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EDITED BY **LUKE CUDDY**

BIOSHOCK
AND PHILOSOPHY

IRRATIONAL GAME, RATIONAL BOOK

BIOSHOCK AND PHILOSOPHY

The Blackwell Philosophy and PopCulture Series
Series editor William Irwin

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

BIOSHOCK AND PHILOSOPHY

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Edited by
Luke Cuddy

WILEY Blackwell

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Hacking into This Book (Introduction)

Luke Cuddy

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

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

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

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

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

Part I

LEVEL 1 RESEARCH BONUS

INCREASED WISDOM CAPACITY

1

BioShock's Meta-Narrative
What *BioShock* Teaches the Gamer about Gaming

Collin Pointon

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

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

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

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

Mind Games

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rapture: How *BioShock* Hooks You

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

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

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

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

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

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

Horizons and Expectations in the Mid-Atlantic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Meta-Narrative: Twisted Horizons

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

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

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

Players react to *BioShock*'s double twist (narrative and meta-narrative) with the realization that their actions made no difference. They had to get Jack to Ryan's office, and kill Rapture's mastermind, because Jack is an unnaturally bred "slave." Players feel played and controlled themselves, and I think this is the product of the designers of *BioShock* replicating the emotional states of Jack in us. The presupposed meta-narrative is destroyed, and players are left with a new meta-narrative of being totally subservient. The manipulation that players feel is all the more powerful in relation to their presupposition of autonomy: the greater the assumption that Jack is like Master Chief, the more manipulated the player feels. As Peter Parrish and Tim McDonald write, Jack is conditioned to respond to other characters like the gamer is conditioned to respond to "Mission Control's" voice of instructions in so many other video games. But then, *BioShock* flips that all on its head.[10]

Personally, I didn't see the twist coming at all, and when it happened it caused me to reflect on what its repercussions were. Yes, I actually had to stop playing, and take a break—it was that intense for me. Gadamer said that there are always risks in any case of a fusion of horizons. One of these risks is having a completely unforeseen experience, or the risk of being changed yourself by the horizon of the "other"—whether the other is a person, a book, a work of art, or a video game. Is this not precisely what happens at the twist of *BioShock*?