



Institute for American Studies
Leipzig University
Author Manuscript

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Published in its final edited form as:

Schubert, Stefan. "Objectivism, Narrative Agency, and the Politics of Choice in the Video Game *BioShock*." *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann et al. Heidelberg: Winter, 2015. 271-89. Print.

Objectivism, Narrative Agency, and the Politics of Choice in the Video Game *BioShock*

Abstract: In this article, I investigate the video game *BioShock* for its political and cultural work and argue that it offers a popular platform to discuss the politically charged question of choice, both inside and outside the realm of video games. In a first section, I introduce the game's basic plot and setting, propose a way to study how video games operate narratively, and briefly discuss the 'political' dimension of games in general. Afterwards, I look at how *BioShock* is influenced by Ayn Rand's philosophy of objectivism, a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of individual choice and self-interest, and I trace this influence specifically in the game's main antagonist, Andrew Ryan, and its setting, the underwater city of Rapture. With these elements as a basis, I analyze how *BioShock* engages with the politics of choice, focusing on a major twist scene in the game to demonstrate how *BioShock* deals with the question of choice on a metatextual level. Reading this scene in the context of the game's overall narrative, specifically of moral choices in the game that lead to different endings, I argue that the game metatextually connects the political question of choice inherent in objectivism to the narrative and the playing of the game, pointing to the ambivalences inherent in questions of choice, agency, and free will.

Introduction

Published in 2007 by 2K Games and developed by Irrational Games, the video game *BioShock* has been an immense critical and commercial success, having been lauded by scholars and reviewers alike as “the masterpiece of recent gaming” (Tavinor 91) and as a title that can “hold its head high among the best games ever made” (Schiesel). The game’s “immense popularity” (Aldred and Greenspan 483)—having sold more than four million copies (Remo)—is often attributed to two core factors: its engaging story (combined with its general interest in and exploration of how narratives in video games work) as well as the carefully crafted world that it presents and lets players explore, a world that is influenced by Ayn Rand’s political philosophy of objectivism. Accordingly, *BioShock* has been discussed as exhibiting a “complex, sophisticated and intertextual narrative world” (Kraus 90) and as demonstrating a “complex engagement with broad political ideas” and problematizing “ideologies of individualism” (Tulloch 34). Likewise, scholars regard it as a game that “raises [...] large questions of free will and choice” (Wysocki and Schandler 205) and that

“simultaneously celebrates and interrogates utopian notions of technological progress and free will” (Aldred and Greenspan 479). Overall, it has thus been praised for combining ‘serious’ political ideas with the ‘popular’ medium of the video game, leading a reviewer of the *Chicago Sun-Times* to state: “I never once thought anyone would be able to create an engaging and entertaining video game around the fiction and philosophy of Ayn Rand, but that is essentially what 2K Games has done . . . the rare, mature video game that succeeds in making you think while you play” (qtd. in Kraus 91).

In this article, I will investigate this highly popular video game for its ‘political’ dimension, that is, for the political and cultural work it does and for the (meta)textual quality of its politicality. *BioShock* depicts a world influenced by Ayn Rand’s philosophy, which has recently gone through a renaissance in American discourse and which foregrounds the importance of individualism, individual choice, and the pursuit of what Rand calls ‘rational self-interest.’ The game thus deals with both Rand’s actual ideas and the related, more general questions of choice, free will, and agency. At the same time, through its narrative and the mechanics of its medium (the gameplay), it connects both the concrete issues concerning Rand’s objectivism and the related more abstract questions to a metatextual discussion of the nature of choice and narrative in video games: The game performs its ‘political’ ideas (revolving around objectivism and thus the question of choice) on a metatextual level as well (in the agency and the choices that players do and do not have).

Before delving into a narrative analysis of *BioShock* specifically, I will first introduce the game’s basic plot and setting while also briefly discussing how video games’ narrative elements can generally be investigated and to what extent games can be considered ‘political.’ Subsequently, in order to discuss how the game references and criticizes Rand’s philosophy of objectivism, I will look at the influence of her philosophical and political ideology on the character of Andrew Ryan and on the depiction of *BioShock*’s city of Rapture. Finally, I will uncover how the game engages with ‘political’ questions even beyond objectivism and in reference to video games and textuality in general by analyzing *BioShock*’s narrative and gameplay in closer detail, specifically discussing the game’s ‘twist’ scene and the choice players have in dealing with the so-called Little Sisters. In doing so, I will argue that *BioShock* uses Ayn Rand’s political philosophy in order to offer a popular platform for elaborate discussions of choice, free will, and agency, of how much choice or agency one can have in video games—and the self-consciously metatextual quality of this discussion is what moves this question beyond video games as well. While evading a clear answer to the questions it so productively poses, the game points to the ambivalences inherent in agency and choice, emphasizing that ‘absolute’ free will or agency are illusory.

BioShock, Narrativity, and ‘Politics’ in Video Games

BioShock is set in a science fiction/biopunk world in which players assume the role of the game’s protagonist Jack, the only survivor of a plane crash over the ocean, and follow his perspective in exploring an enormous underwater city called Rapture. The game is a first-person shooter, that is, players play in first-person mode, as Jack, seeing what he sees, being constricted to what he is able to experience. As a shooter game, combating many of Rapture’s mostly deranged inhabitants (called ‘splicers’) makes up the majority of *BioShock*’s gameplay, yet the exploration of the world and progressing through the game’s various levels takes on an almost equally prominent role. In the game’s story, players learn that Rapture was built by the egomaniac businessman Andrew Ryan in the 1950s to escape the apparently looming threats of socialism and the US government’s variant of capitalism with its state-sponsored social programs. Jack enters Rapture in the year 1960 and is assisted by a man called Atlas helping him navigate through the city and fight against Ryan, who suspects Jack to be a spy and sends many of his forces to combat the player. Along the way, Jack finds out more and more about the world of Rapture and how it has been ravaged by the misuse of genetically modifying serums called ‘plasmids’ as well as by a civil war that pitted Ryan against a man called Frank Fontaine, the leader of the opposition to Ryan’s regime, who was killed by Ryan a few years prior to Jack entering Rapture. During the course of the story, players learn what has happened to Rapture and its inhabitants and uncover the truth about many of the main characters, including the identity of their player avatar, Jack.

In order to understand how *BioShock* narratively operates as a video game and how it presents its world of Rapture, I will make use of the narratological concept of the storyworld.¹ David Herman refers to storyworlds as the “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate [...] as they work to comprehend a narrative” (9). In this sense, the concept of the

1 Discussing video games in terms of narratives and narrativity in general is a long-standing point of contention in the field of game studies. The question whether video games can be understood as narratives—or as having narrative elements—at all has been heatedly discussed as part of the so-called ludology vs. narratology debate. For the purpose of this article, I do not wish to engage in this debate but will instead look specifically at the narrative elements that *BioShock* undoubtedly has, without wanting to address the formalist question of what games like *BioShock* ‘are,’ which is what much of the debate is implicitly about. At the same time, however, I will also pay attention to the unique elements of the medium of the video game that complicate more traditional understandings of narrative. For detailed explorations of the early phases of game studies that also include details of the ludology vs. narratology debate, cf., e.g., Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 189-204; Wolf and Perron 2-13; or Mäyrä 5-11.

storyworld focuses on the role of readers of a text in “trying to make sense of a narrative” as they “attempt to reconstruct not just what happened [...] but also the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved” (13-14). Thus, this concept draws attention to the process of creating an understanding of how the story, the characters, and the setting in a text come together. While storyworlds have ‘traditionally’ been used to analyze novels, the concept can also be employed to investigate how video games narrate:² As players play through a game, the world that is presented to them instigates a mental process of (re)creating what is being (aurally and visually) witnessed as the storyworld of the game.

Focusing on the storyworld of a game—instead of focusing on the narrative—is especially productive because it complements two of the most important narrative characteristics of video games. For one, video games are an interactive medium, that is, they depend on the player’s (physical) input in order to ‘work’ as a game.³ Although different for every video game, generally, this inherent aspect of the medium leads to nonlinearity in a game’s narrative—a player might decide to venture to a specific part of a game’s world first and then to another, but another player (or the same player in another playthrough) might do it the other way round, experiencing the narrative in a different order. In some games, such decisions or choices will then also lead to different narrative outcomes, for instance to multiple different endings to one game. In this sense, video games often do not have one ‘fixed,’ linear narrative to which one could refer. Focusing not so much (just) on this narrative but on the storyworld and thus on the process of how players construct such a narrative (as part of the storyworld) allows for more flexibility in understanding and analyzing how games operate narratively. Secondly, video games generally place a large emphasis on space in their storytelling (cf., e.g., Jenkins), and the active exploration (not just the witnessing) of space takes up a considerable part of many games. Likewise, how players of a game learn about what has happened in a game’s fictional universe is also commonly transmitted through the careful exploration of parts of the world, and often, such exploration is an optional element of the game, which ties this aspect back to games’ nonlinearity. Ultimately, using the concept of the storyworld facilitates a focus

2 Cf. Ryan and Thon for examples of investigations of storyworlds in different kinds of media as well as in transmedia environments.

3 This notion of interactivity is also not without controversy in game studies (cf., e.g., Aarseth 48-49), as is the related concept of nonlinearity, and different terminologies and models for understanding what exactly it is that makes (video) games different from other media have been proposed. Since this is not the place to discuss these in detail, I will instead only focus on how *BioShock* uses its interactive potential as a video game, which I will accordingly look at in the following chapters.

not on how players recreate a game's narrative but on how they recreate a game's fictional world (as the storyworld) in which that narrative—among others elements such as characters and locations—unfolds, allowing to take space into consideration as an aspect of storytelling.

In general, by looking at the narrative and gameplay of *BioShock*, I also want to emphasize the 'political' potential and the cultural and political work of video games in general.⁴ As a relatively new medium, video games are sometimes dismissed as childish, trivial, not 'serious,' or a waste of time (cf. Purchase) and are seen by some as "frivolous, pointless, or unsophisticated things," as Tavinor summarizes (92). While such normative assessments of video games seem quite unproductive academically, instances of this argument also come up in scholarly discussions, partly perhaps because the allegedly nonserious 'playfulness' of postmodernism is sometimes confused with the 'playing' inherent in video games, with the activity of 'play' in general (cf. Huizinga).⁵ Such traces of dismissing video games also appear in discussions of *BioShock*, visible for instance in the aforementioned *Chicago Sun-Times* review talking about "the rare, mature video game" (qtd. in Kraus 91; emphasis mine). Similarly, some scholars allege that "*BioShock* appears an unlikely philosophical text" because it "at first seems indistinguishable from the majority of other first-person shooters" (Packer 210) and that, "[a]t first glance, *BioShock* might appear to be an unlikely game for deep examination" as it is "primarily a first-person shooter with a strong undercurrent of survival-horror" (Wysocki and Schandler 200). They do not conclusively explain, however, why one would deem such a game (or any game in general) "unlikely for deep examination" in the first place. While these scholarly allegations of nonseriousness are thus almost always only implicit, the general suspicion remains that video games are not a medium necessarily to be taken serious.

By taking a look at the 'politics' of *BioShock*, I want to stress that even if video games always have to be played in order to work as games, this does not mean that playing them is in itself only a 'playful'—in the sense of nonserious—activity. To the contrary, video games can be seen as a very political medium, partly of course because of its immense commercial

4 For Paul Lauter, looking at the cultural work of a text entails asking how it "helps construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world" (11; cf. also Tompkins). Similarly, I understand looking at the political work that a text does as investigating how it enables political discussion, how it performs politics, and how it can also be considered 'political' on a narrative or textual level—aspects of a text that one could also understand as part of its cultural work.

5 In this sense, many of the arguments brought up specifically against video games are very much in line with similar 'allegations' against popular culture in general. Specifically, some of these arguments, which are presumably about video games' textuality, are, in fact, 'standard' arguments against popular culture only utilizing the metaphor of 'play.'

popularity,⁶ which firmly ties it to the consumer logics of production and reception. More importantly, I understand them as ‘political’ in a more abstract sense: The interactive, nonlinear nature of many video games demands an ‘active’ engagement with the medium by its players; it fosters an active audience similar to other contemporary texts that have readers “participat[e] in a text’s negotiation of meaning” (Herrmann, Kanzler, and Usbeck 8), and even inherently so due to the (not just mental but also ‘physical’) interactivity of the medium. In this vein, video games can also be seen as part of new forms of textuality that are being negotiated in contemporary American culture. ‘Playing,’ in this sense, can certainly be a serious and a political activity, as the case of *BioShock* will demonstrate.

Rand’s Objectivism and Ryan’s Rapture

To understand how *BioShock* engages with Ayn Rand’s ideas of objectivism, I will first briefly discuss some of the most important elements of her philosophy—or at least those elements that are often associated with objectivism and that have made it popular. Rand mainly expressed her philosophy in her novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Some of the important tenets of objectivism are a belief in rational self-interest, that is, in the pursuit of one’s own happiness, and in the importance of individualism and individual choice. Rand thus sharply criticizes socialism, in which, in her view, the happiness of a collective—of everybody—is foregrounded, and also types of capitalism that include state-sponsored social programs and a redistribution of wealth, both of which are forms of ‘collectivism’ for Rand (Packer 213). Instead, the only form of an economy and indeed a government style that suits objectivism is completely unregulated laissez-faire capitalism in which wealthy members of society are considered ‘productive’ and cannot be obligated to compensate for the less wealthy and supposedly ‘unproductive’ and ‘undeserving’ ones. This political dimension of the more complex overall ideas of objectivism⁷ is how Ayn Rand is most often evoked in public debates, and it is also the way *BioShock*’s world has been influenced by it—in a way, one could see this as a popular understanding of objectivism. Rand’s ideas, in whatever ways,

6 As Arthur Asa Berger notes, “[m]ost people are surprised to find out that the video game industry is larger than the film industry” (24).

7 Thijs van den Berg, for instance, summarizes other parts of the philosophy as claiming that “reality exists independently from the subject, that this reality is knowable to the subject through a unique perspective of observation and reason that help to determine the subject’s chances of survival. This, in turn, claims Rand, allows us to conclude that the individual, within a social context, has an unalienable right to protect the products of his or her reason so as to maximize chances of survival” (par. 7). The idea of such an ‘objectively’ knowable reality is also where the term ‘objectivism’ comes from.

are relevant to this day and have recently seen a resurgence in American discourse.⁸ This influence of objectivism is also visible in the fact that a game like *BioShock* takes it up as a subject and engages with its underlying ideas.

On the surface, objectivist ideas in *BioShock* are most visible in two narrative elements, the figure of Andrew Ryan and the city of Rapture that he built and that players explore in the game. Players learn about Ryan's core beliefs and his motivation for constructing Rapture through numerous ways in the game, most prominently via quotes by him displayed throughout the world, through so-called audio diaries with messages recorded by him that players can obtain, and, more directly, as Ryan later communicates with the player character with the help of a shortwave radio. In the beginning of the game, as players navigate Jack through the water and towards a lighthouse after the plane crash, a banner displays the words "No gods or kings. Only Man," a first indication of the importance of individuals and the rejection of religion and state rule (in the form of monarchy). Subsequently, as players board a bathysphere to reach the underwater city, they hear a recorded voice-over by Ryan further building on these ideas:

I am Andrew Ryan, and I'm here to ask you a question. Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? "No," says the man in Washington, "it belongs to the poor." "No," says the man in the Vatican, "it belongs to God." "No," says the man in Moscow, "it belongs to everyone." I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose . . . Rapture. A city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small.

Ryan's speech—the first words players hear from him in the game—is also the first of many indications that he believes in objectivist ideas, with Washington, the Vatican, and Moscow metonymically standing for state-sponsored capitalism in the United States, religion, and communism in the Soviet Union, respectively, all of which Ryan rejects. His phrasing that "the great would not be constrained by the small" closely mirrors Ayn Rand's idea of rational self-interest and the privileging of the most 'productive' members of society. The rejection of 'collectivism' inherent in Ryan's dismissal of the United States and the Soviet Union and, instead, the focus on individual entitlement and self-determination are the cornerstones of Ryan's ideology, which also closely mirrors the popular understanding of Rand's political ideas. Ryan's ideas are illuminated in similar ways in other instances of the game, and along with them, *BioShock* also features a few more direct allusions to Rand's works. For example, as scholars like Joseph

8 For instance, Joseph Packer argues that the "economic recession of 2008 and subsequent government bailouts have brought a renewed popular interest in Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism" (209); likewise, van den Berg notes that "[m]ore recently, Rand gained further notoriety through the Tea Party movement" (par. 15).

Packer have noted, the name Andrew Ryan is “almost an anagram of Ayn Rand” (213); the character of Atlas refers to the title of Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* and, at the same time, posters in the game asking “Who is Atlas?” mirror the famous question “Who is John Galt?” in Rand’s novel (215); and “[l]ater in the game the player learns that like Rand, Ryan was born in the Soviet Union and fled to the United States” (214).

BioShock engages with the ideas of objectivism not just via the character of Andrew Ryan but even more pervasively through the city of Rapture and by how players go about exploring that city (in which the whole game is set). In the game’s diegesis, Ryan envisioned Rapture as an objectivist utopia, and this influence can be traced by players as they progress through the game. Crucially, compared to the characterization of Ryan, the game is subtler in how it depicts Rapture as objectivist, since players learn about the different locations and inhabitants as well as the history of Rapture only through careful exploration and attention to detail; the game does not ‘force’ these elements onto the player (as would be the case, for instance, if the game explained the city’s history in unskippable cutscenes). Players familiarize themselves with Rapture and its history by paying close attention to the environments, for instance to banners displaying objectivism-inspired messages (such as “Altruism is the root of all wickedness”); by overhearing conversations between other characters; and especially by listening to the audio diaries scattered around the city. Many of these elements are optional; for example, some of the audio diaries are quite well hidden within the different levels of the game and can only be obtained if players are willing to stray from the main path of the game from time to time. In this sense, how players narratively explore Rapture can vary in different playthroughs, and accordingly, two players of the game (or one player in multiple playthroughs) might construct a different storyworld of the game, filled with variable levels of information regarding the setting, the characters, and some of the events that have happened before players arrived in Rapture.

If players do engage with the history of Rapture, they learn that Rapture was built as a city in which every inhabitant should follow his or her own interest, uninhibited by others, pursuing their own happiness without having to take social responsibility for others—but crucially, the game depicts Rapture after its ‘fall,’ that is, after Ryan’s objectivist experiment has apparently failed. What players witness of his utopian objectivist dream is instead decidedly dystopian.⁹ The city has been ravaged and plundered after a civil war, and many of its localities have decayed, a decay that is pervasively symbolized by masses of water in Rapture: As Evan Watts

9 Cf. Aldred and Greenspan or Schmeink for detailed studies of *BioShock* as a dystopia. Schmeink also reads *BioShock* as part of the alternate history genre; cf. Lizardi for another study that also analyzes the games in the *BioShock* series as alternate histories.

points out, “scorched debris, bullet-riddled corpses, and cracks gushing ocean water into the city [...] serve as aesthetic reminders of the failure not just of the structural integrity of Rapture, but of the ideology on which it was formed” (254), and Thijs van den Berg likewise notes the “pervasive presence of seawater that is seeping into Rapture’s submerged buildings” and that “is persistently reminding the player of the fact that Rapture’s structure is failing” (par. 11). Rapture’s laissez-faire capitalism eventually led to ruthless business practices and to the overpricing of basic needs like food and healthcare, quickly turning life problematic for the city’s less fortunate population. Likewise, many essential jobs were unfilled because the entitled citizens of Rapture deemed them beneath them—as the character Frank Fontaine puts it in an audio diary players can find in his apartment: “[S]omebody’s gotta scrub the toilets.” The city of Rapture thus appears as an embodiment of objectivism taken to its extreme, an exaggerated depiction of “the irony of an objectivist utopia running amok” (Tavinor 92). Consequently, this aspect of the game can most evidently be read as a “thorough critique of Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism” (Packer 210).¹⁰ The criticism of an (over)reliance on self-interest and individualism, perhaps especially in a time of “renewed popular interest in Ayn Rand’s philosophy” (Packer 209), is one way in which the game can clearly be understood as doing political work, as it can be interpreted as “a rebuke and rejection of Randian thought in a time where it is resurgent amongst American right wing, neo-liberalist and neo-conservative politicians, economists and media pundits” (Tulloch 30). Yet while these engagements with objectivism are already quite sophisticated and at least partly take place beneath the ‘surface’ of the game, *BioShock* also engages in an elaborate ‘political’ discussion about more abstract and general matters such as choice, free will, and agency in the game’s overall narrative and gameplay, which I will turn to now.

BioShock and the Politics of Choice

The most significant complication of how *BioShock* deals with objectivism and its underlying principles occurs in a scene that happens roughly two thirds into the game, in what is commonly referred to as the major ‘twist’ in the game’s plot. In this scene, after having tried to reach Ryan for most of the game, players finally locate him in his office. Through a window, they

10 However, as Packer notes, the gameplay of *BioShock* can also be analyzed as engaging with objectivism, and it is an aspect often overlooked (in favor of the narrative elements) in discussions of the game. For instance, he reads the abundance of weapons that are part of the gameplay as “a critique of Objectivism by illustrating that if governments abandoned control over defense and access to guns, those with the most weapons would dominate” (216). Cf. Packer 215-21 and van den Berg, par. 19-22 for a more detailed ‘political’ reading of *BioShock*’s gameplay.

look at Ryan calmly playing golf as he explains to Jack the truth about Jack's identity, which Ryan has recently found out for himself. Ryan ponders whether Jack has come to kill him on his own accord or whether he is just following orders, summarized in his question: "What separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No. A man chooses, a slave obeys." Accordingly, he asks Jack whether "a man [was] sent to kill or a slave," thus questioning Jack's motives and memories, asking if he has really chosen to do what he is about to do. Through Ryan's allusions, Jack, along with the player, slowly begins to realize the truth: Jack was implanted with false memories and has been deceived by Atlas to do as he commands, having been genetically engineered to follow any order that is accompanied by the phrase 'would you kindly.' This phrase has been used casually by Atlas throughout the game to give instructions to Jack, usually without players noticing—and the last time he used it was indeed when he said: "Now would you kindly head to Ryan's office and kill the son of a bitch?"¹¹ This twist reveals that it was no coincidence that Jack crash-landed over Rapture; instead, he was genetically modified by Frank Fontaine, Ryan's long-time rival, for the sole purpose of assassinating Ryan. Directly after this scene, Atlas reveals himself to be Fontaine, having faked his death and having assumed the alias of Atlas to be able to overthrow Ryan with this elaborate plot. Through this scene and other sources, including some of the audio diaries found afterwards, players will eventually piece together further parts of this revelation, among them the fact that Jack did indeed, as Ryan suggests, hijack the airplane and force it to crash; that Jack was born only four years ago and was genetically altered so that he would age much more quickly; and that he is actually Ryan's illegitimate son from an affair, having been bought off by Fontaine from Jack's mother when he was still an embryo to train him as an assassin.

The way that these plot revelations are presented to players in this scene constitutes a major moment of narrative instability in the game's storyworld. That is, so far, even though the game did offer some options in terms of how much of the 'background' story of Rapture players experience and thus fill the storyworld with, the identities of the main characters Jack, Ryan, and Atlas all were stable constants in that storyworld, as were the reasons for which Jack ventured through Rapture. This moment of revelation significantly changes all of these certainties abruptly, prompts players to reevaluate and revise major narrative elements, and thus destabilizes the overall conception of the game's storyworld in so far that, for a while, players cannot be exactly certain what has happened in the game's plot so far—or who the character they are playing as really is. Significantly, this

11 That the trigger for Jack is the phrase 'would you kindly' is also meaningful in the larger context of the game: It is, after all, not an order or a command but instead a politely worded request, phrased as a question that actually suggests a choice (one could technically answer 'yes' or 'no') when, in reality, Jack has none.

twist moment is stylized in a fashion similar to such moments in texts that also feature narrative instability: As Ryan questions whether Jack's memories of his childhood are real or whether the airplane really crashed, players see flashbacks of these events on the screen. Likewise, when Ryan reveals the power of the phrase 'would you kindly,' they hear and see Atlas's repeated utterances of these words throughout the game once again, in quick succession to indicate that Jack is currently thinking back to those moments, slowly realizing, along with the player, that Ryan seems to be telling the truth. This is a common trope in narratively unstable texts, and these flashbacks during such a moment of instability equally occur in films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or *Fight Club* (1999).¹² Similar to those films, the game diegetically achieves such a moment of instability in the storyworld through a constant internal focalization of Jack—whatever players witnessed and seemed to know of Rapture, they saw and experienced through his perspective, and accordingly, they were as clueless about his real identity as Jack himself until the moment of revelation. Rowan Tulloch thus summarizes the twist as “reveal[ing] two parallel manipulations: Atlas' manipulation of Jack, and the game's manipulation of the player” (33). This internal focalization is also why players see the flashback images on the screen in this scene, signifying an insight into how Jack visualizes his memories in his mind at that moment. In this sense, the close identification of the point of view with this character constitutes an unreliable perspective.¹³

This revelation that Jack's actions—which he thought were expressions of his free will—were conditioned by Atlas's verbal manipulation has significant implications for the game's engagement with objectivist ideas and related concerns, as do Ryan's final speech and his subsequent actions. After his lecture, Ryan uses the phrase 'would you kindly' to force Jack to kill him with a golf club, and in his dying moments, Ryan repeatedly exclaims his crude motto that “[a] man chooses, a slave obeys.” Significantly,

12 In the twist scene in *The Sixth Sense*, viewers learn that the film's protagonist (Malcolm Crowe played by Bruce Willis) has actually been dead all along, and the flashbacks show previous moments of the protagonist interacting with other characters without those characters noticing him. In *Fight Club*, the twist reveals that the character Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is not an actual person but a manifestation of the multiple personality disorder of the unnamed protagonist (Edward Norton), and some of the flashback scenes accordingly show the protagonist in situations in which, previously, viewers saw Tyler. I understand both twist scenes in the two films as constituting major moments of narrative instability. For a more detailed examination of such an instability, which I work on in the context of my doctoral research project, cf. Schubert.

13 Significantly, though, after Ryan's revelations, the game relatively quickly reestablishes a stable storyworld in which all of these discoveries are privileged by the game as the dominant interpretation of what happened in the game's plot. This is also similar to how films with singular moments of instability like *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* work.

his belief in the importance of free will and choice go so far that he consciously chooses to die as long as he can expose and mock Jack's lack of agency in the matter, since for him, only a human being with choice is really a "[hu]man."¹⁴ In the context of the objectivist idealizing of choice and free will, the scene is a pointed exaggeration of this ideology by portraying Ryan as believing that one's death by choice is superior to a life without choices.

Yet the game also develops these thoughts about the supposed importance of choice and agency on a metatextual level: Crucially, players have no control whatsoever in the scene in which Jack kills Ryan. Normally, in the game, players navigate Jack through the various environments and listen as characters sometimes interact with him; this is also how they listen to Ryan through the window in his room while he is playing golf—players can still move around the room they are standing in at that point. However, once Ryan's initial speech is finished and he starts demonstrating the power of the phrase 'would you kindly,' a cutscene is shown: Players now simply have to watch Jack follow Ryan's orders, without being able to control the character's movements or actions at all. Cutscenes are commonly used in video games to convey significant parts of the story, but they have often been criticized as quintessentially noninteractive (cf. Klevjer), as "temporarily steal[ing] away the player's agency" (Tavinor 103), and they are rarely used in *BioShock*. Switching to a cutscene in this moment to show how the player character Jack brutally kills Ryan is thus a deliberate decision of the game to demonstrate that not only are players unable to choose whether to kill Ryan, they do not even have control over the player character while he is forced to perform these actions—Jack kills Ryan without any input from the player. By generally closely aligning the player's and Jack's experience through the constant internal focalization of Jack, the

14 Ryan's usage of the word 'man' to mean 'human' is of course telling in itself, since it excludes women from the questions of choice and agency. It aligns with a general lack of female voices in the game, as the positions of power in the struggle for Rapture are mostly filled by men (like Ryan or Fontaine). However, interestingly, while both of these 'powerful' men die at the end of the game, the most significant female character, Brigid Tenenbaum, survives, and she is the one who narrates the game's epilogue(s), a point I will briefly come back to later. Generally, how gender is represented in the game and in objectivist ideas is an interesting topic worth pursuing, but unfortunately outside of the scope of this article. For a brief investigation of gender in *BioShock*, cf. Watts. Likewise, questions of 'race' and ethnicity in the game seem equally productive to engage with further. Most prominently, Ryan's drastic use of the word 'slave' to signify a person who is without any potential for choice or agency (and to thus implicitly claim that slaves are not human) is equally problematic and highly simplistic, especially given the history of slavery in the US. For an insight into how complex and ambivalent such constructions of agency are, cf. Bast, who offers a specific exploration of agency in the neo-slave narrative *Kindred* that, among other aspects, discusses the complexities of agency in the context of the historical enslavement of African Americans in the US.

scene also works to transmit Jack's lack of agency to the player: In the same way that Jack has been revealed to compulsively follow orders accompanied by the words 'would you kindly,' the player in this scene is exposed as having no real control over the player character—or the game's narrative, for that matter. The scene thus makes this predicament metatextually obvious, it consciously 'mocks' players for their lack of control in this scene.¹⁵

Taking away player control in this significant scene when a large part of the game so far had been about the player's choices in exploring the world is crucial for the game's interest in discussing notions of choice and agency. Jack cannot stop himself from killing Ryan because he uses the phrase 'would you kindly,' just as Atlas/Fontaine has throughout the game. This revelation points back to how the whole game's narrative has worked so far: *BioShock* provides the player with certain choices in terms of exploring the narrative and (actively) constructing the storyworld. Generally, almost all video games strive to create what scholars in game studies often call the 'illusion' of choice and narrative agency (cf. Atkins 44; Domsch 42, 90)—players are supposed to feel in control of playing the game and exploring its world. However, I would argue that this 'illusion' is actually best understood as a textual effect, as a perception, because players, of course, will never be able to do everything in a game; *BioShock*'s main story line is linear and 'fixed.' Yet through the choices in narrative exploration, the game does offer a heightened sense of this 'illusion,' the feeling or perception of being able to influence and choose between things, regardless of one's actual capacity to affect them.

Throughout most of the game, players were effectively under this illusion of choice, of navigating the game's narrative (and world), while the twist suggests that Jack—and by extension the player—simply followed Atlas's orders and could not have done anything else. The scene thus metatextually points to the issue of choice and agency in video games in general by basically proclaiming that there is none, only the illusion or perception of it: "[T]he assumption, both of the player-character and of the player, of

15 This 'mockery' is also intensified by making players aware of their naiveté in 'blindly' following Atlas's instructions throughout the game. As Rowan Tulloch argues, Atlas's function in the beginning of the game is similar to that of a tutorial, which players might expect to receive from their experience of playing similar games, since Atlas "guides the player's actions and choices" by telling the player where to go and what to do, and thus, "like a tutorial or manual for most players he is unquestioningly followed" (29). Not only are players thus encouraged to 'believe' Atlas as a character, but on a different, in a way extradiegetic, level, he gains additional 'trust' because players assume his role is similar to that of a tutorial, to a 'neutral' instance guiding players through the game. Of course, players actually had no choice in following Atlas's instructions, but the scene in which Jack confronts Ryan can only work as a twist if players were indeed willing to follow Atlas 'blindly.'

the ability to exert agency and operate based on choice and free will [...] has been an illusion from the start” (Watts 256; cf. also Tulloch 33). In this scene, *BioShock* self-consciously plays with the fourth wall, making it very difficult for players to suspend their disbelief. This constitutes a moment of metatextual instability in that the game foregrounds the very fact that players are currently playing a fictional game, over which, in the moment of killing Ryan, they have no control or choice, in turn prompting them to reevaluate how much choice they have had in the game so far at all.¹⁶ This part of the game thus works to metatextually transfer the political question of choice inherent in its objectivism-inspired world and its narrative to the level of the player engaging in the game.

While this scene—and the game overall—has been investigated by scholars as a critique of objectivism, when taking a step back and seeing *BioShock*’s twist in the larger context of its overall narrative and gameplay, I contend that the game is not just interested in a critique of objectivism but more invested in a discussion of the underlying issues of choice, agency, and free will. While the twist reveals that Jack (and players with him) had no choice in reaching Ryan and killing him, it would be too simplistic to go along with Ryan’s dichotomy and to thus assert that players in the game have no choice, that as players of *BioShock*, “we are ultimately slaves” (Aldred and Greenspan 490)—or even that “games make slaves of us all” (Wysocki and Schandler 206). Instead, Ryan’s politics are not the game’s, and *BioShock* paints a more complicated and nuanced picture concerning

16 This twist scene has also been criticized by some scholars as a flaw of the game for not giving players a choice in Jack’s actions, yet in my reading of *BioShock*, this is exactly the point: Taking away player agency in this sequence is a conscious and deliberate decision by the game in order to problematize this very lack. Clint Hocking, for instance, also recognizes that in this scene, “[t]he game openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it,” but he portrays the fact that players “do not have the freedom to choose” as “a serious problem” in the context of the game’s narrative and ultimately as “insulting.” Similarly, Matthew Wysocki and Matthew Schandler lament that “the gamer does not even have control over the moment of confrontation” and state that “[w]hat is problematic [...] is that when Ryan encourages us to ‘Choose or obey’ we cannot. When it comes time to actually consider our options, agency and control have been taken away from us” (204). However, they seemingly fail to see the meaning behind this design, that this is deliberately so in the overall context of the game, that “there is a point to be made by the player’s sudden lack of freedom: they are a pawn in the fictional world of the game” (Tavinor 103), and that thus, in this scene, the game is more interested in a metatextual argument about choice in video games than in actually giving players a choice. In addition, I would also argue that the scene ultimately leads not to frustration among players but, in fact, to pleasure—pleasure through a recognition of how the game has managed to so convincingly ‘trick’ players until the moment of the twist. In this sense, this pleasure derives from the “operational aesthetic,” from “watch[ing] the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics,” as Jason Mittell notes in his seminal article on narrative complexity (35).

choice overall: How it deals with choice on the level of its narrative (and, e.g., via the character of Ryan) is different from how the overall game metatextually depicts choice. As mentioned before, even if players in each playthrough will always have to watch Jack kill Ryan, which areas of the game before and after they explore in detail is their own choice. While certainly a less ‘important’ narrative element than the scene involving Ryan’s death, these choices do lead to some narrative nonlinearity in that the story-world will consist of different elements regarding Rapture and its inhabitants.

Additionally, there is an even more obvious and important choice in the game concerning the fate of the so-called Little Sisters. The Little Sisters are young girls who have been genetically altered and who roam around Rapture to collect a substance called ADAM from corpses. ADAM is used in the production of the powerful plasmids mentioned earlier, which are kinds of serums that can be consumed to gain special powers through genetic modification. While the Little Sisters are harmless themselves, they are accompanied by large bodyguards (called ‘Big Daddies’), and after defeating these, players can choose whether to ‘harvest’ (i.e., kill) or to rescue the Little Sisters. Killing them will grant the player immediate ADAM to be spent on new plasmids, while rescuing them will initially lead to less ADAM but more rewards at a later stage from the character Brigid Tenenbaum, who created the Little Sisters. In addition, the choice of what to do with the Little Sisters influences the ending of the game. In each of the endings, Jack eventually defeats Frank Fontaine, and all of them feature a voice-over by Tenenbaum. However, if Jack saved all of the Little Sisters, the game shows a somewhat sentimental ending in which some of the Little Sisters return with Jack to the surface and live happily together as a family. If all of the Little Sisters were harvested, a much grimmer ending is shown, in which a power-hungry Jack is depicted as consumed by ADAM and in which another scene shows a nuclear submarine arriving close to where the plane had crashed, only to be attacked by splicers coming out of a bathysphere. If some of the Little Sisters are rescued and some are harvested, the ending is identical to the second one, but the tone of Tenenbaum’s voice-over is less one of anger and more one of disappointment.

The question whether to kill or rescue the Little Sisters is an interesting moral choice in itself, and it again relates closely to the game’s preoccupation with objectivist ideas and choice in general. As Grant Tavinor notes, “[t]he Little Sisters are the moral center of *Bioshock*. How the player deals with them depends on [the player’s] moral notions of rights and fairness. Treated as an economic transaction, an encounter with a Little Sister should be seen a pure gain for the player” (104), and in a sense, one could thus see the decision to harvest them as the ‘objectivist choice’ (Packer 218). On the other hand, “[s]aving the Little Sisters does not have the optimal pay-off in the game-world—it is, properly speaking, an act of altruism” (Tavinor 105). Since the immediate gameplay rewards for killing the Little Sisters are higher, Packer thus notes that “[t]he only incentive to save the Little

Sisters is a moral one. [...] The decision to save or harvest the Little Sisters inverts traditional video game strategy, because the correct choice (assuming the moral choice is correct) is at odds with success in the game” (219). Packer’s interpretation is insightful in pointing out that the choice involving the Little Sisters “acts to highlight the game’s anti-Objectivist message” (219), yet Packer’s reading of the game, similar to that of Miguel Sicart (160), disregards the impact this choice has on the game’s ending: Even though the gameplay reward might be higher for harvesting the Little Sisters, saving them also offers players a narrative ‘reward’ in reaching a ‘happy ending.’ Accordingly, bringing the possibility of reaching different endings through choices in the game together with the twist scene, what is most important about this possibility is that it does offer players some choice (again, of course, within limits) and thus counteracts the implication of the twist scene (and of Ryan) that Jack, and by extension the player, has no choice at all in what happens to him. Especially after the twist scene, players might be surprised in the end to learn that the choice regarding the Little Sisters also leads to different narrative outcomes, that, in a way, there is a narrative ‘reward’ for choosing morally or, more generally, for choosing at all, and that “[w]hat might have seemed to be merely a gameplay mechanic [...] turns out to be crucial to the game’s narrative resolution” (Tavinor 105).¹⁷

Thus, overall, *BioShock* is a complex engagement with the nature of choice(s) and agency in general and in video games in particular. While it certainly includes criticism of an exaggerated emphasis on self-interest as inherent in objectivism, it moves beyond Ayn Rand’s philosophy and sheds light on the question of choice more generally—and particularly on a meta-textual level, by foregrounding the notion of how much agency players

17 The choice surrounding the Little Sisters is also interesting for other aspects that cannot be discussed in detail here. For instance, Wysocki and Schandler point out that the choice is flawed and “remains superficial” because when players need to decide, *BioShock* “tells you that if you make the moral decision, the game, through NPC Dr. Tenenbaum, will ‘make it worth your while.’ Whatever penalty of less ADAM that is created by choosing to do what is right will be offset by some benefit, even if it is delayed” (203). More generally, van den Berg notes that all of the endings still submit to capitalist logic, since even in the ‘good’ ending, “the player’s reward for choosing the common good over personal advancement is to witness the reinstatement of traditional devices of the retainment of capital and means of production [...] if not linked to the individual, then at least within the confines of the family unit” (par. 26). Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan likewise criticize this supposedly ‘good’ ending as a “perverse femtopia that misrecognizes itself as a bourgeois nuclear family” (486). For the other ending, van den Berg notes that “the game’s immediate invocation of nuclear Armageddon [...] is the perfect example of how it has become easier for us to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalist economy” (par. 29). For van den Berg, thus, while *BioShock* is “capable of offering a critique of *laissez-faire* capitalism, it is never quite able to imagine its disappearance all together” (par. 27).

have in playing *BioShock* (or games in general). The twist scene reveals that players barely have any choices, no actual narrative agency in reaching that point in the game, but the different endings of the game depending on previous choices regarding the Little Sisters do offer some agency to players, although again within the limits of achieving a textual effect of an ‘illusion’ of choice. Hence, the game itself rejects Ryan’s strict dichotomy that “[a] man chooses, a slave obeys,” that one either has choice and agency or that one has none, and paints the question of agency as a much more complex and contradictory matter. It casts agency as an ambivalent issue that constantly oscillates between an autonomous, conscious action (or choice) and the influence other people can have on a person implementing this action, which is thus always realized “within a dialectic of enablement and constraint” (Bast 152). On the level of the narrative, Jack’s agency is complicated by the use of the phrase ‘would you kindly,’ but on a metatextual level, of course, his agency completely hinges on the player, who is actually in control of what Jack does—until that control, already restricted by the game’s general ‘illusion’ of choice, is notably and deliberately taken away in the twist scene. This self-consciously metatextual way of foregrounding the player’s lack of agency and control transfers the general question of the politics of choice from the game’s narrative level to the level of those playing the game, interweaving the game’s politics with its textuality. Overall, then, that players have some choices but are not in control of everything—that ‘absolute’ agency is, in fact, illusory—is true for *BioShock* but also extends to video games in general—as well as to objectivism and similar political ideologies that foreground the importance of individualism and individual agency.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the video game *BioShock* for its political and cultural work to demonstrate how it engages in a complex discussion of choice and agency in video games and in political philosophies. *BioShock* references Ayn Rand’s philosophy of objectivism to depict the city of Rapture and its founder Andrew Ryan, and many of the game’s elements can be understood as a criticism of objectivism and, generally, of an overreliance on individual choice and self-interest. Yet *BioShock* is not simply interested in objectivism specifically but instead uses it to stage a larger, metatextual project of discussing choice and narrative agency in video games in general. The twist scene, which constitutes a moment of narrative instability, is especially significant in self-consciously highlighting this project, but the overall context of the game’s narrative, particularly the different endings it offers based on a moral choice, complicate a definitive reading of that scene as well. Ultimately, *BioShock* lays bare how the issues of choice and agency are fraught with ambivalence. As a commercially

highly successful video game, it functions as a popular platform to engage with these questions and ambivalences in the game itself, in objectivism and other philosophies, and in video games in general, thus demonstrating an interweaving of politicality and textuality in the medium of the video game via a contemporary reflection on the politics of choice.

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