telling stories,” Costikyan says. Why? Because “stories are linear. Games are not.”¹⁸

Costikyan’s article raises two points of interest to the debate between ludologists and narratologists. The definition of games may not be shared by all nor the requirement for stories to be linear. Costikyan’s argument is dependent upon his readers agreeing with

¹⁴ Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, “Interaction and Narrative,” in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 666.

¹⁵ Keith Burgun, “Games, Stories, and Words,” *Gamasutra*, March 27, 2015, http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/KeithBurgun/20150327/239867/Games_Stories_and_Words.php.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Greg Costikyan, “I Have No Words & I Must Design,” in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 196.

¹⁸ Costikyan, 195.

his use of terminology. Another ludological scholar may agree with Costikyan's conclusion, but not with the vocabulary used to reach it. The second point of concern with Costikyan's phrasing is that the blunt language is easy to misinterpret as it leaves little room for a game, by Costikyan's standards, to have a strong relationship between narratology and ludology. Yet Costikyan says:

Games often, and fruitfully, borrow elements of fiction- - - the notion of increasing narrative tension is a useful one for any game that comes to a definite conclusion. But to try to hew too closely to a storyline is to limit player's freedom of action and their ability to make meaningful decisions.¹⁹

Costikyan is not the only ludologist who sees the benefit of narratology in video game studies. Gonzalo Frasca's "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video) games and narrative" was written with the "intention... not to replace the narratologic approach, but to complement it. We want to better understand what the relationship with narrative and videogames is; their similarities and differences."²⁰ This echoes the words of Espen Aarseth who said, "To claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories. And yet... the difference is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two."²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative," *Ludology*, 1999, <http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.html>.

²¹ Ibid.

For Costikyan, there is a “direct, immediate conflict between the demands of a story and the demands of a game” in that stories do not allow for “freedom of action.”²² It is participation “that for game critics poses a potential threat to threat to the narrative construction,” according to Henry Jenkins.²³ Participation, interactivity, responsiveness, are all different terms to phrase the same crux of this conflict. While the reader cannot affect a story to the same degree as a player to a game, proper narratology has its own form of participation and/or interactivity. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes describes the “goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.”²⁴ Gérard Genette echoes this sentiment in his book, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*.

The preference... is not only “readerly” (classical) but “writerly” (let us roughly interpret: modern) perhaps expresses the [reader’s] desire when in contact with the aesthetically “subversive” points of the text, to play a role vaguely more active than simply that of observing and analyst. The reader, here, believes he is participating in and to a minute extent (minute, but decisive) contributing to creation; and perhaps, by recognition alone-or rather by bringing to light features which the work invented, often without its author’s knowledge, in reality he is.²⁵

²² Greg Costikyan, “Where Stories End and Games Begin,” *Game Developer*, September 2007.

²³ Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 679.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 4.

²⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell UP, 1980), 266.

The two activities, reading and gaming, are both interactive to an extent and it is up to video game developers to test the limits of how well the two different styles of participation blend.

Putting aside the semiotic differences and the moot debate over participation, the real question to ask when it comes to the relationship between narratology and ludology is how (not should) components from both camps intersect?

A narratological standard of study is Janet H. Murray's 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Though a bit past its prime in regards to relevancy in the current industry, several of her predictions and hopes for the future of storytelling in video games were also what Ken Levine aimed to, and to some extent, achieved.

In order to create rich and satisfying stories that exploit the characteristic properties of digital environments and deliver the aesthetic pleasures the new medium seems to promise us... writers would need a concrete way to structure a coherent story not as a single sequence of events but as a multiform plot open to the collaborative participation of the interactor.²⁶

Ten years later, Levine did just that.

LUDONARRATIVE DISSONANCE

The direct connection between narratology and ludology as it pertains to *BioShock* is not a revolutionary premise. Clint Hocking's article "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*" is the genesis marker of such analysis specific to the series.

²⁶ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 185.

Hocking only uses the phrase “ludonarrative dissonance” once, in the title, so its firm definition is never provided. In general, ludonarrative dissonance refers to the gap between “what a text is about as a game and what it is about as a story.”²⁷ Though Hocking is not a scholar, his terminology has become both industry and academic standard.

Hocking opened Pandora’s Box with his article. Some disagreed with his term on a semiotics basis. Game designer and programmer Corvus Elrod regarded the term as pointless and redundant.

So we have a situation where the fight choreography does not uphold the fiction behind the show. But we don’t refer to this as choreonarrative dissonance. Nor, for that matter, do we refer to the poorly written and delivered dialog as dialonarrative dissonance. Or the lackluster camera work as cinemanarrative dissonance.²⁸

The fear was that ludonarrative dissonance would become game theory’s post-modern monster where, instead of gaining meaningful insight into where a game went wrong, criticism would slip down the rabbit hole and into the abyss of conflated ideas incomprehensible to a general audience.

In his review of *Max Payne 3* (2012), author Tom Bissell agrees, “Some designers and critics regard ludonarrative dissonance as a core problem in modern game

²⁷ Chris Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*," *Click Nothing*, October 7, 2007, http://www.clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

²⁸ Eric Swain, “In Defense of Ludonarrative Dissonance,” *The Game Critique* (blog), August 5, 2010, <http://www.thegamecritique.com/recent-posts/in-defense-of-ludonarrative-dissonance/2283/>.

design.”²⁹ But not he. Bissell is *Grantland*’s resident video game journalist, who has made a name for himself when it comes to analyzing first-person shooter games like *BioShock* with his award-winning piece “Thirteen Ways to look at a Shooter,” for which he won the 2012’s Games Journalism Prize for Best Criticism. Bissell declares *Max Payne 3* to be “the most ludonarratively dissonant... ever made...[the game] is aware of its dissonance, and even has some fun with it, as though in the hope that acknowledging a problem’s existence might be mistaken for addressing it.”³⁰ The titular character suffers from protagonist disparity, and his treatment during cut scenes is at odds from his portrayal in gameplay. Max Payne could easily be a stand in for his designers. Payne knows that he is a screw-up, a washed-up hitman turned crappy bodyguard, yet jumps into the fray of ultra-violence without regard for his slipping skill set. The player then spends the next few hours brutally shooting off body parts in bullet-time fashion. There is no lack of murderous talent here. No comment on how Payne is past his prime. The game admonishes Payne for “being too American, too prone to charging into situations he doesn’t understand, too prone to use violence as a first resort.”³¹ The developers of *Max Payne 3* are just the same. They may try to make the game over-the-top in the attempt to

²⁹ Tom Bissell, “Vicodin Visions,” *Grantland*, May 31, 2012, <http://grantland.com/features/on-rockstar-games-max-payne-3/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

satire this sort of visceral gameplay by blowing it up to huge proportions. The intention, however, never melds together and does not feel natural.

That is the essence of ludonarrative dissonance. It is a gut feeling that even the most novice of gamers can sense. In Conan O'Brien's Clueless Gamer segments, the comedian and talk show host tests out the hottest video games upcoming and/or on the market. As the segment title suggests, O'Brien is not your typical gamer and most of the videos feature him struggling to just figure out the controls. Nevertheless, even a novice like him notices when a game's narratological components are at odds with the ludological. While playing through *Hitman: Absolution* (2012), O'Brien comments on the illogical level design when it comes to storing dead bodies. Hiding the remains of the enemies you have slaughtered is a key dynamic of the game, for if their compatriots find the corpses, this alerts them to your presence, thus increasing the level of difficulty for that particular level. However, the ample resources for body disposal, such as dumpsters and heavy brush, prove much too convenient for O'Brien, as he yells over the loud grinding of his most recent victim being mulched "There's an incredible amount of storage everywhere... that's fantastic! They know everyone there is going to get murdered!"³² O'Brien never uses the term ludonarrative dissonance, but neither did Hocking for the most part.

³² Team Coco, "Conan O'Brien Reviews 'Hitman:Absolution'-Clueless Gamer-CONAN on TBS," *YouTube*. November 14, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XLrtLsGt_g.

It is not my intention to continue in Hocking's footsteps, but to steer his thesis in a new direction. Hocking believed that *BioShock* suffered "from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story."³³ I concur with Hocking's premise; however, it is the narratological and ludological components that Hocking chooses to examine where I find his piece lacking. Hocking never defines what he would categorize as "ludic elements," thus producing an analysis based more on subjectivity than critical thinking.

³³ Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *BioShock*."

Methodology

DEFINITIONS

Concerning definitions, the video game industry is rife with fluid vocabulary and lacks a consensus; however, several terms in the industry are key concepts in this analysis. For the purpose of clarity, I will use the following definitions. The use of these terms in other sources may not necessarily be synonymous. In such cases, I will attempt to justify my choice of denotation.

The definition of genre differs in video games as compared to film. Whereas narrative tropes such as character archetypes, setting, and plot are the base for cinematic genres, gameplay defines a video game's genre. This analysis will be adhering to Mark J. P. Wolf's definition where "player participation is arguably the central determinant in describing and classifying video games, more so even than iconography."³⁴ For instance, a game like *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), in which players direct Mario to jump from platform to platform, beam to beam, cloud to cloud, is a platformer. A role-playing game (RPGs) such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), centers on the player creating his character whether it is by the avatars appearance, skills, or social interactions. *BioShock* is an example of a first-person shooter (FPS), a game where the player controls the character via the eyes of the avatar, shooting down enemies. An avatar is a graphical

³⁴ Mark J.P. Wolf, "Genre and the Video Game," in *The Medium of the Video Game!* ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 113.

representation of the character the player controls and in a FPS video game like *BioShock*, disembodied hands, wrist, and forearms typically are the only portions of the avatar's body presented on screen. When describing the initial action taken that causes the avatar to react, this analysis will refer to the player in the second person. Therefore, instead of writing "the player(s) can choose to use weapons or plasmids in combat," I will write "you can choose to use weapons or plasmids in combat."

To avoid the subjectivity I find with Hocking's work, here I will clearly set out the components I am examining in regards to narratology and ludology.

Narratology, in the case of this analysis, will not revolve around its structuralism roots. Instead, narratological components are any aspects of the game that create and arise from the narrative, such as the setting (both time and place), characters, and story. The difference between narrative and story in this case is that "a story is about facts or events that are happening in a predefined world" while the "narrative describes how the story is told: in a linear or in a nonlinear way, which points of view will be used, etc."³⁵

The ludological components are, for the most part, more abstract. For this analysis I will be using the terms game mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (referred to as MDA), for ludology. MDA is the current industry standard for use in video game development.

³⁵ Trinh Elise, "Game Narrative: Thinking Outside the Lines," *Gamasutra*, February 20, 2014, http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/EliseTrinh/20140220/206179/Game_narrative_thinking_outside_the_lines.php.

Matt LeBlanc, who worked with Ken Levine at Looking Glass Studios, created the following definitions for his conceptual framework of formal abstract design tools.

Mechanics refer to all necessary pieces that we need to play the game. This primarily refers to the rules of the game, but can also refer to the equipment, the venue, or anything else necessary for playing the game. Controls, such as the button used to produce the mechanics, will not be included. The controls for the *BioShock* series not only change between games, but from console to console as well, and players have the option to change the controls to buttons of their choice.

If we think of the game as a system, the mechanics are the complete description of that system.³⁶ In a game like *Borderlands* (2009), a FPS filled with kooky characters and even crazier physics, the lack loss of health when a player falls from a great height is a mechanic of the game.

Dynamics refers to the “behavior” of the game, the actual events and phenomena that occur as the game is played. When we view a game in terms of its dynamics, we are asking, “What happens when the game is played?” The relationship between dynamics and mechanics is one of emergence. A game’s dynamics emerge from its mechanics.³⁷ When playing *Dishonored* (2012), a first-person stealth action-adventure game where the player undertakes the role of a scorned assassin, choosing to sneak past a guard rather

³⁶ Matt LeBlanc, “Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics,” in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 440.

³⁷ LeBlanc, 440-441.

than execute him is an example of the game's dynamics. A dynamic choice need not be a decision between a better or worse action, though the outcomes they produce may differ. Choosing stealth over vicious is not a right or wrong choice, but purely a matter of a gamer's desired play style.

A game's aesthetics are its emotional content, the desirable emotional responses we have when we play the kinds of fun that result from playing the game. A game's aesthetics emerge from its dynamics; how the game behaves determines how it makes the player feel.³⁸ The difference in aesthetics between two racing games from 1997, *Mario Kart 64* and *Diddy Kong Racing*, is that the former intends to be fun with its random item generator mechanics and its lack of dynamic options to compensate for this apparent chaos. *Diddy Kong Racing*, on the other hand, has much more strategic dynamic capabilities due to its hierarchical item generator system, thus creating a more competitive aesthetic.³⁹

Finally, rather than using Hocking's term, "ludonarrative dissonance," which is loaded with negative connotation, I will analyze the games based on their attempt to reach "ludonarrative synchronicity." This term of my own signifies moments when the narratological elements of a game converge with the ludological elements in a

³⁸ LeBlanc, 441.

³⁹ Really Freakin' Clever, "Diddy Kong Racing," *YouTube*, May 16, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7_u57q-ztE.

harmonious fashion. Unlike Hocking's word choice, ludonarrative synchronicity does not seek to find fault in a game from the outset.

In order to determine ludonarrative synchronicity, I will be using a refined version of Marc LeBlanc's inquiry into drama in games.⁴⁰ The answers to the following three key questions will illuminate how the theme, level design, and immersion in each of the three *BioShock* titles bring together narratology and ludology.

First, how does the narrative function as an aesthetic of play? The year 2013 saw the release of two action-adventure games with similar themes: *Far Cry 3* and *Tomb Raider*. Both games forced both the player and the game's protagonist to commit atrocities in order to survive. Their narratives are similar as well, with Jason Brody and Lara Croft attempting to rescue their friends from crazed locals and escape from a tropical island swarming with viscous animals and criminals. Neither character is a violent person at heart, but the game requires each of them to brutally murder dozens of non-playable characters (NPCs) in order to survive. Unlike *Max Payne 3*'s unclear satire, *Far Cry 3*'s lead designer Jamie Keen and lead writer Jeffery Yohalem wanted to the game to be "about subverting video game clichés."⁴¹ The aesthetic of the game relates not only to story told, but also the player's ability.

If the player's good at headshots, Jason's good at headshots," he said. "The player

⁴⁰ LeBlanc, 441.

⁴¹ Kirk Hamilton, "I Hope Video Gaming's *Apocalypse Now* Fixation Isn't Just An Excuse for Artsy Violence," *Kotaku*, June 18, 2012, <http://kotaku.com/5919342/hopefully-video-gamings-apocalypse-now-fixation-isnt-just-an-excuse-for-arty-violence>.

pulls Jason in certain directions, and that dialogue [between player and character], I find it really interesting. You have this everyman who's lost on an island, who's never shot a gun before, and you have a player who has played first-person shooters before. And the player shows Jason what's what about first-person shooters, but that will come back to haunt the player later.⁴²

Where *Far Cry 3* means to provide a retrospective aesthetic, making the player question his or her own enjoyment of violent games, *Tomb Raider* is much clearer in its admonishment of violence. Lara Croft breaks down in tears multiple times during the game, crying in guilt over the actions she has taken to save her friends. Even if the player is skilled with these styles of games, he or she will be unable to save all the NPCs. The game's aesthetic is to draw empathy from the player to Lara (and to her friends to a certain degree) by making them experience the same frustrations and inability to save the day based on skill alone.

The second question when evaluating a game's ludonarrative synchronicity is what kinds of dynamics can evoke the narrative. A game like *Left 4 Dead* (2008) and its sequel have strong ludonarrative synchronicity for their use of dynamics in order to justify your empathy towards the game's NPCs. The core campaign's narrative for both these games is based on films like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and the comic book/TV series *The Walking Dead* (2003, 2010). You play as a member of a survivor group, attempting to traverse through zombie-infested areas in order to reach an evacuation site. In game, it would make sense for your avatar to care about his fellow survivors, but the

⁴² Ibid.

developers at Valve also found a way for you the player to care about the other survivors as well. NPCs are highly responsive in *Left 4 Dead*, both reactively and pro-actively. You and the NPCs share most of the same mechanics. Both can kill enemies and save other survivors after they take damage. Dynamically it makes sense to keep as many of the NPCs alive because that is more ammo to pump into the undead by the NPC survivors, but also more bandages from the NPCs available to wrap around your wounds. The player does care whether they die, even if their feelings towards their computerized teammates are for purely selfish reasons, rather than in a truly sympathetic or empathetic way.

The final question to ask when judging ludonarrative synchronicity is “from what kinds of mechanics do those dynamics emerge?”⁴³ A game cannot have strong ludonarrative synchronicity if it lacks a consistent internal logic when it comes to its own rules or has an incoherent narrative. Take for example, the dynamically compromised character that is Sonic the Hedgehog: In 1991, when Nintendo released their Super Nintendo Entertainment System, the Sega Corporation introduced the Genesis. Their response to Nintendo’s figurehead, Mario, was the spiky hair, blue Sonic the Hedgehog. The mascot for the Genesis, Sonic’s speed was supposed to be representative of the console’s processing power. While both the unit and the character were fast, it is best to play *Sonic the Hedgehog* slowly. According to Jack of the gaming web-series, *Previously*

⁴³ LeBlanc, 441.

Recorded, “going fast almost makes the game unplayable.”⁴⁴ This is not just one player’s opinion; there are mechanical flaws in the game that makes Sonic and his speedy sneakers counterintuitive. Unlike the early *Mario* platformers, where the avatar remains positioned on the left side of the screen while maintaining three-fourths of the screen visible for seeing oncoming enemies, Sonic’s avatar is in the middle of the screen. That alone would make *Sonic the Hedgehog* the more difficult platformer to play. When running at full speed, a player typically has eight frames or 1/4 of seconds to react until obstacles reveal themselves. However, even if the player makes the dynamic choice to play it slow, the level design provides another mechanical hurdle. There are springs that push the blue hedgehog forward, there are loops that require you to use Sonic’s dash mechanic, and Sonic automatically builds up momentum after several seconds of moving forward continuously even without the numerous downward facing ramps. The game’s flawed mechanics compromise the dynamics, removing the “fun” aesthetic featured in the original Mario platformers and replacing it with a “frustrating” aesthetic when players attempt to play the game as the marketing purported.

Leblanc’s inquiries are the framework for the examination of the interaction between narratology and ludology in regards to theme, level design, and immersion for each of the three *BioShock* titles. These three concepts (theme, level design, and immersion) are the specific areas of focus that I wish to direct my analysis of

⁴⁴ Previously Recorded, “Sonic, The Most Overrated Game Ever?” *Red Letter Media*, July 28, 2014, <http://redlettermedia.com/pre-rec-sonic-the-most-overrated-game-ever/>.

ludonarrative synchronicity, each representing an area of game design where narratological and ludological components can (though not necessarily do or need to) interrelate.

Theme is a literary term that refers to “the main idea, or the central generalization, implied or stated in a work... made tangible through its depiction in character, action and imagery.”⁴⁵ Naturally it tends to best be exhibited by the narratological components of a game, but the ludological elements of a game can be representative of its theme as well. *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), a loose adaptation of the film *Apocalypse Now* (itself an even looser adaptation of Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*), has an anti-war theme that is exhibited in multiple ways. *Spec Ops* features multiple military characters with shady pasts, forces the player to take drastic action that could doom the lives of innocents in order to save others, and features a gritty landscape of destruction brought upon Dubai by U.S. forces.

The wrecked environment of Dubai is part of the game’s level design, a mainly ludological aspect of game design. In its simplest form, game design is

the data entry and layout portion of the game development cycle. A level is, for all intents and purposes, the same as a mission, stage, map or other venue of the player interaction. As a level designer, you are chiefly responsible for the gameplay.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ John M. Desmond and Peter Hawkes, *Adaptation: Studying Film & Literature* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 24.

⁴⁶ Tim Ryan, “Beginning Level Design, Part 1,” *Gamasutra*, April 16, 1999, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131736/beginning_level_design_part_1.php.

According to designer Bart Vossen, specifically regarding the gameplay aspect of level design:

Level design refers to the space in which the combat takes place. This includes the shape of the area, placement of objects and other gameplay elements in the area. It also partially includes which enemies are encountered, because these alter the mode of interaction and experience of the space.⁴⁷

Level design is also about flow. Sigeru Miyamoto, creator of *The Legend of Zelda* franchise, puts focus on directing the player in his level design. There are four goals he aims for in designing levels for the benefit of the player. The first is level flow. How do the spaces in the level fit together? Where is the player supposed to go, and will she know how to get there? Next is intensity ramping. Does the intensity of the experience ramp up in a satisfying way? Do monsters get more difficult as the level goes on? Does the player get a chance to learn how the enemies work and then display her mastery later on? Third is variety. Is there sufficient variety in the gameplay? Do enemy encounters frequently repeat themselves? Are the spaces varied in interesting ways? Finally is training. If the design requires new skills from the player, does it teach and test those skills appropriately?⁴⁸

All of these definition, however, are strictly mechanics-based, overlooking the importance of level design in regards to how a digital space can also convey narrative,

⁴⁷ Bart Vossen, "Level design for melee combat systems," *Gamasutra*, March 24, 2015, http://gamasutra.com/blogs/BartVossen/20150324/239562/Level_design_for_melee_combat_systems.php.

⁴⁸ Mike Stout, "Learning From The Masters: Level Design In *The Legend of Zelda*," *Gamasutra*, January 3, 2012, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134949/learning_from_the_masters_level_.php.

emotion, and meaning. Level design can also be applied to a game's architecture, its aesthetic style, and the ambiance it creates.⁴⁹ Even the smallest of details, a throwaway prop, can have significance and purpose in the game's level design. In 2013's *The Last of Us* remnants from life as we know it, before the zombie apocalypse in game, remain for the player to find. While running away from dangerous Clickers and other undead abominations, protagonist Joel becomes trapped on a college campus. Sneaking from room to room, it almost feels as if the occupants have just vacated for spring break, not that they are dead or worse. Trash is strewn across sticky carpet floors, food left out, but every once in a while Joel will come across a panicked note written on the wall asking for help. These details add to the aesthetic of fear, reminding the player just how quickly death can come in this game.

Immersion is neither strictly narratological or ludological at its core. The concept of immersion applies to the meta-game, what occurs outside of the gameplay itself. Other examples of the meta-game include the social aspect of playing *Mario Party 10* (2015) with friends or competing in a *Battlefield 4* (2013) battle online. Meta-gaming is about the player's experience and it is affected by the narratology and ludology of a game.

Immersion has two applications in video game studies. The player getting "caught up in the world of the game's story" is an example of immersion at the diegetic level, while the player's love of the game and the strategy that goes into it is immersion at the

⁴⁹ Aesthetic, in this case, is not being used as defined by MDA, but as applied to the fine arts.

nondiegetic level.”⁵⁰ For this analysis, the focus will be on the diegetic form of immersion. A fully developed diegesis is more important than one with realistic visuals or sounds. According to Janet Murray, “the more realized the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it. When things we do bring tangible results, we experience... [a] sense of agency.”⁵¹ In *Goldeneye* (1997), even though the toilets resemble cubist art gone array and their flushing sound is hardly apropos, the veil of reality is maintained by the sensory feedback players get when pressing a button causes a toilet to flush. It is a simple mechanic, but helps maintain the illusion of the game’s reality.

RESEARCH APPROACH

I will be performing three case studies, comparing and contrasting *BioShock*, *BioShock 2*, and *BioShock Infinite* in regards to ludonarrative synchronicity. The strength of analyzing the *BioShock* trilogy in depth, rather than focusing on a group of separate, unrelated titles, is two-fold. First, Ken Levine’s stated goal was to achieve some form of ludonarrative synchronicity. The other advantage of having three related games to analyze is that it allows for multiple points of comparison and correlation that appear in all three games.

⁵⁰ Alison McMahan, “Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 68.

⁵¹ Murray, 126.

I will conduct a textual analysis for each case study. Yotam Haimberg's "Critical Literacy: Game Criticism for Game Developers" sets out a generic methodology for how to perform a close reading of a video game, instead of a quantifiable scored analysis based on a rubric. According to Haimberg, criticism should provide fundamental feedback for developers, elevate the state of the game, contain understandable or clarified vocabulary, and spur further discussion. His piece recommends game critics provide a better method of communicating their opinions of a game by using constructive criticism that would be beneficial towards developers. "We need to nurture a community that is critically literate;" Haimberg says, "one that can discuss our perceptions of game experiences, properly evaluate those experiences, and create new games that advance the medium further." I see no reason why scholars cannot share this goal and follow Haimberg's outline as well.⁵²

Beyond the close reading, I will use opinions from outside sources as well to judge the ludonarrative synchronicity of each game, including those in the press, other developers, and gamers. The purpose of bringing in the perspective of other critics, developers, and gamers is to assist in eliminating the possibility of a single subjective decision on whether or not the video game aligns with itself.

Before the restructuring of Irrational Games, the studio was open to revealing the process behind the making of their games, including releasing primary resources such as

⁵² Yotam Haimberg, "Critical Literacy: Game Criticism for Game Developers," *Well Played 2*, no. 2 (2013): 33.

their original pitch for *BioShock*. Levine and other heads of departments remain open to the press and continue to discuss their past projects with journalists. I will be using these interviews and articles written by the developers themselves as primary resources to support my analysis.

In the video game industry, unlike film and literary critics, the opinions of reviewers, journalists, and even average gamers can have a direct impact on the project they are covering. A video game is malleable and can be modified even after its initial release. When *Assassin's Creed Unity* was released November 11, 2014, early reviews of the game were critical of the many bugs and programming errors that rendered the game unplayable. Initial sales did not meet projections and only two weeks after the game's launch, Ubisoft Montreal CEO Yannis Mallet released an apology.

Unfortunately, at launch, the overall quality of the game was diminished by bugs and unexpected technical issues. I want to sincerely apologize on behalf of Ubisoft and the entire *Assassin's Creed* team. These problems took away from your enjoyment of the game, and kept many of you from experiencing the game at its fullest potential. We've been working hard to fix the problems players are reporting, and the patches we have released so far have resolved many of them.⁵³

Not all studios are as quick to respond to the wishes of fans or even respond at all. This is where “mods” come into play. “Mods” refers to modifications to games made by players, not the original developers. For instance, players have changed third-person camera games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) into first-person games. The ability of the players

⁵³ Yannis Mallet, “An Update on Assassin's Creed Unity from Yannis Mallet,” *Assassin's Creed Live Updates*, November 26, 2014, http://assassinscreed.ubi.com/en-us/news/news_detail.aspx?c=tc:154-186654-16&ct=tc:148-76770-32.

to adjust games to fit their own wants and desires puts added pressures on studios to produce what the marketplace demands. For if the major companies are not producing the types of games desired by the audience, then critics and players well-versed in coding will.

Due to the unique nature shared by developers, gamers, and critics within the gaming industry, relevant criticism and observations made by those not associated with the *BioShock* teams are applicable for this analysis. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* includes not only references to the work of scholars such as Henry Jenkins and developers like Mark LeBlanc, but also anonymous players known only by their handles such as Mochan's "The Evil Summoner FAQ_v1.0: How to Be a Cheap Ass." The piece falls under the category of "New Games Journalism" (NGJ), a term created by Rock, Paper, Shotgun's founder Kieron Gillen as an extension of Tom Wolfe's "The New Journalism."⁵⁴ The purpose of NGJ is to justify more personal-style writings on video games, rather than just the traditional form of criticism and reviews. "Bow, Nigger" by Ian Shanahan, also known as always black, is an example of NGJ that also appears in *The Game Design Reader*.

These outside sources serve as touchstones for evaluating my own personal observations that may appear to cross the line between opinion and NGJ.

⁵⁴ Kieron Gillen, "The New Games Journalism," *Kieron Gillen's Workblog*, May 13, 2005, http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress_html/assorted-essays/the-new-games-journalism/.

ANALYSIS

Each section is devoted to a single game in the series, based on their release order. The analysis will focus on the core gameplay and stories in *BioShock*, *BioShock 2* and *BioShock Infinite*. I will not explore the multiplayer portion of *BioShock 2*, nor do a separate in-depth analysis of any of the games' downloadable content (DLCs).

I will detail specific narratological and ludological aspects of each game for those who have not played them, followed by an examination of three key points of comparison between the three games where the intersection of narratology and ludology are prominent within the entire trilogy. Those three key points, not necessarily exclusive of one another, are theme, level design, and immersion.

BioShock

When *BioShock* burst onto the scene in 2007, it was not at the top of the marketplace for first-person shooter of its day. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* on PC out-sold Ken Levine's creation, along with both *Call of Duty 4* and *Halo 3* on the Xbox 360. *BioShock* did not even make the top ten best seller for the PlayStation 3.⁵⁵ However, in relation to artistic credibility, *BioShock* was the talk of the town. Even non-traditional gaming review sources lauded the game. The *New York Times* declared that "anchored by its provocative, morality-based story line, sumptuous art direction and superb voice acting, *BioShock* can also hold its head high among the best games ever made."⁵⁶ Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Pete Metzger continued with high praise:

A game like *BioShock*... changes everything. Sure, it's fun to play, looks spectacular and is easy to control. But it also does something no other game has done to date: It really makes you feel. After all, aren't video games supposed to make us lose ourselves in vast imaginary worlds? *BioShock* does. And more.⁵⁷

What set *BioShock* apart from the other shoot 'em up of its day was the game's narrative. *BioShock* did not just have a complex and intricate story, but also the narrative altered based on the player's experience. The choices you made changed the game, and not just in an immediate sense such as an enemy's head blown off and a fountain of blood spurts

⁵⁵ All financial data acquired from IGN's 2007 Year in Review coverage.

⁵⁶ Seth Schiesel, "Genetics Gone Haywire and Predatory Children in an Undersea Metropolis," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/08/arts/television/08shoc.html>.

⁵⁷ Peter Metzger, "*BioShock*? You're soaking in it," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/sep/20/news/wk-gamea20>.

after you press X to fire the grenade launcher. *BioShock*'s ending depended entirely on how the player chose to play the game. Would they be ruthless and brutal? Would they try to maintain some moral center? *BioShock* was not the first game to feature multiple conclusions. As far back as the 1980s, role-playing games altered the end based on the character created by the player. The space-marine RPG *Mass Effect*, also released in 2007, carried the player's choices through not only the game, but also the entirety of the series. A choice made at the beginning of the first *Mass Effect* could affect events that occurred in *Mass Effect 3* (2012). *BioShock* worked to do the same in a singular game, but as a FPS instead of a third-person space marine epic. A common criticism towards first-person shooters is their stories often taking a back seat to ultra-violence. Ken Levine found a way to have both the story and the shooting by creating *BioShock* for "re-inventing the first person action RPG."⁵⁸

BioShock takes place in 1960, where Jack, the sole survivor of a plane crash, is lost at sea in the Atlantic Ocean. Whether it is fate or pure luck, Jack finds his way to the hidden underwater city of Rapture. The former Objectivism utopia has fallen into disarray forcing Jack into the fray as he battles his way through demented Splicers and traps laid by Rapture's architect, Andrew Ryan. All the while, revolutionist Atlas aids

⁵⁸ IG. Admin, "From the Vault-The BioShock Pitch," *Irrational Games Insider*, May 20, 2010, <http://irrationalgames.com/insider/from-the-vault-may/>.

Jack with instructions, hoping that in guiding Jack through Rapture he can use him to save his own family from Ryan's wrath.⁵⁹

Ken Levine, along with co-directing the game with Alyssa Finley, was also *BioShock's* writer. Levine put his "useless liberal arts degree" to work and created a narrative influenced by a wide-range of "utopian and distopian [sic]" writers such as Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and especially Ayn Rand.⁶⁰ Rapture's founders based their tenants on the Randian philosophy of Objectivism and its core principles: individualism, freedom, rationality, and capitalism.⁶¹

The plot of *BioShock* shares multiple parallels to that of Ayn Rand's 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. Andrew Ryan's name a partial anagram for Ayn Rand, he shares her disillusionment in America after her escape from Russia, and he is also Rapture's John Galt. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Galt's Gulch is a "capitalist utopia... where the great titans of the era have been hiding. Here reside the preeminent industrialists, financiers, builders, jurists, scientists, composers, and artists who have vanished over a twelve year period."⁶² Dagny Taggart, the novel's protagonist, does not discover the hideaway until she is

⁵⁹ "BioShock," *BioShock Wiki*, <http://BioShock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock>.

⁶⁰ Douglass C. Perry, "The Influence of Literature and Myth in Videogames," *IGN*, May 18, 2006, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2006/05/18/the-influence-of-literature-and-myth-in-videogames?page=3>.

⁶¹ Anne C. Heller, *Ayn Rand and the World She Made* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 195.

⁶² Heller, 92.

involved in a plane crash that just happens to occur near the location, similar to the opening of *BioShock* and Jack's happenstance upon Rapture.

Dr. Robert Stadler, one of *Atlas Shrugged's* antagonists, has a Rapturian counterpart in Frank Fontaine. Like Stadler's betrayal of Galt, Fontaine worked for Ryan initially to gain Rapture's secrets and sell them to the United States government. It is with Stadler, a prototypical mad scientist that the novel "borders on science fiction."⁶³ Fontaine too has a knack for kooky science, discovering the mysterious substance ADAM for which he later teams up with Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum to create Little Sisters as vessels to generate and harvest the rare material.

Little Sisters are young girls that, while retaining the mind of a child, appear as greyish corpses with glowing yellow eyes, another monstrous result of a society "where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality."⁶⁴ Big Daddies are steampunk cyborgs, unlucky humans turned into horrific guardians of the Little Sisters. Along with being stuck in a massive diving suit, they are equipped with a large drill. Big Daddies are mini-bosses, enemies that are more difficult to fight than the common Splicer, and they appear repeatedly throughout the game, but only one or two times per level.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Andrew Ryan, "From the desk of Andrew Ryan," *Video*, Bathysphere Station.

The Big Daddies and Little Sisters, with their monstrous forms, exemplify the aesthetic Irrational Games was aiming for. *BioShock* will “tell a mature, terrifying story,” the initial game pitch says, and it will “scare the hell out of people.”⁶⁵

There are other ways, beyond character design, that *BioShock* affirms its nightmarish experience. The level design creates an environment in which there is imminent danger lurking behind every corner and the player has to be wary of an enemy attack, maintaining tension throughout the game. However, unlike other popular FPS survival horror games, such as *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010) or *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014) that leave you weaponless, in *BioShock* the player is given the means to fight back through a trio of mechanics.

BioShock features three main mechanics: shooting, hacking, and harvesting/rescuing. The core mechanic of the game is shooting. A major dynamic portion of the game is the player's choice of what to shoot. You can choose between the traditional style of shooting, various weapons, different ammo for those weapons, and even the combat alternative to use super-human power-ups called plasmids, instead of traditional guns. The use of plasmids is one of the trilogy's franchise components.

As used by Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten in their manual for writing and designing video games, franchise components are certain elements and qualities that make a game and its ilk unique.

When story intersects, (you can decide whether it is a smooth merge or a

⁶⁵ IG. Admin, “From the Vault-The BioShock Pitch.”

collision) into the nitty-gritty of game design, this is where the larger franchise elements you develop for the property can really come into their own. Think about the unique ideas in your game, and how they could be expressed beyond gameplay and story.⁶⁶

A franchise component should transcend narratology and ludology. For the *BioShock* trilogy, the combat alternative of super-human power-ups sets the series apart from traditional FPS that focus on the use of range weapon and melee attacks alone.

Another mechanic featured in *BioShock* is the ability to hack various machinery. The earliest vision for *BioShock* influences this portion of the gameplay.⁶⁷ According to the original pitch document:

Carlos Cuello, a down and out “deprogrammer” is assigned to infiltrate a religious cult on a remote island and “rescue” a wealthy heiress from the clutches of the cultists. Once on the island, however, you find out that all is not as it seems.⁶⁸

A previous title Irrational Game created, *System Shock 2*, which in turn was a sequel to a title Levine worked on at his old company, Looking Glass Studios, was the basis for the hacking system. While the initial design documents do not divulge the mechanical process for hacking into the security terminals, it does provide the results of your actions.

Once into the system the player can do a variety of things [such as] shut down or take control of security turrets, set off false alarms to divert the enemy’s attention, or commandeer security robots and control them and their powerful arsenal

⁶⁶ Flint Dilly and John Zuur Platten, *The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design* (Los Angeles: Lone Eagle Publishing Company, 2007), 111.

⁶⁷ IG. Admin, “From the Vault-The BioShock Pitch.”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

remotely. Players lose control of their avatar but get a first-person perspective from the robot and now control it directly. But be careful, your avatar is helpless while in control of the robot.⁶⁹

Because the use of indirect control is antithetical to the game's core intention the remote control robots were eventually scrapped. As stated in the initial game pitch, "*BioShock* gives the player absolute control; of their environments as well as in the creation of their own weapons and bio-modifications. The only limit is their imagination."⁷⁰

The game intends to emphasize your sense of dominance and control over the avatar and game. The mechanic that provides the player with the strongest sense of control over the game, including its narrative, is the choice to rescue or harvest the Little Sisters after defeating their hulking, metal guardians. For programmer and video game blogger

Brendan Vance:

The city of Rapture feels to me like a place built by deduction. Centering on the crucial dynamic between Big Daddies and Little Sisters the studio extrapolated outward; every aspect of the city, from characters like Andrew Ryan to the citizens' Objectivist worldview, serves to focus and complicate the dynamic.⁷¹

The relationship between these two characters has as much to do with narratology as it does ludology and thus leads us to our first key point of integration.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Brendan Vance, "Ghosts of *BioShock*," *Brendan Vance* (blog), March 25, 2015, <http://blog.brendanvance.com/2015/03/25/the-ghosts-of-bioshock/>.

IN THE END, OUR CHOICES MAKE US

In a series of interviews for Critical Path with various high-profile personalities in the game industry Robin Hunicke states:

Games are about choice. They are about giving you meaningful choices. Because games are about meaningful choices, they can be about empowering choices, but they don't necessarily have to be about that.⁷²

Choice is everywhere in the *BioShock* universe. Gamers are always making dynamic choices during gameplay. Jump here or walk there? Shoot that or knife this? However, the use of choice in the *BioShock* series takes the concept beyond those featured in a simple FPS. Not only can you choose how to fight, but also what skills to choose, more in keeping with an RPG game. Your choices have immediate results via the gameplay, but also in time by means of the narrative as well. The ending is a product of your choices. It is not just how you choose to play dynamically, but whom you choose to be morally.

In *BioShock*, the moral dilemma is whether to harvest the creepy Little Sisters or to rescue them. After you defeat a Big Daddy, an event where you expended a great deal of your ammo, health, and ADAM, you must make this decision.

However, your resources are not drained during your first encounter with a Little Sister who has lost her Big Daddy. You observe a Splicer attacking a Little Sister, only to witness the ADAM-junkie shot by Dr. Tenenbaum. The Little Sister's creator pleads with

⁷² Critical Path, "CRITICAL PATH-Robin Hunicke-Games Are about Choice," *YouTube*, March 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhZYQbEW0nM&list=WL&index=64>.

you. “*Bitte*, do not hurt her! Have you no heart?”⁷³ Atlas, who up to this point in the game has been your reliable guide, also appeals for your empathy. “You won’t survive without the ADAM those... things... are carrying. Are you prepared to trade your life, the lives of my wife and child for Tenenbaum’s little Frankenstein’s?”⁷⁴ As the Little Sister crawls into a corner, terrified, the following instructions appear on screen:

CHOOSE whether to RESCUE the Little Sister or HARVEST her. If you harvest her, you get MAXIMUM ADAM to spend on plasmids, but she will NOT SURVIVE the process. If you rescue her, you get LESS ADAM, but Tenenbaum has promised to make it WORTH YOUR WHILE.

The Objectivist thing to do would be to help yourself and harvest the Little Sister. The “right” thing to do is unclear. The player must choose between helping the doctor and her subjects, who up until this point have been portrayed as merely a mad scientist and her monstrous creations, or help oneself in order to save the seemingly trustworthy Atlas’ family. That is the narratological side of the quandary.

The ludological side is a matter of resource management. You are aware of what the prize will be for harvesting, while the rescuing option is unclear in regards to not only how much less ADAM one receives but also what “worth your while” actually means. As mentioned prior, besides your first encounter with a Little Sister, the rescuing/harvesting option presents a crucial dynamic choice that appears to affect the difficulty of the gameplay for the moments following. Or does it?

⁷³ Brigid Tenenbaum, *Dialogue*, Medical Pavilion.

⁷⁴ *On-screen Instructions*, Medical Pavilion.

A player, going by the handle Ajar, posted on *The Escapist* web forum a quibble he had while playing through *BioShock* the first time. After rescuing all of the Little Sisters during his initial run of the game, Ajar was left wondering “why [he] wasn’t feeling constrained by a lack of ADAM.”⁷⁵

In order to answer his own question, Ajar performed a theorycrafting analysis. According to Bonni Nardi, theorycrafting is “the discovery of rules that cannot be determined through play.”⁷⁶ I would argue that theorycrafting is the process of breaking down a game’s mechanics via an analytically focused dynamic playstyle. The Elitist Jerk website, dedicated to thoughtful technical discussions pertaining to *World of Warcraft*, provides examples:

Posts demonstrate that players played a game about the game in which they attempted to figure out the game’s own machinations. Technically oriented players designed quantitative experiments, performed tests, analyzed the results, published them online, and worked with one another to solve puzzles of game mechanics.⁷⁷

After multiple replays, Ajar concluded that harvesting rewards the player with 160 ADAM per Little Sister, while rescuing gives the player 80 ADAM per Little Sister plus

⁷⁵ Ajar, “BioShock Spoiler Thread,” *The Escapist* (forum), August 26, 2007, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/9.48000-BioShock-Spoiler-Thread#318863>.

⁷⁶ Bonnie A. Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 137.

⁷⁷ Nardi, 139.

200 ADAM from Tenenbaum every third Little Sister saved and other rewards that were not specified when presented with the choice.

The difference trends toward 10% of what you get by rescuing. For instance, after 16 Little Sisters rescued the player has accrued 2280 ADAM. After 16 Little Sisters harvested, the player has accrued 2560 ADAM, a difference of 280 (12%). Also, you get the Hypnotize Big Daddy plasmids, which are extremely valuable and can't be acquired any other way, along with other ancillary benefits (various gene tonics, ammunition, health kits).⁷⁸

Ajar's theory as to "why this is still presented as an ethical dilemma," despite mathematically not being so, is that "you don't know the rewards at the outset."⁷⁹ The player does not know that technically "harvesting is a less effective game strategy overall."⁸⁰ Nor do you know how rescuing versus harvesting affects the story (sans spoilers). How you treat the Little Sisters is the basis for the conclusion presented. *BioShock* has three possible endings. If the player chooses to rescue all of the Little Sisters, then Jack and several Little Sisters escape Rapture to live normal lives. If the player chooses to harvest all of the Little Sisters then Jack and several Splicers escape Rapture to destroy the surface world with the terrible secrets he has stolen. Even if the player harvests only one Little Sister, Jack becomes a villain, but Tenenbaum's condemnation of his actions is less virulent than if he destroyed all of her girls.

⁷⁸ Ajar, "BioShock Spoiler Thread."

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

The presence of these three endings creates a unique experience for the player in two ways. First, there is an incentive to replay the game. Perhaps first time around you played the game empathetically and now you want to see if Jack is able to progress more easily through Rapture with more ADAM in hand. The other benefit to the multiple endings is that they make the player feel as if their choices mattered.

SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE SEA

Just as the works of Ayn Rand influence the plot of *BioShock*, so does the level design. Andrew Ryan built Rapture in 1946, but the city's design is that of the popular art Deco movement that rose to prominence in the 1920s and 30s. The use of the term art Deco did not come "into general usage [until] soon after a 1966 exhibition, 'Les Années "25" Art Deco/Bauhaus/Stijl/Esprit Nouveau,' presented at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris."⁸¹ However, if the proper title of the design style was in use when Rand published *The Fountainhead* in 1943, surely its protagonist Howard Roark and his buildings would have been categorized as part of the movement. In the novel, Roark is an architect who fights against the neoclassical style. Roark does not have a direct counterpart in *BioShock*, but he does in real life. Rand studied "the masters of early skyscraper design and of clean, fluid modernist styling, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright."⁸² While

⁸¹ Patricia Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture: Design, Decoration and detail from the twenties and thirties* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 12.

⁸² Heller, 113.

Sullivan, the grand architect of the Chicago skyscraper, was the basis for the character of Henry Cameron, Wright's "organic architectural style, his emphasis on "Truth in Architecture," his contempt for imitation and mediocrity, [and] his transcendent indifference to clients' good opinion" became the foundation for Roark. Wright's work, or even those of his fictional counterpart, would have fit in seamlessly to the Rapture landscape, which highlights Art Deco's trademarks such as:

geometric elements, handsome ornamental metalwork, classical yet unmistakably modern, sculptures and reliefs, generous use of colour (in terracotta ornament, metal, paint, stone and even stained glass) and their imaginative juxtaposition of light-and-dark and matte-and-textured elements.⁸³

In Rapture, you can hear Splicer's footsteps from a distance echoing off the tiled floors. The singing of hymns by Waders echo eerily through the empty halls, becoming terrible tunes warranting trepidation. The shadows of enemies project upon the walls, made even ghastlier by the neon lights and ocean glow. Irrational Games meant *BioShock* to be a "horrifying, sophisticated, visually stunning... experience that would leave players gasping for breath" and the city of Rapture provides this aesthetic based on design alone.⁸⁴

The haunting beauty of Rapture more often works against the player than for them. The tight spaces, rather than an open layout, create a sense of claustrophobia but also affect the combat dynamic. While the player has the option of using weapons such as

⁸³ Bayer, 7-8.

⁸⁴ IG. Admin, "From the Vault-The BioShock Pitch."

a pistol, machine gun, shotgun, and even a grenade launcher, the small rooms are conducive to limited range combat. You can use these distance-based weapons, but the player also has to be prepared for melee combat by use of a wrench whenever necessary as well. The numerous stairwells and columned hallways also create a lack of direct line of fire. The player must depend on the sense of hearing rather than vision- quickly peeking into the next room in order to sneak up upon enemies is difficult. Players are also limited in regards to their movement. It is difficult to run away from an encounter once blood spills and there are few places to hide, especially in the atriums. These difficulties, however, do not represent poor level design, but design choices used to elevate the game's aesthetic. Frustration, when properly balanced, can lead to fear.

There are ways to balance out the degree of difficulty. At times, Jack is able to traverse through levels without being attacked, giving the player time to actually enjoy the work put into the level design. Long interactions without the player feeling the need to take action also allow the player a break from the violence, and while a sense of relief may wash over the players as they come upon a large room with open space, this change in level design actually signals an increased level of difficulty, commonly corresponding to a boss fight. These expansive areas put the player's skills to the test.

Take for instance Jack's confrontation with Sander Cohen. Fort Frolic, a district ruled by the crazed artist, used to be "where the best and brightest celebrate success," but has now become where the worst and hardest Splicers aggress. For Vossen "boss fights

and the arenas they take place in are usually tailor-made for each other.”⁸⁵ It is not just that these encounters are combat specific, but level design-specific as well. Alex Schulman, combat designer for the *God of War* series, believes, “that boss design uses the environment really well and integrates the boss into the area or into the stage.”⁸⁶

Sections of Fort Frolic have literal stages, such as the first part of the level that takes place in a theater, Fleet Hall. The player is aware that this is the first area they must visit, despite several other entrances in the two-level atrium, because the neon sign for Fleet Hall lights first and is the brightest. Over the radio Sander Cohen says that “the artist has a duty to seduce the ear” and as the player comes closer and closer to the map objective the music becomes clearer and louder.

Cohen is an artist and the minions featured in his level represent the arts. Besides the typical Thuggish Splicers and Nitros, Fort Frolic is also home to Spider Splicers whose acrobatic movements resemble those of a nimble dancer. There are also Houdini Splicers who have the ability to teleport. If the player chooses to combat Cohen (though this is not required to complete the level) then Sander fights like a Houdini Splicer.

As the player advances through map objective to map objective before meeting Cohen face to face, Sander watches from above, whether it be from a theater booth or a darkened balcony. Your gameplay is a performance for him. When Sander decides to

⁸⁵ Vossen, “Level design for melee combat systems.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

reveal himself, he makes a grand entrance, either descending the staircase in the atrium or walking down from the second floor of his apartment “this interaction with the environment is often intuitively seen by players as signifier of a boss fight, and results in strong synergy between the enemy’s behaviors and the level.”⁸⁷ Cohen’s Houdini Splicer fighting style gives him the ability to teleport anywhere in not only an expansive region but a dual-levelled one as well, making him even more difficult than his Houdini Splicer minions.

Even the underwater setting hearkens back to *BioShock*’s literary influence. Dazzled by the cinema of America, at an early age Ayn Rand envisioned her future home as ““Atlantis:” the ideal existence for intelligent, purposeful, ruggedly individualist men and, presumably, women.”⁸⁸ Sadly, that was not the case with the United States, so Rand created her Atlantis with Galt’s Gulch. While his city was not underwater, the final act of *Atlas Shrugged*, in which John Galt finally reveals his mission, features the title “Atlantis.”⁸⁹ Promotional material for *BioShock*, including a mockumentary entitled “Fact From Myth,” referred to Rapture as a Modern Day Atlantis.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Vossen, “Level design for melee combat systems.”

⁸⁸ Heller, 46.

⁸⁹ Heller, 235.

⁹⁰ Irrational Games’ Official Channel, “Rapture: A Modern Day Atlantis?,” *YouTube*, October 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsJDrsKNYxI>.

The decision to set the story underwater goes beyond narrative influence to provide a specific aesthetic. Water, a representation of life for humans who require it to survive, is also representative of death in *BioShock*. The ocean is an ever-present danger to the citizens of Rapture. Any time a player passes by a cracked window, the threat abounds and the water's pressure can be felt, both in a literal and figurative fashion.

Water, the bringer of life and death, can be used to the benefit or the detriment of the player. At times, leaks in the structure blocks your path. In other occasions, a flooded floor allows the player to use the plasmid Electro Bolt to electrocute enemies that are standing in the water (though be wary of shocking yourself if you are not on dry land). Other plasmids are water based such as Winter Blast; however, that freezing power does not require the actual presence of water nearby. Even the use of hacking has a water element to it. In order to hack a machine, security robot, or alarm, the player is required to complete a mini-game ala *Pipe Mania* (1989). The player must rearrange segments of tubes into the correct pattern so that when the timer goes off, water may flow to the exit drain without resistance.

A MAN CHOOSES, A SLAVE OBEYS

According to Janet Murray, “an avatar is a graphical figure like a character in a video game... [a] mask that creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that

we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves.”⁹¹ Jack’s avatar in *BioShock* is never fully seen, only his disembodied hands, thus preserving the immersive experience.

Initially, however, the game has you set in the position of observer rather than player. The prologue opens up with narration by Jack, whose name you gather by the camera panning down to a letter Jack is holding, along with a blurry photo of Jack featuring few discernable features. We hear Jack’s voiceover as his flight hits stormy weather: "When Mum and Dad put me on that plane, they told me, 'Son, you're special, you were born to do great things.' You know what? They were right."⁹² The plane then spins out, crashes and the player finally gains control of the avatar as Jack flounders in the water.

This opening sequence, in the span of less than a minute, covers multiple manners of perspective. The scene takes place through Jack’s eyes, a first person point of view. The letter and photo set up Jack as a distinct entity, rather than an empty vessel for the player to fill.

The end of the game’s second act covers the fluidity of identification more extensively. On his way to murder Andrew Ryan, Jack finds a board in the antagonist’s office covered with photographs, papers, and the phrase “would you kindly” written out in red ink. This room is a visual illustration of Jack’s backstory, but the player does not

⁹¹ Murray, 113.

⁹² Jack, *Narration*, Apollo Air Flight DF-0301.

know that yet. Neither the player nor Jack understand why the mad scientists Yu Suchong and Tenenbaum, along with Andrew Ryan, and a beautiful woman all have threads connecting their photos to Jack's. Nor why an upside down black-filled headshot with a question mark on it is pinned to the photo of Jack as well. The writing on the wall, "would you kindly" is the equivalent of *The Shining's* "redrum." The message is obvious, after the fact.

The fact is that Jack is not who you or he thinks he is. The player advances from the office to find Andrew Ryan, alone in Rapture Central Control. Ryan does not directly address Jack as the player walks in on Ryan leisurely putting golf balls, the room collapsing around him from prior explosives set.

The assassin has overcome my final line of defense, and now he plans to murder me. In the end what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No, a man chooses, and a slave obeys!

The fourth wall is then broken as Ryan stops golfing and continues orating, keeping his eyes towards not just Jack, but at the screen as well.

You think you have memories. A farm. A family. An airplane. A crash. And then this place. Was there really a family? Did that airplane crash, or, was it hijacked? Forced down, forced down by something less than a man, something bred to sleepwalk through life unless activated by a simple phrase, spoken by their kindly master.

The player is unable to control Jack, who begins to follow Ryan's every request.

Would you kindly, powerful phrase. Familiar phrase? Sit, would you kindly? Stand, would you kindly? Run! Stop! Turn. Was a man sent to kill, or a slave?

KILL! A man chooses! A slave obeys! OBEEEEEEY!⁹³

The game seems to have reached its climax. Andrew Ryan flays out on the ground, bludgeoned to death by Jack with his own golf club. The player and Jack now know the awful truth. They have been nothing but a tool for murder and mayhem. Just as Jack was incapable of dismissing Ryan's assisted suicide wish, the player is unable to resist the developer's manipulation.

This brutal moment in *BioShock* is a critique of the FPS genre, of how players focus so much on achieving various goals, trophies, and objectives that they pay little attention to their emotional choices or lack thereof. Players have been brainwashed by the genre, to become unquestioning agents of mass destruction, rather than possessing any agency of their own.

However, just as suddenly as this revelation is bestowed upon the player, the narrative picks right back up, playing "itself out in objective-led fashion, expecting players to somehow forget what's just happened" for nearly another half of the game's runtime.⁹⁴

According to Marc LeBlanc:

The climax occurs at the moment of realization, when uncertainty is dispelled and the outcome of the contest is known. Given that definition, it would seem that the climax of the game should occur as late as possible. After all, a contest whose outcome is known has ceased to be a game on some level: the players have

⁹³ Andrew Ryan, "A Man Chooses and a Slave Obeys," *Dialogue*, Rapture Central Control.

⁹⁴ Rich Stanton, "Through The Looking Glass," *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, March 26, 2014, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/11/26/bioshock-and-looking-glass/>.

become spectators. We could argue that such an interval should be as short as possible.⁹⁵

After the “Would You Kindly” moment, the lapses in ludonarrative synchronicity become apparent. When Tenenbaum saves you from the collapsing Rapture Control Center, she begins to deprogram Jack. However, this does provide narrative reasoning for the player to regain agency, this deus ex machina moment does not necessarily make sense with the plot. If the player has been rescuing the Little Sisters, Jack receiving Tenenbaum’s assistance is a logical consequence for good behavior. However, Tenenbaum helps Jack regardless of how he has treated the Little Sisters. She assists Jack even if he has been harvesting the very girls she takes care of. The plot reveals itself, in what should be a moment of freedom for Jack and the player, no longer a player-driven narrative.

SUMMARY

Overall, up until the “Would You Kindly” reveal, *BioShock* has multiple incidences of ludonarrative synchronicity. The game is able to have its narratology reflected in the level design, theme, and characters. The Ayn Rand Objectivism philosophy that influences both the characters and plot can be found in the level design with the Art Deco sensibility also found in the works of Ayn Rand. The theme of choice is used in the Little System harvest/rescue mechanic and the outcome of this choice

⁹⁵ LeBlanc, 457.

changes the narrative accordingly. Ludologically, the theme of choice is used in the combat system with the use of multiple types of weapon options and multiple dynamic styles of fighting provided by the level design.

However, though most of these elements remain present in the second half of the game, the theme of choice is rendered mute and breaks the internal logic of the game. Ken Levine himself admitted, “You had a situation there where you had this amazing character and once he's gone the story loses some of its steam.”⁹⁶ If the game had proceeded directly towards Jack seeking out and killing Frank Fontaine, which is the eventual ending, then even though the game has brought into question the matter of agency, the player would still have been provided “with a dénouement to resolve the tension and give them a sense of closure.”⁹⁷

Instead, *BioShock* both criticizes and falls victim to the faults of agency and morality in FPS, yet somehow still tries to present agency as an obtainable reality with the inclusion of multiple endings whose narrative are affected by your choices in regards to the Little Sisters.

⁹⁶ Wesley Yin-Poole, “Levine: BioShock Infinite ending ‘like nothing you’ve experienced in a video game before’,” *Eurogamer*, December 18, 2012, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-12-18-levine-bioshock-infinite-ending-like-nothing-youve-experienced-in-a-video-game-before>.

⁹⁷ LeBlanc, 457.

BioShock 2

Take-Two Interactive released *BioShock 2* on February 9, 2010.⁹⁸ Critically and financially, it was the least successful of the series. While *BioShock* received an aggregate Metacritic score of 95/100 and *BioShock Infinite* would go on to receive a 93/100, *BioShock 2* only garnered an 88/100.⁹⁹ Lainie Goldstein, Chief Financial Officer for Take-Two Interactive, was disappointed by *BioShock 2*'s performance in the marketplace, explaining that sales were "lower than expected... the title was well-received by the media and was profitable for us. However, sales slowed down sooner than we had expected."¹⁰⁰

BioShock 2's Metacritic score and eventual gross revenue hardly warrant it as a failure, but the game never grew out of the shadow of the original. Perhaps the cooler reception and sales was because the same core team behind the first *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite* did not make *BioShock 2*. Instead of Ken Levine's Irrational Games developing the sequel, 2K Marin, a spinoff of the Boston-company located on the

⁹⁸ Take-Two Interactive is the parent company of 2K Games.

⁹⁹ Metacritic is a site that gathers multiple reviews and produces an aggregate score, one based on critics ratings and another based on player submitted scores. The numbers presented here are based on the critic's ratings and are the average of each game between the three consoles they appeared on.

¹⁰⁰ Ludwig Kietzmann, "Take-Two Q2 revenue up to \$268M, BioShock 2 sales 'lower than expected'," *Engadget*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.engadget.com/2010/06/08/take-two-q2-revenue-up-to-268-million-bioshock-2-sales-low/>.

opposite coast in Novato, California, made *BioShock 2*.¹⁰¹ However, the change in crew also allowed *BioShock 2* the freedom to revise and re-work weak points found in the original *BioShock*.

According to the *BioShock 2* website:

Set approximately 10 years after the events of the original *BioShock*, the halls of Rapture once again echo with sins of the past. Along the Atlantic Coastline, a monster has been snatching little girls and bringing them back to the undersea city of Rapture. You are the very first Big Daddy as you travel through the decrepit and beautiful fallen city, chasing an unseen force in search of answers and your own survival.¹⁰²

Unlike its predecessor, *BioShock 2* does not put its literary influences at the forefront.

There are no direct counterparts to famous literary characters or plot points lifted from various novels. Instead, *BioShock 2* builds upon the ideas set forth from various literature works.

Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* have little pertinence to the narrative of *BioShock 2*, but another work of hers is influential. Creative director Jordan Thomas featured her 1937 novella, *Anthem*, on his list of recommended reading for fans of *BioShock 2*.¹⁰³ The novella is set in a world without individuality, where the world has forgotten the word "I" and collectivism is the foundation for its society. *BioShock 2*'s

¹⁰¹ Marin County is also home to another video game studio with a focus on narrative-based products: Telltale Games, Inc.

¹⁰² "Story," *BioShock 2*, www.BioShock2game.com/en/.

¹⁰³ Nick Cowen, "BioShock 2 developer interview," *The Telegraph*, January 13, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/6980675/BioShock-2-developer-interview.html>.

villain, Sofia Lamb, promotes the group mentality that stands in stark contrast to Andrew Ryan's Objectivism. A combination of "John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and other thinkers who promote the common good to the extreme, Lamb and her altruistic nature represents what Rand believed was the greatest problem of [the 20th] century:"¹⁰⁴ Or, as Andrew Ryan would say:

What is the greatest lie every created? What is the most vicious obscenity ever perpetrated on mankind? Slavery? The Holocaust? Dictatorship? No. It's the tool with which all that wickedness is built: altruism. It is this great inversion, this ancient lie, which has chained humanity to an endless cycle of guilt and failure.¹⁰⁵

"I would actually argue that most villains believe themselves to be altruists," says BioShock 2's creative developer Jordan Thomas.¹⁰⁶

Very few people consider themselves evil. The most extreme ideals in the whole of human cognition are typically behavior altering one; a system of restraint or a redistribution of power that is designed to uplift the species but usually ends up stamping out the rights of those people in question.¹⁰⁷

Like Ryan, Lamb is "just another ideology given flesh," but Lamb's fanatical adherence to her beliefs is where the similarities end.¹⁰⁸ Her role in *BioShock 2* is less that of Andrew Ryan, but more along the line of Frank Fontaine. She was a rival of

¹⁰⁴ Heller, 91.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Ryan, "Speech," *Public Address*, Medical Pavilion.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas was also the level designer for Fort Frolic in the first *BioShock*.

¹⁰⁷ Cowen, "BioShock 2 developer interview."

¹⁰⁸ Richard Cobbett, "BioShock 2 retrospective," *Eurogamer*, July, 4, 2013, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-04-07-bioshock-2-retrospective>.

Andrew Ryan and just as Fontaine took over when Jack killed Ryan, Lamb takes over Rapture after Jack killed Frank. Eleanor is the final antagonist, but not the only villain featured. Augustus Sinclair is also a combination of these two original *BioShock* characters. The size of his role, as a secondary villain whose death occurs approximately two-thirds through the game, parallels Andrew Ryan but personality wise he is the equivalent to Frank Fontaine: “a ruthless businessman who makes no secret of his plan to pick Rapture clean for profit.”¹⁰⁹

The more nuanced storytelling featured in *BioShock 2* creates a lack of clear parallels between characters, specifically the characterization of the key NPCs. Sinclair has the “self-awareness to know when it’s time to drop the philosophy textbooks and have a human response to what fate has in store,” and it is moments like that where “*BioShock 2* breaks away from being depressing... [and] speaks to an optimism that’s often missing in Levine’s characters.”¹¹⁰

BioShock 2 does its best to avoid absolutes. Jordan Thomas, in regards to the battle of minds between altruism/collectivism and Objectivism says, “the player will be exposed to far more philosophical viewpoints than these two extremes in *BioShock 2*.”¹¹¹ Sinclair, who can be both of aid and obstacle, represents moral relativism. Even you, as the Big Daddy Subject Delta, represent individualism that stays away from the

¹⁰⁹ Cobbett, “BioShock 2 retrospective.”

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Cowen, “BioShock 2 developer interview.”

intemperance of Ryan's Objectivism for *BioShock 2* is "without the series' standard cynical view that everyone is just a scrap of power away from corruption. In *BioShock*, that extended to assuming the worst of the player for harvesting Little Sisters."¹¹²

BioShock 2 also marks the return of the Big Daddies and Little Sisters in an integral role more pertinent than was the case earlier. The sequel advances Brendan Vance's assertion that *BioShock* centered "on the crucial dynamic between Big Daddies and Little Sisters," and highlights their relationship to an even greater degree.¹¹³ Not only do you play as a Big Daddy this go around, but the game expands the mechanics and dynamics surrounding the Little Sisters as well.

Just as there are similar narrative elements, literary influences, setting, and theme that carry over to the sequel, *BioShock 2* also features much of the same gameplay as its predecessor, with a few twists.

The shooting mechanic retains the use of melee, range, and plasmid weaponry. There are several minor changes, such as the introduction of new types of guns and the reduction of several plasmids, but the major alteration is with the dynamic of the shooting mechanic. The player now has "the ability to dual-wield weapons and plasmids, allow[ing] players to create exciting combinations of punishment."¹¹⁴ Two story changes

¹¹² Cobbett, "BioShock 2 retrospective."

¹¹³ Vance, "Ghost of BioShock."

¹¹⁴ "Information," *BioShock 2*, www.BioShock2game.com/en/.

support this increase in combat power. First, the story takes place eight years after the original game. Though the city is under new management, it continually has to create and evolve new technologies. Secondly, the player's avatar is yet another science experiment: a Big Daddy. These cyborg creatures are deadly, dangerous, and deal a lot of damage.

Just as elements of the combat system have been altered due to a character change, so too the hacking mechanic has been adjusted. Instead of a mini-game involving the re-routing of pipes, the player now has to stop a needle-gauge at the proper time in order to gain control of machinery. The difference between the two forms of hacking is that the former is non-diegetic while the latter represents the character's actions in game.

The mechanic to harvest or rescue remains in the game as well, but with an alteration similar to the expanded shooting mechanic. Before the option to harvest or rescue a Little Sister presents itself to Subject Delta, his first choice is to harvest or adopt the Little Sister. If the player chooses to adopt, then the Little Sister will search out for "angels," dead Splicers filled with ADAM. So instead of like in *BioShock*, where saving a Little Sister gave the player ADAM immediately, this time the player has to work to earn the reward. While a Little Sister is harvesting a corpse, the player must protect her from swarms of Splicers. If successful, the player will then have the original option: harvest or rescue. However, harvesting now gives the player even more ADAM than the original harvest and the player has to fight off the new mini-boss, a Big Sister, after rescuing all the Little Sisters in a level.

The theorycrafting performed by system1021 is deceptive in regards to the statistical complications presented in *BioShock 2*'s new harvesting system. In regards to whether or not it is better to harvest or rescue all the Little Sisters.

Well, it actually comes out to a fairly even number either way. You initially get 80 less ADAM per sister if you save them, but after the 4th you get a tonic that reduces the gap to 40 less ADAM per sister. After 8 sisters you get another tonic that lets them harvest faster, which makes the onslaught of splicers a lot easier to deal with (though by this point they shouldn't be a huge issue for you). You also get about 350 ADAM from the presents the sisters leave you... Short answer is that by the end of the game it will be neck and neck for which one actually earns you more ADAM, with rescuing possibly winning out, but early game will be a lot easier if you harvest because you'll get the extra ADAM right away.¹¹⁵

In the first *BioShock*, it was statistically clear that the player would benefit more from rescuing the Little Sisters, thanks to the secondary benefits given to you by Tenenbaum. However, in *BioShock 2*, dynamics heavily affect the difference between harvesting and adopting/rescuing. Player system1021 comments that it may be wise to assume that after dealing with eight Little Sisters the player has enough experience, has gained enough weapons and power-ups, to be able to handle the "onslaught of splicers a lot easier."

Also, system1021's recommendation that the "early game will be a lot easier if you harvest because you'll get the extra ADAM right away," goes to show that the decision is not nearly as cut and dry as in the first *BioShock*. The moral angle is still present in *BioShock 2*, but the player also has to take into account a more multifaceted

¹¹⁵ system1021, "Should I rescue or harvest little sisters?" *GameFAQs*, 2010, <http://www.gamefaqs.com/xbox360/945380-bioshock-2/answers/165562-should-i-rescue-or-harvest-little-sisters>.

system of resource management and whether or not their skill level overrides a lack of resources. Just as the key NPCs with their more nuanced portrayals provide a more complex plot than the original *BioShock*, the altered dynamic impacts of the Little Sister harvesting/adopting/rescuing mechanic complicates the moral dilemma.

The aesthetics reflect the extension of the mechanics. The boost of combat power is necessary for the increased level of difficulty. Adopting a Little Sister is no longer a statistically irrelevant choice as in the original *BioShock*, but can have a legitimate impact on the likelihood for a player to be underpowered while facing enemies that are even more difficult. The harder the game is, the scarier it should feel. This is true, to an extent. Like its prequel, *BioShock 2*'s aesthetic is based around tension and fear, but a sense of nostalgia produced as well. Players of the first *BioShock* have pre-conceived notions of what a *BioShock* game is or should be. Depending on a fan's allegiance to the prequel, the nostalgia aesthetic can damper the horror aesthetic by means of unrealistic expectations on the part of the player.

BioShock was not a game, narratively, clamoring for a sequel. Add in the fact that *BioShock 2* was being produced by a sister studio and without the supervision of Ken Levine or any of the key crew members, the sequel faced an uphill battle from the start in regard to gaining acceptance from fans of the original. Despite the apprehension from players and critics alike, reviews for *BioShock 2* did not regard it as either lackluster or unnecessary, and while the sequel received praise for its re-worked mechanics and cleaner storytelling, aesthetically it suffered from comparisons to its predecessor.

BioShock 2 is “a world less mysterious than when you last left it...[its] story does not have the same revelatory power or stunning, complete vision of the original. It is not as fresh or frightening.”¹¹⁶ While *BioShock 2* made the necessary changes to stand out from the original, those changes were not immediate enough to distance itself from its beloved predecessor. Echoing the reviews of several other critics, Richard Cobbett argued, “The basic chance to return to Rapture is more than worth your time on its own - assuming you’re willing to give it an hour to find itself.”¹¹⁷

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Critic Michael McWhertor also felt that “*BioShock 2* does enough to differentiate itself from the original to make it feel new again, but it takes some time to get there.”¹¹⁸ Perhaps, though, this lack of recognition of change is less a matter of the alterations being slow to appear and more a matter of the amount of time it took players to realize they were there all along. After a four minute video prologue, Subject Delta awakens in Adonis Luxury Resort, flooded, trashed, and with “Fallen, Fallen Is Babylon” graffiti etched out on the wall. Unlike the start of the first *BioShock*, in which the beauty and grandeur of Rapture awes Jack at first sight, in *BioShock 2* the player is immediately met

¹¹⁶ Michael McWhertor, “BioShock 2 Review: In Case Of Rapture,” *Kotaku*, February 8, 2010, <http://kotaku.com/5466745/bioshock-2-review-in-case-of-rapture>.

¹¹⁷ Cobbett, “BioShock 2 retrospective.”

¹¹⁸ McWhertor, “BioShock 2 Review: In Case of Rapture.”

with decay and destruction. The effects of having lost its founders eight years ago are immediately apparent.

As Subject Delta traverses through Rapture, the city feels emptier than in the last game. The halls do not echo with the approach of Splicers. Narratively, one can assume that this is because the citizens, desperate for resources, have killed each other off. What the players will notice as they dive deeper into the game is that when a Splicer attacks Subject Delta, the enemy is never alone. These are Darwin's All-Stars; they have survived by banding together and being brutal. This change in behavior, their grouping up when attacking, is an influence by Sofia Lamb's Rapture Family, a religion based on her book, *Unity and Metamorphosis*. Followers of Lamb attack Subject Delta as per her orders and do so with great fervor, believing their actions just and in service to the greater good.

BioShock 2 altered the AI system for the Splicers. Not only are there more of them, but each of them is harder to kill than their *BioShock* counterparts. In Kotaku's "Five Things Every Great First-Person Shooter Needs," GB Burford recommends worthy opponents.

Enemies should be *tough* but also work to make you utilize the movement mechanics and the map you're in—in other words, enemies are about pushing you to use all the elements of the game. They're not fodder to be pointed and clicked on. They're environmental hazards to move you through the space in interesting ways.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ GB Burford, "Five Things Every Great First-Person Shooter Needs," *Kotaku*, October, 31, 2014, <http://kotaku.com/five-things-every-great-first-person-shooter-needs-1653281844>.

This increased level of difficulty is reflected by the change in mechanics and character design. You need the ability to dual-wield weapons and plasmids in order to handle the onslaught of enemies. Narratively, this new amped up ability reflects the change in protagonist. As Jack “in *BioShock* you’d been a squishy man, but now you’re an elite Big Daddy called Subject Delta, with a drill-arm capable of carving through splicers with impunity.”¹²⁰

BioShock 2 also takes advantage of the new avatar by allowing players for the first time to explore the exterior of Rapture. With the use of his diving suit, Subject Delta is able to march along the ocean floor. This experience, viewing Rapture’s skyscrapers and undiminished architecture from the outside, is one of only a few new visual moments of shock and awe that *BioShock 2* provides. These moments of underwater exploration provide a break from combat. They give the player an opportunity to appreciate the visual spectacle without fear of attack. While underwater combat would have been an interesting new mechanic with new dynamics impossible to perform in interior levels, the break from fighting does ease the tension and allows the terror aesthetic not to overwhelm the player.

The level Ryan Amusements highlights all of these adjustments, from the creation of larger, emptier levels as to accommodate more enemies to the increased level of brutality by both Splicers and yourself. Built by Carlson Fiddle, this theme was meant to

¹²⁰ Cobbett, “BioShock 2 retrospective.”

be “something magical, but instead [Ryan] turned it into a school... no, a cathedral. Dedicated to himself.”¹²¹ Now it lies in ruins, just like Ryan’s dreams. The level is “a wonderful piece of design,” piecing together what went wrong in between *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* “where dioramas depicting exactly the rules that would see Rapture turn from heaven to hell are depicted in fine style.”¹²²

Ryan Amusements takes place at the end of the first third of *BioShock 2* and marks the transition from *BioShock* carbon copy to a game all its own. The level combines the tight corridors famous in *BioShock* with the large lobbies that used for more than just boss fights in *BioShock 2*. This is also the first time the player meets a Little Sister in the game, learning of the new extended mechanic regarding the adoption option, and the first time a player must battle the game’s new mini-boss, a Big Sister.

By the time the game reaches its climax, the changes in the level design from *BioShock* to *BioShock 2* are much more apparent. “Variation, not novelty, is the guiding aesthetic” and *BioShock 2* does this by having not only the narrative affected by choices you make, but the level design as well.¹²³ The deaths, or lack thereof by the player’s accord, of three key NPCs (Poole, Holloway, and Alexander) is reflected in statues scattered through the last two levels of *BioShock 2*. Whether or not the player chooses to

¹²¹ Carlson Fiddle, “The Old Sheepdog,” *Audio Diaries*, Ryan Amusements.

¹²² Cobbett, “BioShock 2 retrospective.”

¹²³ Alec Meer, “Wot I Think: Bioshock 2,” *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, February 8, 2010, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2010/02/08/wot-i-think-bioshock-2/>.

kill alters the statues. A statue of the NPC Stanley Poole either shows Subject Delta extending his hand as a sign of mercy or using that hand to choke Poole. As Subject Delta accompanies a Little Sister through the penultimate level, Persephone, the monstrous child will point out all three artworks and make various comments depending on their merciful or brutal nature.

HERE COMES THE BOGEYMAN

Unlike in the first *BioShock*, the player is fully aware from the beginning who his or her avatar is. The game opens up with a four-minute video prologue that establishes the character's backstory. Subject Delta is a first generation Big Daddy and the first to properly bond with a Little Sister, who just happens to be Sofia Lamb's daughter. When a Splicer hits Subject Delta with a Hypnotize plasmid, Sofia commands the Big Daddy to kill himself.

Ten years later, Eleanor Lamb awakens Delta. As the game continues, you learn how she cared for Subject Delta in secret for the past decade and now needs him in order to defeat her mother. The first image you see upon waking up is Subject Delta's reflection. Both parts of this opening, the backstory and the reflection are two non-immersive elements that did not appear in *BioShock*. Also, while in the first *BioShock* there was a prologue in which you were unable to control Jack's actions, this scene lasted under a minute. The opening of *BioShock 2* does not hand the controls over to you the player for over four minutes. The absence of Subject Delta as a tabula rasa avatar, unlike

Jack from *BioShock*, and the lack of agency at the beginning of the game slow down the drive towards the creation of an immersive experience.

Though *BioShock 2* starts out less immersive than its predecessor does, the game gains momentum towards this goal as it does not feature the same narrative twist in the first *BioShock* that broke down the barrier between Jack's choices being that of the player's choice. Despite the presence of a Big Daddy's drill on the screen, the game seldom reminds the player who they are after this opening.

Subject Delta's drill is also the reason for a change in the sequel's mechanics. In *BioShock*, Jack is not physically moving around pipes as he attempts to hack into various machinery. The act of hacking in *BioShock* is performed in a mini-game, which is a non-diegetic subgame featuring an entirely new set of mechanics and user interface. In *BioShock*, the mechanics for the hacking mini-game are based on the title, *Pipe Mania* (1989), in which you must rearrange segments of tubes into the correct pattern so that when the timer goes off, a liquid may flow through to the exit drain without resistance. While the mini-game lasts no longer than a minute or two, the abrupt change in point of view to an entirely new user-interface that is no longer in first-person perspective is a break in immersion. In *BioShock 2*, even if the pipe maneuvering were diegetic, Subject Delta would be unable to complete the task for he only possesses one gloved, bulky hand and a massive drill on his other arm. So instead, the sequel features a hacking system where the player must stop a needle on a specific colored portion of a gauge. This exercise could take place in the diegesis and therefore deepens the level of immersion.

Subject Delta also has free will, or to the degree that you have free will upon the actions of Subject Delta. Jack's choices, for a majority of *BioShock*, were not his own and nor yours either. According to Thomas, the frustration Sofia Lamb expresses towards Subject Delta is that he "is the last individual in Rapture" and will not conform to the ideals of her Rapture Family.¹²⁴ Not only is this a major shift from the characterization of the protagonist in *BioShock*, but a rather large alteration to the idea of a Big Daddy in general. Subject Delta's journey towards individualism began after he lost himself to a Hypnotize plasmid. Upon waking, Subject Delta is a new man. Within the narrative, Subject Delta awakens to find that he no longer is bound by a majority of the brainwashing Big Daddies are subjected to. He is no longer required to protect the Little Sisters; he has free will. Outside of the diegesis, Subject Delta is a new man because instead of being controlled by his Big Daddy instincts, he is now being controlled by you, the player.

FOR EVERY CHOICE, THERE IS AN ECHO

Free will, as it pertains to immersion, is intertwined with its impact thematically as well. Choice is still a blatant theme in *BioShock 2*, just not the primary one. In comparison to the game's true thematic focus, individualism, choice is less a theme and more a function.

So in celebrating the player's free will with the script this time, we have given

¹²⁴ Cowen, "BioShock 2 developer interview."

more choices, such as whether to betray the Little Sisters' trust (which is something the other Big Daddys can't do) and what to do about the adult characters who are more challenging, ethically speaking. This aspect of free-will is both a key gameplay consideration as well as a device which helps push the plot forward.¹²⁵

“Making various moral statements,” such as deciding the fates of the Little Sisters and the three particular adult NPCs is what enables the developers to “learn a little bit more about [the player] and shape the outcome of the story” to an even greater extent than in *BioShock*.¹²⁶

The choice to rescue, harvest, or adopt the Little Sisters is made even that much more difficult by the narratology. For those that played the first *BioShock*, the allegiance between a Big Daddy and their Little Sisters is a given notion. Even for players new to the *BioShock* universe, *BioShock 2*'s plot revolves around this deep connection between these mechanical monstrosities and their grossly genetically modified girls. Giving the players the option to harm a Little Sister is both free will for Subject Delta and the player. Armed with the knowledge of Subject Delta's backstory, you can choose to play as you would expect Subject Delta to do so or as yourself. Unlike with playing as Jack, there is a clear distinction between making choices by yourself or in line with the avatar's narrative. To some degree, this is more immersive than *BioShock* in which the players thought they were making their own decisions without Jack's influence since Jack was

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

nothing more than an empty vessel through a majority of the game. With *BioShock 2*, the game does not remind the player whether a decision is theirs to make or one that the developers intended for them to choose, thus preserving the concept of a player-driven narrative.

In addition, unlike in *BioShock*, there are several other factors in deciding the narrative's conclusion. The Little Sisters are no longer the only NPCs whose fate affects the story. Whether you choose to kill or let live three side characters (Holloway, Poole and Alexander) alters the ending both narratively and visually as discussed earlier in the level design section.

These choices drive home the theme of individualism not just because of what Subject Delta represents philosophically, but also because the decision to murder each of these characters is made on an individual-basis. The same goes for the Little Sisters. You can harvest one and then rescue another. However, the choice to end the life of Holloway, Poole, and Alexander relies on what you know of them as individuals and not a group identity as is the case for the Little Sisters.

Scattered throughout Rapture are audio diaries providing some of the backstory for the NPCs, along with background information given to you in real-time by Sofia Lamb and Augustus Sinclair.

Through brilliant use of unreliable narrators and contradictory advice, these decisions can be truly difficult. We are left with our gun pointed at a quivering man or woman, at their most vulnerable. With the information at hand, are they worth being kept alive? We are given all the time we need to make our choice.

Pull the trigger, or just walk out the door? ¹²⁷

While the choices in *BioShock* “amount[ed] to little more than doing what is morally the “right” thing to do or being a comic book style villain,” the morality system in *BioShock 2* features a much more complex sense of mercy. ¹²⁸

The impetus for Subject Delta wanting to kill Stanley is that, despite assisting the player in his fight against Sofia Lamb in game, Poole was the man who turned Subject Delta over to the authorities eight years ago and thus became a Big Daddy.

Grace Holloway does nothing but antagonize the player, even as Subject Delta looms over her, readying for the kill. Her hatred towards you, however, is misconstrued. Holloway loved Eleanor and Sofia Lamb misled her in to thinking that you were behind her disappearance years back. The player is incapable of explaining him/herself and thus is left only with the option to kill Holloway, who sent wave after wave of Rapture Family loyalists after Subject Delta, or let her live despite the threat she poses even though she is not physically threatening. Over the radio Sinclair reminds the player that this is “your call, friend. Gracie’s unarmed, for what it’s worth.”¹²⁹ Even if the player does not immediately shove a drill into her face, Gracie will continue to goad the player until he leaves her office.

¹²⁷ Daniel Carbone, “Death and Ethical Violence,” *Kotaku*, April 29, 2010, <http://kotaku.com/5527216/death-and-ethical-violence>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Augustus Sinclair, *Dialogue*, Pauper’s Drop.

This leads us to the greyest of morality choices in *BioShock 2*. Dr. Gilbert Alexander was a key scientist behind the creation of the Big Daddies and their bond with the Little Sisters. He is as much, if not more, to blame for your current predicament as Poole. However, vengeance alone does not drive the decision whether or not to murder Alexander. Just as you find Poole groveling and Holloway is too old to fight back, Alexander is in no condition to resist you physically. The player finds Dr. Alexander languishing away in a holding tank, his body mutated beyond recognition from too much ADAM. His mind too has mutated. Going by the name “Alex the Great” now, Gilbert’s consciousness is able to command security bots remotely to attack Delta and still maintains the ability to communicate.

After breaking Alexander’s security system and obtaining the key for the next level, a recording from the “original” doctor plays.

It is done, the sample disposal button on the panel in front of you will administer a massive jolt of electricity to the deck. More than enough to kill me. Whatever I might say to dissuade you, do not listen. The man whose voice you hear now is long gone. As my mind fades, I find my thoughts turn to the suffering that Eleanor will be made to endure. I am overcome with pity but I can only offer my feeble prayers. Perhaps after my death you could do more. Now, please, I ask you to grant me peace. Goodbye, my friend, and thank you.

This is not a direct address to Subject Delta. It is not like the screams of Alex the Great who begs and pleads for you to ignore the death wish of his “old” self. Dr. Alexander wanted to die for what he done to Eleanor and her fellow Little Sisters and has been waiting for who knows how long to be released from his vile existence. The player must now decide whether he deserves to have his wish granted.

SUMMARY

BioShock 2 is what *BioShock* should have been, a game whose theme of choice and its consequences played out for the entirety of the game with its mechanics, dynamics, plot, and characters.

While the narratological and ludological elements resemble to some degree *BioShock*, its ludonarrative synchronicity is more substantial. The choices you make in regards to the killing (or not) of NPCs changes not only the narrative, but the level design as well. The game's more nuanced plot and characterization bleed into a more nuanced relationship with the avatar. You retain free will to play Subject Delta as you please. His background can influence your choices to kill certain characters or save others, or you can be merciless on your own accord. The game does not force you to make either decision and that is true to the theme of individualism and allows you to remain immersed in the game without it reminding you, like in *BioShock*, that your decisions are not of your choosing.

That is not to say *BioShock 2* is without fault. Though not a ludonarrative synchronicity issue, *BioShock 2* starts with a slow burn for its first act, but this is less a sin than *BioShock*'s late game deviation from its own mid-point twist in theme. *BioShock 2* still maintains the multiple ending possibilities that caught the attention of critics and players alike with the original *BioShock* and does so without contradicting itself.

BioShock Infinite

A week after Irrational Games officially announced that they were indeed working on a new *BioShock* title, a trailer for *Infinite* was featured at Gamescom 2010, the “world’s largest trade fair and event highlight for interactive games and entertainment.”¹³⁰ In the span of seven days, *Infinite* went from being completely unknown to IGN’s Game of the Show.¹³¹ In the two and a half years before the game’s release on March 26, 2013, *BioShock Infinite* was nominated for over and won nearly a hundred awards, including three consecutive “Most Anticipated Game” for Spike’s Video Game Awards and nominations in both 2011 and 2012 for “One to Watch” at the Golden Joystick Awards.¹³² When *Infinite* finally hit the market, it did so triumphantly, living up to the hype by outselling both its predecessors and receiving far better reviews than *BioShock 2*.

The official *BioShock Infinite* website provides the following plot summary:

Set in 1912... former Pinkerton agent Booker DeWitt [is] sent to the flying city of Columbia on a rescue mission. His target? Elizabeth, imprisoned since childhood by the city’s founder, Zachary Hale Comstock. During their daring escape, Booker and Elizabeth form a powerful bond -- one that lets Booker augment his own abilities with her world-altering control over the environment. Together, they fight from high-speed Sky-Lines, in the streets and houses of Columbia, on giant

¹³⁰ Federal Association of Interactive Entertainment Software, <http://www.gamescom-cologne.com/en/gamescom/home/index.php>.

¹³¹ Martin Robinson, “Gamescom: BioShock Infinite Wins Game of Show,” *IGN*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2010/08/20/gamescom-bioshock-infinite-wins-game-of-show>.

¹³² *BioShock Infinite*, <http://www.bioshockinfinite.com/the-game>.

zeppelins, and in the clouds, all while learning to harness an expanding arsenal of weapons and abilities.¹³³

No longer were Ken Levine and Irrational Games dependent upon Ayn Rand to provide the foundation for their narrative. A FPS with sci-fi elements may seem an unlikely benefactor of a historical novel's influence, but *BioShock Infinite* owes much of its narratology to Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*. This non-fiction novel follows two men of great importance to the Chicago World Fair of 1893, also known as the World's Columbian Exposition. Daniel H. Burnham was the Director of Works for the fair, while Dr. H. H. Holmes was a serial killer who took advantage of the influx of fresh targets brought to town by the fair. There are a few, even if loose, connections between these historical figures and those of *Infinite*'s main "protagonist" and "antagonist."¹³⁴ Like Burnham, Comstock was the impetus behind the creation of his Columbia, a feature at the Chicago World Fair back in 1893 within the fictional timeline of *BioShock*. Like Holmes, Booker does bring death and destruction upon Comstock's city, though Booker is actually a spree killer rather than a serial killer regardless of a similar death toll.

While Comstock and Booker have their counterparts in fact, they have parallels in the fiction of Rapture as well. Zachary Hale Comstock is *Infinite*'s Andrew Ryan, both

¹³³ *Synopsis*, <http://www.BioShockInfinite.com/the-game/>.

¹³⁴ Technically, as spoiled by the end of the game, Booker DeWitt and Zachary Hale Comstock is the same person, just from alternate universes. Therefore DeWitt/Comstock is both protagonist and antagonist, hence the use of quotations.

founder and tyrant. He is also like Sofia Lamb, a religious zealot who does not take kindly to non-believers. Anarchist (or revolutionist, depending on your financial status in Columbia) Daisy Fitzroy shares a similar function as that of Atlas in the original *BioShock*. While she appears to make a fair trade of you helping her and in return she providing you the means of escape, Fitzroy is only using you so she can overtake Comstock's rule. The parallels continue with all three *BioShock* games featuring a businessman who follows his own rules of Social Darwinism rather than the teachings of their leader, whether this be Frank Fontaine, Augustus Sinclair, or Jeremiah Fink in *Infinite*.

What makes the third *BioShock* title unique is the lack of direct parallels for its narratological components to the prior *BioShock* games. The settings, from a dystopia under the sea to a utopia in the sky, are as diametric opposites as can be designed. The story tries to jam together *BioShock* and *BioShock 2*'s narrative into a swashbuckling adventure to both save the girl and escape the city, resulting in an over-burdened plot. There are no Splicers or Big Sisters. There are no Big Daddies or Little Sisters. Instead, *Infinite* gives us the Lutece Twins, a pair of siblings whose main functions appear to be spouting riddles and have no narratological or ludological counterpart in either *BioShock* or *BioShock 2*.

Unlike *BioShock 2*, with its emphasis on variation by extension, *Infinite* alters both the ludology and narratology more often than not with reduction. Without the presence of the Little Sisters, the entire mechanic of harvesting or rescuing is eliminated.

Hacking is also absent from *Infinite* which leaves shooting as the only mechanic, outside of basic movement, to be featured in all three games.¹³⁵

The player still has the option to shoot with weapons or use superhuman powers. In the world of Columbia, these abilities, are named vigors rather than plasmids. For *BioShock* and *BioShock 2*, plasmids were a key element tied to both the setting and plot. Rapture, in part, fell due to the over-use of plasmids by its citizenry. They were a creation of the free-market Andrew Ryan instilled and his emphasis on unchecked scientific research. Vigors, on the other hand, play a minor role in the story of *BioShock Infinite*. They are not commonly used by the population, yet somehow easy to access for the hero Booker DeWitt.

These vigors, while less integral to the narrative, are more important to combat dynamics in *Infinite*. In *BioShock*, the main dynamic was combining the plasmids with specific weapons, like freezing opponents with Winter Blast and then smashing them into ice cubes with a wrench. In *BioShock 2*, the player could dual-wield plasmids and weapons for more brutal attacks. *Infinite*'s fighting style centers around vigor combinations, like using Murder of Crows followed by Devil's Kiss to create a fiery birdemic.

The reduction of vigors available to the player also exemplifies the focus to combining vigor powers as the new key dynamic. Not only does *Infinite* feature fewer

¹³⁵ Basic movement includes walking, jumping, crouching, etc.

vigor options than either *BioShock* or *BioShock 2* but the player is only capable of equipping two vigors at a time rather than allowing the player to cycle through all of the vigors they have earned. In the first two *BioShock* titles, you could choose from all of the plasmids you collected by way of a plasmid wheel, a set of gears that appeared onscreen that you could then rotate through until you found the power you wanted to use for a particular situation. You also had the option of rotating through all of your plasmids without the visual assistance of the plasmid wheel. In *BioShock Infinite* the plasmid (or vigors in this case) wheel has been removed. You can only cycle through two vigors in real-time. If you wish to substitute out one of these vigors, then you have to pause the game and replace one or both of the vigor slots with a new choice of superpower.

This change creates more difficult battle scenarios and changes the pace of the game, with players having to spend extra time setting up their game plan by choice of vigors before jumping into a battle. The alteration to the series franchise component was just one of numerous changes to the combat portion of *Infinite*, and contributed to more complex but also more challenging scenarios. Many more of those changes spawned from the new level design.

A CITY LIGHTER THAN AIR

Visually, *Infinite* starts like that of its two predecessors. Just as Jack's plane crashes into the ocean, like Subject Delta awakening to see his reflection in a puddle, Booker DeWitt's story begins in the water. An unknown man and woman row him to a lighthouse, not the same as the one Jack found in the Atlantic but a lighthouse

nonetheless. This time, however, when Booker DeWitt enters, instead of diving deep into the ocean, a rocket launches him high into the sky.

Booker lands in the Church of Comstock, a space that has remnants of the Art Deco architecture previously seen in Rapture. Booker wades through water as what at first are dark hallowed halls begin to glow from candlelight. The Church of Comstock has similar aesthetic qualities to the Art Deco church designs of New York such as the use of stained glass and gold similar featured in St. Andrew Avellino Church.¹³⁶ Religious structures of the period commonly featured elements from other forms or architecture, such as combining Art Deco and the Gothic Revival style.¹³⁷ The 1926 Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri had both a “Neoclassical bent [and] contained Art Deco elements.” Inside the Church of Comstock, you can also find several neoclassical statues of figures such as Lady Comstock and Elizabeth. The Château Thierry in Bellicourt, France was also an Art Deco hybrid with a “Neoclassical temple form guarded by a massive stylized eagle behind a symbolic render of the Stars and Stripes.”¹³⁸ The Church of Comstock features multiple patriotic imagery combined with religious symbolism, a trend that continues upon entering Columbia.

¹³⁶ Carla Breeze, *American Art Deco: Architecture and Regionalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 55.

¹³⁷ Bayer, 196.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Before the player may enter the city, he or she require a baptism. Booker approaches a golden, metallic wrought archway. You need look no further than Louis Sullivan, one of the influential architects for Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, to find the inspiration for this final transport into Columbia. Louis Sullivan's design of the Transportation Building for the World's Columbian Exposition was a major departure from the classical style of the other Great Buildings:

The building's main entrance was an immense single arch known as the 'Golden Doorway.' The doorway was stunning in its intricate metal design. This grand portal featured a series of receding arches entirely overlaid in gold leaf.¹³⁹

Architecture and level design transition the player from the familiar world of *BioShock* toward an entirely new interpretation of the series.

The World's Columbian Exposition is the main influence for the design of Comstock's utopia. The name of the fair was in reference to the quadricentennial of Columbus' discovery of America. After the success of the International Exposition of 1889 in Paris, the planners behind the Chicago World's Fair were "challenged, not only to equal, but to surpass what the French had accomplished."¹⁴⁰ The event was a spectacle of American Exceptionalism. Comstock modeled his city on not only its architecture, but also its purpose as well. Henry Van Brunt, one of the members of the Commission of

¹³⁹ Normon Bolotin and Christine Laing, *The World Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 55-57.

¹⁴⁰ Titus Marion Karlowicz, "The Architecture of the World's Columbian Exposition" (doctorate's dissertation, Northwestern University, 1965), 68.

Architects, explained that “what was to be found at the exposition was not architecture in its highest sense, but rather a scenic display, composed - to use a theatrical term - of ‘practicable’ models, executed on a colossal stage.”¹⁴¹ Nicknamed the White City, the ultimate purpose was for the fair to be an ideal for other American cities. Comstock took the colossal portion literally, along with a few of the cities’ “darker” aspects. While the nickname White City came from its color palettes, the Columbian Exposition also faced troubles with Native American groups and other minorities.¹⁴² The fair presented Asians of multiple descents in various exhibits as nothing more than inaccurate stereotypes.

The level Soldier’s Field features the Hall of Heroes, a sequence that parallels Ryan Amusements in *BioShock 2*. Here Booker and Elizabeth find two racist diorama displays. The first is a representation of the Boxer Rebellion, an event in which Columbia used its capabilities as an aerial craft of war to decimate the Chinese. The second display is that of the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which Booker was involved. Just as Ryan Amusements shows the history of Rapture and its eventual downfall, the Hall of Heroes does much the same. The player does not know until the conclusion of *BioShock Infinite* that Booker’s guilt over his part during the Battle of Wounded Knee led him to find God and change his identity to Zachary Hale Comstock. But thanks to the parallel universe theory integral to *Infinite*’ plot and gameplay, Booker’s action at Wounded Knee made

¹⁴¹ Henry Van Brunt, “Architecture at the World’s Columbian Exposition,” *Century Magazine* 44, 1892, 88.

¹⁴² Bolotin and Laing, 55.

him a great soldier and provided the skills necessary for the non-Comstock version to destroy Columbia.

Despite the ugliness of the Hall of Heroes, a good portion of *BioShock Infinite* is built around being pleasing to the eye. Steve Anichini, principal graphics programmer for *BioShock Infinite* explains:

The size of the levels were bigger than anything Irrational had attempted before... this meant much bigger and much more open spaces that still retained the high detail required for environmental storytelling, because much of the story telling in a *BioShock* game was done via the world itself.¹⁴³

While a player can explore the grandeur that is Columbia, absorbing all its detail and appreciating the result of more powerful graphics, the splendor of the city does not make up for its lack of genre appropriateness. *BioShock Infinite*'s story is that of a rescue (or escort) mission. Booker DeWitt attempts to sneak into Columbia, go unnoticed, find Elizabeth, and sneak her away without causing a fuss. This plot lends itself more towards the stealth genre than it does a FPS. There are stealth games told in the first-person perspective such as *Thief* (1998) and *Dishonored* (2012). These titles allow the player to guide the avatar in attempts to traverse unnoticed, but they do not feature the scale of combat or similar weaponry found in *BioShock Infinite*. The trials and tribulations Booker and Elizabeth face as they try to escape Columbia undetected is a story best fit for the third-person stealth genre rather than a FPS like *BioShock Infinite*. Third-person

¹⁴³ Steve Anichini, "A Super Technical Look At the Lighting of *BioShock Infinite*," *Kotaku*, March 6, 2014, <http://kotaku.com/the-science-behind-bioshock-infinities-beautiful-world-1537743502>.

stealth games, such as *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), are known for their escort missions. *BioShock 2* did have its moments in which the player could perform an escort mission, protecting a Little Sister as she gathered ADAM. However, there are two differences between *BioShock 2*'s escort function and *Infinite*. First, *BioShock 2*'s missions were optional and not the focus of the entire game, unlike *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative. Secondly, *BioShock 2*'s level design was built to accommodate the protection of young, female NPC. *Infinite*'s level design was simply not developed with this dynamic in mind.

Instead, like nearly all FPS, the level design for *Infinite* centers on combat, the very task Booker is attempting to avoid. The design of Columbia features numerous wide, open spaces. These areas accommodate a large number of enemies and the developers always take advantage of this.

The original *BioShock*'s Rapture was a dark, claustrophobic place full of corridors and rooms that accommodated only small-scale battles. *BioShock Infinite*'s Columbia, with its massive floating city blocks, allows for a much wider range of tactics and behaviors. Enemies can be engaged both in close combat and with long-range weapons across huge expanses—and everywhere in between. But they will also take advantage of the same opportunities you have, as they work together and zip around on Sky-Lines to outflank and outwit you.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Chris Remo, "Ten Things You Should Know About BioShock Infinite: Day 6," *Irrational Games Insider*, September 11, 2010, <http://irrationalgames.com/insider/ten-things-you-should-know-about-BioShock-Infinite-day-6/>.

Why is Booker forced to participate in such large-scale carnage? This does not serve a plot where an outsider attempts to steal away a princess of sorts from a possessive and paranoid city prone to violence.

BOTH SINNER AND SAINT

Unlike the previous *BioShock* avatars, players' know nearly everything about Booker DeWitt: what he looks like, his birthday, details of his past, and even what he sounds like. Booker is the first *BioShock* avatar that speaks, with the exception of Jack's opening monologue. Voice actor Troy Baker has pages upon pages of dialogue, interacting with a majority of the *Infinite* cast. Booker talks as he observes his surroundings, cries for help during combat, and chews the fat during *Infinite*'s many cut scenes. Returning to Robin Hunicke's view on choice, "games can be about empowering you to see and experience someone else's perspective."¹⁴⁵ This is how *Infinite* differs greatly from the previous two *BioShocks*. You are Booker DeWitt; he is not you.

However, it is not the altered nature of the game's avatar that breaks the immersive nature the series has thus far strived to create. *Infinite* features a basic mechanic of many FPS that inevitably pulls the player out of the game. Rich, in the episode "Why Mario is more Immersive than Call of Duty" from the web series *Previously Recorded*, proposes that for horror "you need to be immersed, you need to be

¹⁴⁵ Critical Path, "CRITICAL PATH-Robin Hunicke-Games Are about Choice."

there.”¹⁴⁶ The video references the recent *Call of Duty: Advance Warfare* (2014) in which the player attends the funeral service of a fellow soldier and friend, only to be asked to “press X” in order to pay their respects. Rich argued that the mechanic of button prompts, instructions that tell you exactly what you are supposed to do specifically, break immersion in a game regardless of genre. These instructions are addressing you, the player, not your character.

While *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* featured several button prompts, they typically were for simple tasks like “open door” or “pull lever.” Button prompts used for complex actions such as “jump ledge” or “swing across room” take away agency and sensory feedback, removing the challenge aesthetic and limit dynamic options for players. *Infinite* featured far more promptings to tap X, including an instance that spurred religious controversy.

Only minutes into the game, the player is asked to press a button in order to be baptized and thus enter Columbia, a city based on religious zealotry. If you choose against the baptism, you cannot continue with the game. At this early point in *Infinite*, the player is not fully Booker. *Infinite*’s opening retains much of that visual style and narrative similarities of the previous two *BioShock* games. This leads the player, whether consciously or not, by the aesthetic of nostalgia to assume that the immersion featured in *Infinite*, where you are making choices as your own not just as the character, will

¹⁴⁶ Really Freakin’ Clever, “Why Mario is more Immersive than Call of Duty,” *YouTube*, February 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUIstqS6mdE&index=59&list=WL>.

continue. Gamer Green Malmberg felt that being forced to perform this action of baptism was an affront to his religion and requested (and received) a full refund from Valve, an online video game distributor, for his purchase of *Infinite*.¹⁴⁷ Twitter responses to Kotaku's article on the subject proved that even though the choice "felt ham-handed," many believe it was a decision not meant to be made by the player's own ethics. "I'm not being me," said one respondent, "I'm Booker DeWitt. Booker DeWitt don't give a shit." Up until this point, Booker's dialogue has been sparse and even Jack had a few words to say at the beginning of *BioShock*. Having a decision such as this early on the game, where developer's insistence drives the plot so heavily and leaves no choice for the player, is where the game clearly breaks away from its predecessors in regards to immersion.

Perhaps the over-use and controversial button prompts in *Infinite* spawn from the fact that this game does not feature a horror aesthetic, unlike the previous two. The level of immersion required to create this mood is not as necessary for a game that does not desire the player to be scared.

¹⁴⁷ Patricia Hernandez, "Some Don't Like BioShock's Forced Baptism. Enough To Ask For A Refund," *Kotaku*, April 16, 2013, <http://kotaku.com/some-dont-like-BioShocks-forced-baptism-enough-to-as-473178476>.

A CHOICE IS BETTER THAN NONE

BioShock Infinite does not feature the Big Daddy/Little Sister moral quandary that the first two *BioShock* games revolved around. There are, however, still ethical questions revolving around violence.

Unlike in Rapture, where behind every corner is the potential for a Splicer ready to cut your head off, the citizens of Columbia are not out for blood... at least not without warrant. “Her citizens have more unpredictable motives, and their enmity—or their loyalty—can’t be taken for granted,” which is why once a Columbian has been provoked; the player must be ready to fight them and their loyal brethren.¹⁴⁸ Killing a Splicer in Rapture was a matter of survival, kill or be killed. Murdering citizens of Columbia is less cut and dry. ADAM drove rapture dwellers mad, devolved them, and thus killing them was almost mercy. Those in Columbia attack you out of fear, and rather than give the player the option to run away and hide or even incapacitate rather than cause lethal damage, the player more often must kill not just officers of the law but also simple bar patrons and wrong place-wrong time crowd members.

Choice is still a theme, but in the case of *BioShock Infinite*, it is about the futility of choice. The actions of Booker DeWitt inevitably escalate into violence, whether he chooses heads or tails. For instance, when Booker arrives in Raffle Plaza, he is chosen to

¹⁴⁸ Chris Remo, “Ten Things You Should Know About BioShock Infinite: Day 5,” *Irrational Games Insider*, September 15, 2010, <http://irrationalgames.com/insider/ten-things-you-should-know-about-BioShock-Infinite-day-5/>.

participate in a sadistic, racist ritual: throwing a baseball at an interracial couple. The player does not have to throw the ball at them. They can peg the host of the raffle, Jeremiah Fink, instead for leading such a despicable display. Alternatively, the player can even refuse to throw period. However, no matter what the player chooses, the result will be the same. A member of the crowd will notice the “mark of the False Shepherd” upon Booker’s hand and the police arrive.

Later on, when Booker and Elizabeth attempt to gain passage out of town, Booker’s inability to keep a low profile comes back to haunt him. When he approaches the ticket booth, Booker overhears the clerks call for backup. He has two choices now: pull out a weapon or sternly ask for the tickets. Either way, Booker ends up yet again surrounded and forced to fight off wave after wave of angry citizens and police officers.

Not only are the consequences for Booker’s choice inevitable, but optional moments of violence in the game are without consequence at all. When security is not around, Book can randomly kill civilians. There is a reaction, the quick cry of agony and viscera exploding from their heads, but Booker is rewarded for his behavior, not punished. Killing innocents is too often necessary in order to steal resources off their dead bodies. Lacking the hacking mechanic, which lowered the cost of items in *BioShock* and *BioShock 2*, or the gifts from the Little Sisters, makes managing of money and vigors that much more difficult in *Infinite*.

Throughout *Infinite* there is foreshadowing of the conclusion’s reveal of futility of choice. The Lutece twins, who all too often confuse Booker by speaking in the future

tense, provide hints towards the game's theme and its parallel universe theory. At Monument Island, Robert and Rosalind Lutece approach Booker. Robert wears a chalkboard around his neck with two columns: heads and tails. The former features thirteen tallies, the latter has none. "Heads or tails," they ask. Booker flips the coin. It's heads. "I never find that as satisfying as I'd imagine," says Robert. "Chin up, there's always next time," responds Rosalind. "I suppose there is."¹⁴⁹ Robert turns around, revealing another chalkboard with the entire heads column filled with tallies. This scene, and its awkward use of grammar, is the result of Booker having met the Lutece twins multiple times before during his numerous failed attempts to rescue Elizabeth, not that he remembers or knows any of this; nor does the play know at this point in the game.

The multiple endings featured in *BioShock*, the reveal that the player's choices somewhat mattered, was a major twist for storytelling in the FPS genre. For *BioShock 2*, thanks to the nostalgic aesthetic, varied endings were to be expected. The twist with *Infinite* was that there was no twist. The third *BioShock* chose not to have your decisions alter the game's conclusion.

The lengthy epilogue for *Infinite*, in which the player no longer completes any combat missions but instead is only capable of moving Booker around and having him perform simple tasks like opening doors and pressing buttons, reveals how the game turns the entire series onto its head.

¹⁴⁹ Robert and Rosalind Lutece, "Heads or Tails," *Dialogue*, The Fairgrounds.

As previously discussed, Comstock and DeWitt are one in the same, merely different versions of the same man from different parallel universes. Elizabeth has the ability to access these universes through “tears,” and it is these tears that connect Rapture to Columbia. The vigors that seem out of place in *Infinite*? Those were plasmids acquired by Jeremiah Fink after an inter-dimensional trip to Rapture. The monstrous man-machine hybrids known as the Big Daddies? Those were based on the research done in Columbia used to create Elizabeth’s mechanical guardian, Songbird.

Before the final scene, in which multiple versions of Elizabeth from multiple universes kill Booker prior to his baptism and transformation into Comstock, Elizabeth reveals an endless sea of infinite lighthouses. “There’s always a city, a man, and a lighthouse,” she says.¹⁵⁰ Whatever decision made, whether it be in *BioShock*, *BioShock 2*, or *BioShock Infinite*, is played out simultaneously in some other lighthouse, in a way “retconning” all choices made by the player throughout the entirety of the series. Even if you played Jack as a moral man, somewhere else he was harvesting all those Little Sisters. Ryan, Fontaine, and you were not the only puppeteers; fate is the ultimate developer.

¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth, *Dialogue*, Sea of Doors.

SUMMARY

BioShock Infinite has the largest gap between narratology and ludology, specifically in regards to the game's plot, level design, and genre. Instead of providing Booker with an environment in which he could hide and sneak by enemies, as would commonly be found in third-person stealth games, *Infinite* is designed as a typical FPS and builds its levels to be brutal warzones.

There are other problematic issues within *BioShock Infinite*. The game struggles to maintain immersion. While there are moments in which Elizabeth addresses Booker by looking directly at the screen, breaking the fourth wall, there are too many times that the game reminds you that it is just a game by featuring multiple quick-time events rather than allowing the player the agency to perform these tasks themselves.

That being said, the restriction to the combat dynamics does foreshadow the new theme of choice as a farce. There are other hints, presented mainly through the Lutece twins, that choice is unobtainable. However, these moments of ludonarrative synchronicity are only made apparent at the completion of the game.

Results and Discussion

In order to highlight the differences in ludonarrative synchronicity between the three titles, one must compare and contrast them in regards to level design, theme, and immersion.

LEVEL DESIGN

BioShock and *BioShock 2* share a similar aesthetic in their look and feel of Rapture. Both games take advantage of the dystopia's architecture to heighten the aesthetic of horror, using the eerie lighting effect of moving water to produce strange visuals and focus on the use of echoes off the Art Deco material to increase the tension. The main difference between *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* is that the sequel allows for an alteration in the level design by means of the narrative and the choices the player made that change it.

Columbia, in *BioShock Infinite*, is the utter antithesis of Rapture. The opening of the game does provide a visual transition from the level design of the first two games into the third by means of the architecture in the Church of Comstock, but the level design in *Infinite* does not benefit the combat in the same manner that Rapture does. All three games are challenging, but *Infinite*'s increased difficulty is partially due to its own lack of ludonarrative synchronicity. The game's narrative, at its core, is an escort mission. The level design, however, is fit for combat and not stealth.

THEME

Choice is the main theme, to some degree, in all three *BioShock* titles. The use of plasmids, or vigors in the case of *Infinite*, as an alternative form of combat is a dynamic use of the theme. Both *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* have the Little Sister system, with no equivalent featured in *Infinite*. However, this alteration in the third game is actually an example of ludonarrative synchronicity. The game is about the falsity of choice and including such a system would not be appropriate for the game's narrative and theme. Unlike the level design, where *Infinite* strays too close to the focus on combat featured in its predecessors, *Infinite*'s choice to stray from the franchise components by cutting a major mechanic preserves the internal logic of the game.

IMMERSION

The clearest difference between all three games is the difference in the avatar and the player's relationship with the protagonist. In *BioShock*, Jack is you. In *BioShock 2*, you are Subject Delta but have the option to ignore his backstory and play as you will. In *BioShock Infinite*, you are Booker and the game constantly reminds you of this. The amount of knowledge you have in regards to your avatar's background is not cause for a break in immersion necessarily. The difference is in the amount of agency you have in controlling the avatar.

BioShock, by way of its thematic digression and plot, dismisses agency. *BioShock 2* and its thematic and narrative focus on individualism support your sense of agency. *Infinite*'s lack of choice is reflected your inability to surmise what would Booker do. The

game makes it clear by its well-defined characterization and use of dialogue what Booker wants, whether or not you want the same thing.

Beyond theme, the games combat system in each of the games illuminates the differences in immersion. *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* have multiple dynamics, allowing you to play the game as best suits your gaming style (ex. favoring melee combat, range, stealth). *Infinite* pauses the game, slowing down the pace, and breaking immersion by having you participate in a quick-time event rather than perform a complex or important task such as “save Jeremiah Fink.”

Conclusion

BioShock was the first of its kind, a FPS that aimed to be a step above the narratively weak games of its genre. The game did expose the weakness of the genre, the lack of player agency, but was unable to present an answer of how to create a coherent player-driven narrative.

BioShock 2 was able to learn from the mistakes of its predecessor and maintain its strengths. The sequel follows its own internal logic to a much higher degree than its two prequels. As mentioned previously, the development under a different set of leadership could have been the cause for the game's ability to alter weaknesses of the original while maintaining the strengths of *BioShock*.

Where *BioShock 2* took an hour or so to step out of the shadow of its predecessor, *Infinite* needed only minutes to set itself apart. Despite featuring the return of its creator to the franchise, *BioShock Infinite* is the least like a *BioShock* game, in regards to featuring the tropes players had come to expect. *Infinite* had an entirely new cast, setting, and philosophies to explore. It eliminated multiple mechanics while changing the dynamics to those that remained. The game's diametrically new location mirrored the game's theme as the true antithesis to everything *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* stood for.

The changes were not the issue in regards to the lack of ludonarrative synchronicity in *BioShock Infinite*; if anything, the attempt to retain elements from the previous titles is what caused the narratology to be a mismatch with the ludology. Elements like vigors, while an effective combat tool, were given little explanation in the

story for their existence and purpose in the world of Columbia outside of them being a franchise component. Without *Infinite*'s coda, the game does not warrant any of these elements left over from *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* that by being jammed in weaken the ludonarrative synchronicity.

The ludonarrative synchronicity of a video game is not a measurement of quality. A game can still be “fun,” or however you wish to describe successful, even if it lacks a strong relationship between narratology and ludology. As exemplified by the success of *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*, ludonarrative synchronicity does not guarantee financial or critical success. If that was the case then *BioShock 2* would be the “blockbuster” classic game its prequels are regarded as.

A developer who wishes to achieve ludonarrative synchronicity is making an artistic decision, not a financial choice. I hypothesize that *BioShock Infinite* would not have been the smashing success it was if the game was not part of the *BioShock* franchise, despite this change resulting in stronger ludonarrative synchronicity. By keeping just enough franchise components like the combat system with its superhuman attacks, regardless of their lack of necessity or connection to the plot, *Infinite* was able to please fans of the previous games. *Infinite* marked the return of the franchise's creator and thus was regarded as the true sequel to *BioShock*. While *BioShock 2* featured stronger ludonarrative synchronicity, it was not made by Levine and Irrational Games and thus seen as the step-child of the *BioShock* series. In the end, franchise components play a

larger role in the critical and financial success of game, regardless of the effect these have on the ludonarrative synchronicity.

Creator Ken Levine was deliberate in his intentions for the *BioShock* franchise to intertwine narratology and ludology, and therefore the connection or its absence does reveal whether or not the developers met their goal. Levine wanted to create something more than “interactive fiction,” or purely objective-based.¹⁵¹

For him, the debate between whether or not a video game should focus more on narratology or ludology was invalid. Instead of favoring one over the other, Levine wanted to have the two meet in the middle; he wanted to build the impossible.

Levine is not alone in voicing the desire for more player-driven narrative video games. Tom Bissell believes it is possible, just not easy.

The person who finally figures out how to make the game many gamers seem to believe they want — the action-heavy shooter with great characters and thoughtful scenarios — is basically going to be the Twelfth Imam of mass entertainment, and by that I mean we’ll all be waiting for this figure’s appearance, and his or her game, for a long, long time.¹⁵²

That isn’t to say that ludonarrative synchronicity should not be a desired outcome for video game developers. Aiming for ludonarrative synchronicity is a noble artistic choice, but a developer cannot and should not expect financial and critical reciprocation

¹⁵¹ Grant Tavinor, “Videogames and Interactive Fiction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no 1 (2005): 36.

¹⁵² Tom Bissell, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Shooter,” *Grantland*, July 12, 2012, <http://grantland.com/features/line-explores-reasons-why-play-shooter-games/>.

for trying to achieve what some have deemed impossible. Theorists and academics will continue to debate on narratology and ludology. Critics will clamor on about how

“[I]t is extremely difficult — maybe impossible — to come up with a story and characters that, when placed within the context of most current video games, *don't* feel inherently silly.”

It is difficult to achieve, but more importantly, it just isn't what the majority of the market is looking for right now.

The *BioShock* franchise fell short of Levine's goal, but just as the character of Booker DeWitt tried and tried again, it is not out of the realm of possibility for Ken Levine, another *BioShock* team, or an intrepid group of indie developers to attempt the so-called impossible once more. According to the Lutece Twins, “One goes into an experiment knowing one could fail. But one does not undertake an experiment knowing one HAS failed.”¹⁵³ Ludonarrative synchronicity is not a primary concern for gamers at the moment, but the consumer climate will eventually shift.

Ken Levine's dream of a ludonarrative-synched game is still very much alive, which is more than can be said for the utopias he created.

¹⁵³ Robert and Rosalind Lutece, *Dialogue*, The Lighthouse.

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