

Ideology in BioShock: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper will analyse the *BioShock* series, with a particular focus on the treatment of ideology within these games. This popular and critically acclaimed series contains deeply political themes, including various controversial ideologies such as Objectivism, and Collectivism. The treatment of these ideologies within the games have been widely contested and interpreted. Writers and critics have tended to focus on *BioShock* games as a critique of particular political ideologies. By examining the games, with a particular reference the use of procedural rhetoric, this paper will argue that this series instead presents a critique of extreme ideology itself.

Keywords

BioShock; ideology; objectivism; procedural rhetoric, politics



Introduction

BioShock is one of the most critically acclaimed video game series in history. One of the most striking aspects of this series is the way in which a mainstream videogame approaches and criticises complex ideological positions. Rather than simply communicating a political position to the audience, these games invite the player to explore and consider fundamental issues of political philosophy through the careful use of a variety of communicative techniques. These techniques include elements of the story, dialogue, music and art. However, the series is underpinned by the careful use of interactive design, something which sets it apart from literature and film that discuss similar themes. This paper will primarily analyse '*BioShock*' and to a lesser extent '*BioShock 2*' (2010), with some reference to '*BioShock Infinite*' (2013). While *BioShock Infinite* contains a significant overlap in themes and techniques with the earlier games it differs in setting and background significantly. Therefore, this paper will focus on the first two games in the series for the sake of brevity.

These popular games communicate certain political messages and explore familiar political ideas and concepts. Given that these ideas are present in earlier works of political theory and fiction, these games can be seen as a continuation of the on-going political discourse found within popular culture. They are deeply reflective of the political situation at the time of their making, touching variously on themes such as libertarianism, welfare, taxation, nationalism, racism and transhumanism. However, in addition to reflecting concerns about specific political issues, '*BioShock*' also functions as a commentary on the nature of ideology and political belief. This more nuanced feature of the series has often been left out of other analyses, and it is this issue which this paper will particularly seek to explore.

Synopsis

BioShock is a first-person shooter/role-playing game set in a failed underwater utopia called Rapture. Rapture is the brainchild of businessman Andrew Ryan, who sets up the city as a libertarian utopia where a man is 'entitled to the sweat of his brow'. This ideology is libertarian in the extreme and bears a great resemblance to Ayn's Rand's Objectivism. The protagonist of the game arrives in Rapture in 1960, by which time it has become a lawless, decaying dystopia. The story of Rapture's fall is told through audio diaries which the player finds in the game world. These diaries reveal the story of Rapture's downfall, which was brought about by a civil war and genetic alteration technology. The civil war was fought between the gangster Frank Fontaine on one side and an increasingly despotic Andrew Ryan on the other. Following Fontaine's apparent death, a revolutionary figure named Atlas rallied the lower classes against Ryan, leading to the collapse of Rapture's society. This social collapse was hastened by the use of genetic alteration technology, which could give users powers such as telekinesis. This technology led to addiction, mutation and madness in many of its users, who are known as Splicers. These Splicers are the player's main opponents throughout the game. The game opens with

the player's character, Jack, surviving a plane crash and finding his way to Rapture by accident. Once in Rapture, he is guided in his attempts to escape via radio by Atlas, and he eventually comes face to face with Andrew Ryan. Ryan reveals that Jack is his illegitimate son, who was taken from his mother by Fontaine and raised on the surface as a sleeper agent. Jack was brainwashed to follow any command preceded by the phrase 'Would you kindly?' and was to be used by Fontaine to help win the war against Ryan. At this point, it becomes clear that Atlas, who repeatedly used the phrase 'Would you kindly?' was actually Fontaine. The brainwashed Jack is forced to kill Ryan, before being saved and deprogrammed by a surviving scientist. Jack then finds and kills Fontaine, and is able to return to the surface.

Visual Style

The dystopian feel of this game is consistently reinforced in the visual style and presentation. Upon entering the lighthouse which gives access to Rapture, the first structure encountered in the game, the player is presented with a looming bronze bust of Andrew Ryan. This statue towers over the entrance hall, and is underlined by a banner reading, 'No Gods or Kings. Only Man.'



Figure 1. The entrance to Rapture

This slogan begins to introduce the player to the ideology of Rapture, while the intimidating bust hints at the hubris and totalitarian tendencies of Rapture's founder. Statues and slogans of this type are present throughout Rapture, and call to mind the iconography described in Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' and similar totalitarian dystopias. These similarities emphasise that *BioShock* should be understood not only as a videogame, but within the rich tradition of dystopian fiction more generally.

The idea of a spectacularly failed utopia, rather than an inherently dystopic city, is also emphasised in the game's visual style. Adverts and billboards throughout the city implore the viewer to buy exciting new products, many of which come in the form of genetic enhancement technology. This hints at the idea that Rapture degenerated into a

dystopian society due to a complex set of factors, rather than being created as a nightmarish reflection of any particular ideology.

This faith in technological advancement makes these cheery posters bittersweet given the violence caused by this technology. The visual presentation of these adverts fits with the time period in which the game is set, as they display an optimistic 1950's American style. Indeed, this style permeates every aspect of the design of Rapture and its inhabitants; the fashion, the architecture and the language. This juxtaposes the cheery utopianism of the 1950's with the dark and violent Rapture which the player inhabits.

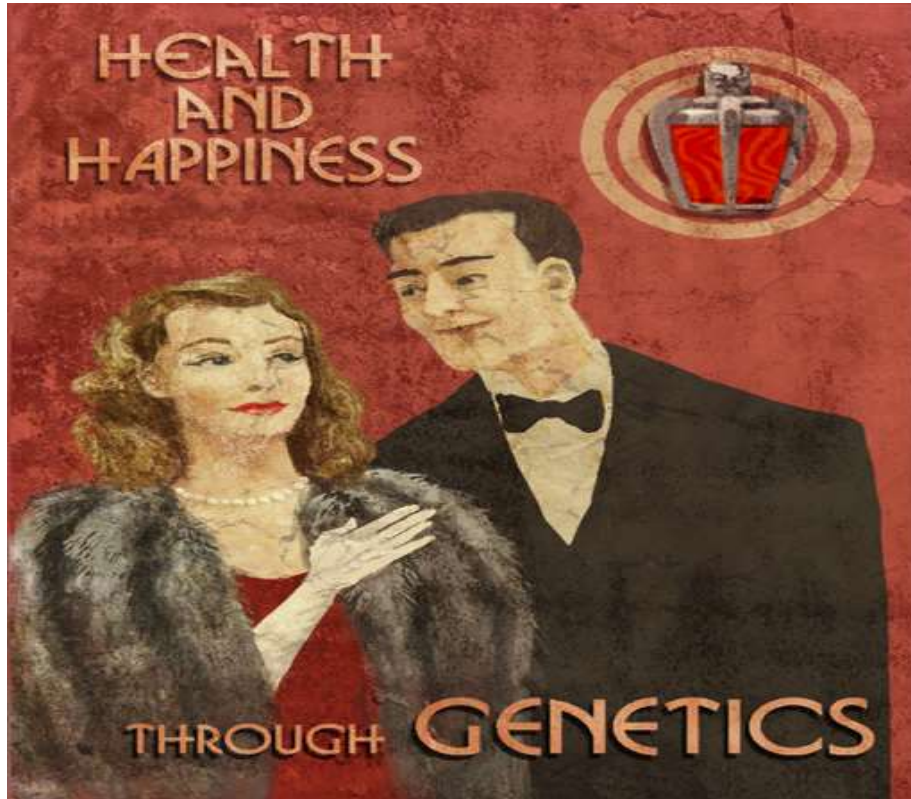


Figure 2. Advertising in Rapture

The cinematic style of the game further adds to this effect. During particular set-pieces, the player's Heads-Up Display (HUD) disappears to give the impression of looking through Jack's eyes at the spectacular setting. Rapture is not the grim, totalitarian dystopia of Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Rather, it is a decaying failed utopia of spectacular ambition and grandeur. Although Rapture is a failure, this sense of grandeur makes it difficult not to find the city, its ideology and its founder somewhat alluring.

Music

The music in *BioShock* also adds to the political narrative in an interesting and effective manner. The award-winning score is utilised throughout the game to induce a sense of trepidation and fear, consistent with the overall tone of the game. However, of more narrative significance is the use of popular music as a commentary on the game's action and themes. The

music helps situate the player within the time period of the game, with all of the songs predating 1960. Much of the music is cheery and optimistic, again juxtaposing the utopian Rapture of the past with the dystopic nature of the player's surroundings. The lyrical content of certain songs also allows them to function as an often-ironic commentary on the game's narrative. Gibbons argues that the dark lyrics of Noel Coward's 'Twentieth Century Blues' act as a commentary on the fall of Rapture, and combine with Coward's delicate singing and instrumentation to mirror the dichotomy between beauty and destruction at the heart of Rapture and *BioShock* (2011)

Why is it that civilised humanity can make this world so wrong?
In this hurly-burly of insanity, our dreams cannot last long.

Given that '*BioShock*' tells the story of a utopian dream brought low by human avarice and arrogance, it is clear that this choice of music is designed to assist in the player's understanding of the narrative. In a similar fashion, Patti Page's 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?' plays from a jukebox while the player battles murderous Splicer's in the ruins of a mall. This can be read as a commentary on the consumerism which underscored the American utopianism of the 1950's, and arguably continues to act as the driving ideology in the West. Gibbons also states that

To find such a saccharine tune juxtaposed with the scenes of destruction the player encounters here and elsewhere in Rapture highlights both the naïveté of the utopian ideal and the grotesqueness of its dystopian inversion. (2011)

The music thereby serves not only to add to the game's overall tone, but also to reinforce the overall narrative and themes.

Narrative and Dialogue

The bulk of the *BioShock* narrative, as opposed to the audio driven backstory, is advanced by action which occurs in gameplay and radio communications with other characters. There are short cut-scenes in which the player's HUD fades away, although the player is still able to use the camera to look around. This helps keep the player immersed in the game, as there is no significant break in gameplay. The player is actively looking through Jack's eyes at all times, even as the narrative is progressed. The backstory concerning Rapture's descent into dystopia is told through often harrowing and poignant audio diaries which are found and listened to in the game world. Again, these diaries play while the player continues to act, meaning that they do not interfere with the gameplay. These diaries act as short soliloquies, slowly drawing out a complicated back story and introducing the player to a number of characters without breaking the action or pacing of the game. In game designed with mainstream appeal in mind it is important that the narrative works well alongside the gameplay. Indeed, the game's creator Ken Levine has stated that gameplay experience must come first (2011). Furthermore, the fact that finding and listening to these diaries is optional means that they do not adversely affect the experience of players who are less interested in the game's narrative or political content. Such players can continue to enjoy the gameplay and main thrust of the storyline, while other players are able to enjoy a more fully realised world.

This is an effective way of introducing a thoughtful and nuanced story into a mainstream game without adversely affecting gameplay or alienating a section of less interested or politically engaged players. Furthermore, it makes the sporadic moments in which player agency is temporarily removed much more effective in comparison.

Gameplay and Procedural Rhetoric

In gameplay terms, *BioShock* conforms in many ways to what would be expected of a first-person shooter with elements of role-playing and survival horror. The political subject matter is not allowed to interfere with the production of an entertaining game within the genre. However, certain gameplay elements can be seen as containing an element of political commentary. This is best understood in terms of what Bogost refers to as 'Procedural Rhetoric', which he defines as 'the practice of authoring arguments through processes' (2007, pp. 28-29). This refers to how the processes of gameplay and interactive design can be used to develop an argument. For example, weapons, ammunition and upgrades are available at vending machines, reflecting the extremely libertarian nature of Rapture. The design of these machines is bright and garish, almost as if to appeal to children. They are given frivolous names such as 'El Ammo Bandito'. The seeming ridiculousness of such lax controls on weaponry can be seen in terms of procedural rhetoric as a criticism of this kind of extreme libertarianism. Indeed, this interpretation has been articulated by Levine ('Objectivism in *BioShock*', 2008). Given the ongoing debates around gun control in the USA, and the relation between libertarian movements such as the Tea Party and gun proliferation at this time, this can also be seen as a direct commentary on the political environment at the time the game was being made.

The player is only given one significant narrative choice within the game. There are characters in the game called Little Sisters, who are genetically mutated children who harvest dead bodies for ADAM, the genetic material needed to power plasmids. Plasmids are the abilities conferred through the genetic mutation technology. After defeating their guardian (known as a Big Daddy) the player is given the opportunity to either harvest the child for a high amount of ADAM, a process which will kill the Little Sister, or restore the child to normality and gain a much smaller amount of ADAM. If the player chooses to save most of the Little Sisters a positive epilogue shows Jack returning to the surface with the children. They then progress happily through life and are shown standing by Jack's deathbed as he passes on surrounded by his adopted family. If the player chooses to harvest more than two of the Little Sisters, the epilogue shows a monstrous looking Jack turning on the surviving girls and harvesting them for more ADAM, thus suggesting he has become like one of the crazed Splicers. The relationship between the protagonist and the Little Sisters can be looked at in a number of ways, and is certainly worthy of a more in-depth gendered analysis than can be provided here. Much as with the preponderance of guns in Rapture, it can be viewed as a direct critique of a certain political issues in the USA. The fact that these girls have no agency over their own bodies, and are forced to gestate a living organism, can be interpreted as a commentary on abortion and a woman's right to choose. This is borne out by the treatment of the Little Sisters by both player and non-player characters. The girls have no agency, being abused by various authority figures throughout the series. The animations of player interactions with the Little Sisters are violent, both when saving

and when killing the girls, reflecting a clear power dynamic in which infantilised females are denied the right to choose.

In terms of procedural rhetoric, the fact that harvesting the Little Sisters confers a clear gameplay advantage with no clear attendant disadvantage suggests that in a dog-eat-dog society like Rapture there will always be an advantage to those willing to act in an immoral way. Altruism within this context confers an immediate disadvantage. However, this disadvantage makes the choice much more meaningful. It has been a common trope of videogames to offer the player the option to be either 'light' or 'dark', for example in games such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) or *Fable* (2004). However, in these games both options provide the player with benefits and disadvantages, making potentially moral choices tactical or even stylistic decisions. In *BioShock*, the player is being asked to make a difficult decision which is actively moral. The epilogue which is shown if the player does harvest the Little Sisters seems to suggest that there is something inherently dehumanising about the selfish immorality which this kind of society engenders. Although this is a relatively simple narrative choice in comparison to some other games, it provides an elegant commentary on the kind of extreme libertarianism represented in Rapture.

The Ideology of BioShock

Given that *BioShock* depicts the failure of a libertarian utopia, it is tempting to see it as a straightforward criticism of this ideology. Indeed, many have viewed this game as a specific critique of Rand's Objectivist philosophy (Packer, 2010 and Hocking, 2007). Lanchester delights in this interpretation, congratulating *BioShock* for examining Rand's ideas and "duffing them up" (2009). On a superficial level this seems to be the case, with Lanchester pointing to the fact that Andrew Ryan and Ayn Rand share a similar name. There are clear allusions to Rand and her ideology throughout the game. The ideology of Rapture is almost identical to Objectivism, and certain quotes and slogans are lifted from Rand's works. Levine has confirmed that Ryan's oratory style and beliefs are modelled on Rand's (2011). The failure of this utopian project, and the monstrous behaviour of many of the people behind it, means that on a narrative level the game certainly contains a strong critique of rampant individualism. The fact that unregulated technological advances played a part in this failure means that the game can also be seen as a critique of laissez-faire policies.

Packer argues that the procedural rhetoric of the game also acts as a clear and specific critique of Objectivism, as his interpretation is that the enemies are all Objectivists (2010). The player has no peaceful interaction with these Objectivist enemies, as both they and the player adopt a shoot first policy. On the surface level, this suggests that Objectivists and by extension Objectivism, should be viewed negatively by the player. However, there are some problems with Packer's interpretation, and with the idea that *BioShock* is a specific critique of Objectivism. The idea that all the enemies are driven by an Objectivist ideology is not necessarily correct. While it is fair to assume that most citizens of Rapture would have sympathised with a libertarian viewpoint, hence their decision to live there, they are not obsessively driven by this ideology. The audio diaries suggest that pre-breakdown Rapture was a functioning city that contained a broad range of often quite ordinary people, rather than an obsessive

Objectivist cult. Furthermore, the Splicers who the player encounters are quite clearly insane, and are driven more by insanity and addiction than a political ideology. While the libertarianism of Rapture clearly played a major part in creating the situation in which they could become insane ADAM addicts, they are not specifically driven by Objectivism. The aggression which these characters display could therefore be read more as a commentary on the dangers of transhumanism than Objectivism.

The storyline of *BioShock 2* acts as a challenge to the idea that *BioShock* as a series is fundamentally anti-Objectivist. Set eight years after the events of the first game, *BioShock 2* features an even more decayed and dystopic Rapture. Rapture is now ruled over by Dr. Sofia Lamb, who is just as despotic as Ryan despite representing the opposite ideological position. Lamb's ideology is strongly collectivist and utilitarian. However, the results are the same. Like Ryan, she is driven to madness and totalitarianism by her hubris and unquestioning ideological conviction. The commonality here is not in the nature of the ideology, but in its extremity. This leads the player towards the conclusion, confirmed by Levine, that it is not a specific ideology itself which is dangerous, but the obsessive and unquestioning adherence to it;

I wasn't setting out to make a game about Objectivism, I was setting out to make a game about someone who had a very strong belief in a philosophy that was similar to this philosophy. It's a cautionary tale about wholesale, unquestioning belief in something (2008).

This message is imparted through the main plot twist in the original *BioShock*. When it is revealed that the player's character has been manipulated and brainwashed into killing his own father, the game refocuses the narrative away from a specific ideology and onto the dangers of unquestioning belief. Given that this is a game which takes pains in its design not to break the feeling of immersive interactivity, even during key narrative moments; it is telling that the player loses all control over their character when Jack kills Andrew Ryan. Although the player likely no longer wants to kill Ryan, given the recent plot developments, they are forced to watch through Jack's eyes as he brutally beats him to death with a golf club. The harrowing nature of this scene emphasises the horror which can stem from unquestioning obedience. This is driven home by Ryan's last words:

'A man chooses. A slave obeys.'

In terms of procedural rhetoric this is incredibly powerful, in the sense that the removal of choice and power at key moments can be shocking within the context of an otherwise interactive media. This device has been utilised to great effect elsewhere in the *BioShock* series. For example, early in the narrative of *BioShock Infinite* the player is required to undergo baptism. The player must press a button to accept the baptism but has no attendant option to refuse, creating a strong sense of forced choice. Some players reported feeling so disturbed by this scene that they requested a refund (Hernandez, 2013). This fits with the argument that videogames can be more effective in terms of making the player reflect on a situation by denying them the opportunity to make a narrative choice (Wittwer, 2012). If the player is made complicit in the actions of their in-

game avatar, this may prompt a strong emotional reaction from the player:

Remove that decision from me, force me to adjust to the fabrication of the world, and then I'll be in the right mind set to process guilt. I could even learn something from it to apply to my own life . . . I need games to punch me in the gut if they want me to feel something as heavy as guilt and responsibility (Wittwer, 2012).

This moment can also be seen as a criticism of the illusion of interactivity provided by many modern videogames (Levine, 2011). Within the context of the trend towards increasingly open-ended and interactive games, this removal of choice at such a pivotal moment functions as an intriguing counterpoint. This idea has been viewed by some in Freudian terms, with particular reference to Freud's exploration of *Oedipus Rex* (Jackson, 2014, pp. 109-156). Barry (2014) insightfully analysed the Oedipal overtones within the relationship between the Little Sisters and their protectors, the Big Daddies. The implications of the highly symbiotic relationship between the hyper-masculine Big Daddies, whose main weapon is a phallic drill, and the flirtations and doll-like girls are clear. This is an interesting account, and one that could be explored further in relation to the later games in the series. However, Barry's conclusion that this represents a problematic sexualisation of the child characters is perhaps limited. Jackson (2014, pp. 109-156) deploys a Freudian analysis to instead explore free will in *BioShock*. Although the popular understanding of Freud's discussion of Oedipus is often based in the literal, and therefore the sexual, it is better understood as an allegory. Specifically, it is an allegory concerning unconscious drives and the illusion of free will. The story of Oedipus is not merely that he killed his father and slept with his mother. It is rather the story of someone who, despite their best efforts, is driven by fate. In psychological terms, this can be used to illuminate the idea that people are unknowingly driven to certain action by their unconscious. This strikes closer to the core philosophical message of *BioShock*, with the player embodying this as a subject with great superficial choice obscuring a predetermined fate.

Additionally, on a more political level this narrative can be seen as a clear commentary on the danger of ideological extremity and unquestioning belief. The player has not only observed the effects of unquestioning belief, they have participated in it. Game designer Chris Hocking (2007) finds this "ludonarrative dissonance" both disturbing and insulting, feeling that the game is mocking the player for buying into the narrative limitations of the medium by forcing a certain narrative choice upon the player. However, this may be precisely the point. By buying into an ideological position, either pro or anti-Objectivist, the individual gives up a portion of their free will. The cognitive dissonance required to maintain an extreme ideological position is reflected by the dissonance of removing interactivity from the player at this moment. In terms of political theory this can perhaps be best understood through the Horseshoe model of political ideology, often attributed to Faye (Mayer, 2011). This theory subverts the traditional left-right political spectrum by holding that despite believing that they are diametrically opposed, extreme political groups are actually closer to each other than they are to the political centre. Although this example assumes a certain centrist bias, it does

illustrate an interesting point that extremists often have more in common with each other than they may think. This theory is displayed throughout the *BioShock* series, particularly in relation to the primary antagonists. *BioShock*'s Ryan and *BioShock 2*'s Sofia Lamb display the opposite political ideologies but yet both lead Rapture towards totalitarianism due to their own inflexibility and self-interest. Likewise, in *BioShock Infinite* a civil war breaks out in which a black worker revolts against a theocratic racist, only to then turn into a tyrant herself.

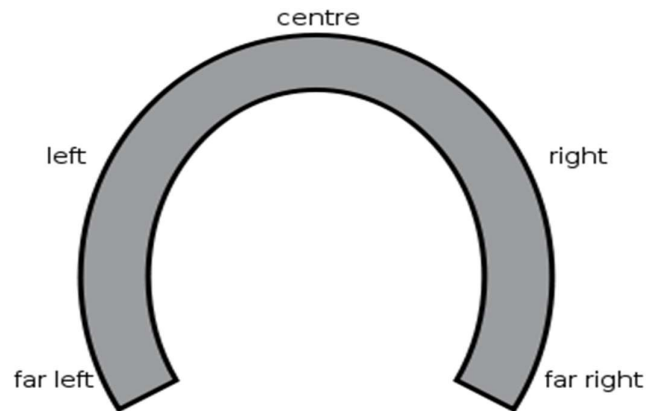


Figure 3. The Horseshoe Theory (Wikimedia Commons)

In many ways *BioShock* extends the idea of the horseshoe, turning it into a full circle as opposing ideologies produce exactly the same results. The message of *BioShock* is therefore more nuanced than a simple criticism of Objectivism.

This interpretation bears an interesting similarity to the conclusion of Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1969). Within this, Berlin sets out positive negative and negative liberty. Positive liberty can be understood as the freedom *to*, while negative liberty can be defined as the freedom *from*. For example, a feature of positive liberty is the freedom to pick one's own leaders. Meanwhile, negative liberty is the freedom not to be left alone by others. Berlin argues that positive liberty can be abused because it can be wrongly associated with objective rationality and therefore inherent rightness. It is not that positive liberty is a bad thing in itself; it is simply that the unquestioned pursuit of it, along with the exclusion of other viewpoints or conceptions of liberty, makes it susceptible to being used to justify totalitarianism. The most obvious example of this would be the USSR, a utopian project which failed and succumbed to totalitarianism due in part to the false belief that the more rational elite could impose the "correct" type of liberty on the masses (Carter, 2012). Given that *BioShock* is set during the Cold War period and concerns the failure of a libertarian utopia, it acts as a complementary point to Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1969). While Berlin focuses on how the pursuit of positive liberty can lead to totalitarianism, *BioShock* as a series shows how the unquestioning pursuit of either positive or negative liberty leads to totalitarianism. The character of Sofia Lamb in *BioShock 2* can be seen as espousing the ideals associated with an extreme conception of positive liberty, as she believes that a rationally led collective of people can transcend the evils of individual desire. Meanwhile, Andrew Ryan's extreme conception of negative liberty is

shown in *BioShock* through his belief in ultimate individual freedom. Ryan's commitment to negative liberty means that he refuses to regulate dangerous goods, a situation which leads to widespread exploitation and the demise of his utopia. Taken together, the same conclusion can be reached; that an unquestioning adherence to any ideological position can lead to totalitarianism and that it is the obsessive search for a certain type of utopia which leads to dystopia. Indeed, *BioShock Infinite* sees these ideologies replaced with an ideology based upon national exceptionalism and religion, as the action is moved to a white American ethnostate. The resulting social effects are however the same, insofar as they result in oppression and totalitarianism. Rather than functioning as a critique of any particular ideology, the *BioShock* series as a whole, functions as a critique of ideology itself.

BioShock is a series which effectively utilises the unique communicative strengths of the videogame format to effectively communicate political ideas. As a work clearly placed within the tradition of dystopic fiction *BioShock* can be seen as a valuable addition to political and philosophical discourse within popular culture. Questions of free will and control are raised by an effective use of procedural rhetoric, while the progression between games in the series elevates it above being a simple criticism of a particular political ideology.

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