Bioshock - Clint Hocking

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Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock: The problem of what the game is about
by Clint Hocking

In 2006, I praised2 Ian Bogost's critique3 of Bully4 and lamented the unfortunate lack of game criticism, as distinct from game reviews. Roughly speaking, we could say game criticism is for game developers and professionals who want to think about the nature of games and what they mean. Game reviews are for the public – for people who play games – and they are intended to help those people make decisions about which games they should buy. Both are valuable and important contributions, but sadly, we seem to only have one.

So this is not going to be a review of Bioshock. If you want a review of Bioshock, you can visit some of the websites listed in the reference section for this article5. This is going to be a critique of Bioshock. I have completed the game Bioshock once, from beginning to end. Because it unfolds as a narrative and because this critique focuses heavily on where the narrative and the play intersect, I believe having thoroughly played the game once is the correct amount of investment that ought be given in order to form this critique.

Before I tear into it though, I want to apologize to the folks who worked on the game. If this was a review, it would be glowing, but as a critique it's going to be pretty rough. I mostly really enjoyed this game, and aside from a few minor quibbles that are inevitable coming from someone who lists System Shock 26 as his favorite game of all time, I basically think the game is great. In a very important sense Bioshock lives up the expectations created by its ancestor by inviting us to ask important and compelling questions, which is wonderful. But unfortunately, in most cases, I think the answers Bioshock provides to those questions are confused, frustrating, deceptive and unsatisfactory.

To cut straight to the heart of it, Bioshock seems to suffer from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story. By throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition, the game seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all. The leveraging of the game's narrative structure against its ludic structure all but destroys the player's ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest (which I almost did) or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story, and to then finish it for the mere sake of finishing it.

So what is the form of this dissonance and why does it shatter the internal consistency of the work so totally?

Bioshock is a game about the relationship between freedom and power. It is at once (and among other things) an examination and a criticism of Randian Objectivism7. It says, rather explicitly, that the notion that rational self-interest is moral or good is a trap, and that the 'power' we derive from complete and unchecked freedom necessarily corrupts, and ultimately destroys us.

The game begins by offering the player two contracts.

One is a ludic contract – literally 'seek power and you will progress'. This ludic contract is in line with the values underlying Randian rational self-interest. The rules of the game say 'it is best if I do what is best for me without consideration for others'. This is a pretty standard value in single player games where all the other characters in the game world (or at very least all of the characters in play in the game world) tend to be in direct conflict with the player. However, it must be pointed out that Bioshock goes the extra mile and ties this game mechanical contract back to the narrative in spectacular fashion through the use of the Little Sisters. By 'dressing up' the mechanics of this contract in well realized content, I literally experience what it means to gain by doing what is best for me (I get more Adam) without consideration for others (by harvesting Little Sisters).

Thus, the ludic contract works in the sense that I actually feel the themes of the game being expressed through mechanics. The game literally made me feel a cold detachment from the fate of the Little Sisters, who I assumed could not be saved (or even if they could, would suffer some worse fate at the hands of Tenenbaum). Harvesting them in pursuit of my own self-interest seems not only the best choice

mechanically, but also the right choice. This is exactly what this game needed to do – make me experience – feel – what it means to embrace a social philosophy that I would not under normal circumstances consider.

To be successful, the game would need to not only make me somehow adopt this difficult philosophy, but then put me in a pressure-cooker where the systems and content slowly transform the game landscape until I find myself caught in the aforementioned 'trap'. Unfortunately, when we take the first, ludic contract and map it to the game's second contract, the game falls apart.

The game's second contract is a narrative contract – 'help Atlas and you will progress'. There are three fundamental problems with this being the narrative contract of the game.

First, this contract is not in line with the values underlying Randian rational self-interest; 'helping someone else' is presented as the right thing to do by the story, yet the opposite proposition appears to be true under the mechanics.
Second, Atlas is openly opposed to Ryan, yet again, as mentioned above, I am philosophically aligned with Ryan by my acceptance of the mechanics. Why do I want to stop Ryan, or kill him, or listen to Atlas at all? Ryan's philosophy is in fact the guiding principle of the mechanics that I am experiencing through play.

Thirdly, I don't have a choice with regards to the proposition of the contract. I am constrained by the design of the game to help Atlas, even if I am opposed to the principle of helping someone else. In order to go forward in the game, I must do as Atlas says because the game does not offer me the freedom to choose sides in the conflict between Ryan and Atlas.

This is a serious problem. In the game's mechanics, I am offered the freedom to choose to adopt an Objectivist approach, but I also have the freedom to reject that approach and to rescue the Little Sisters, even though it is not in my own (net) best interest to do so (even over time according to data on the Escapist forums8).
In the game's fiction on the other hand, I do not have the freedom to choose between helping Atlas or not. Under the ludic contract, if I accept to adopt an Objectivist approach, I can harvest Little Sisters. If I reject that approach, I can rescue them. Under the story, if I reject an Objectivist approach, I can help Atlas and oppose Ryan, and if I choose to adopt an Objectivist approach – well too bad… I can stop playing the game, but that's about it.

That's the dissonance I am talking about, and it is disturbing. Now, disturbing is one thing, but let's just accept for a moment that we forgive that. Let's imagine that we say 'well, it's a game, and the mechanics are great, so I will overlook the fact that the story is kind of forcing me to do something out of character…'. That's far from the end of the world. Many games impose a narrative on the player. But when it is revealed that the rationale for why the player helps Atlas is not a ludic constraint that we graciously accept in order to enjoy the game, but rather is a narrative one that is dictated to us, what was once disturbing becomes insulting. The game openly mocks us for having willingly suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it.

The feeling is reminiscent of the Spike Jonze Ikea commercial9 where we are mocked for feeling sorry for the lamp. But instead of being tricked by a quirky 60 second ad, we are mocked after a 20 hour commitment for having sympathy for the limitations of a medium. The 'twist' in the plot is a deus ex machina built upon the very weaknesses of game stories that we – as players – agree to accept in order to have some sort of narrative framework to flavor our fiddling about with the mechanics. To mock us for accepting the weaknesses of the medium not only insults the player, but it's really kind of 'out of bounds' (except as comedy or as a meta element – of which it appears to be neither).

Now, I understand the above criticism is harsh, and also that it is built upon complex arguments, so let me clarify a few things.

First, this is not a review. If it was, I would be raving (mostly) about the interesting abilities, fun weapons, beautiful environments, engaging enemy 'eco-system', freedom of choice, openness to explore, and a mountain of other fantastic things. But I'm not talking about all of the reasons players should play this game and all of the reasons they will certainly enjoy it. I am talking about the fabric of the game. I am talking about the nature of the game at the most fundamental levels that I can perceive. I am talking about weaknesses that I see (or more importantly that I feel) when I become deeply drawn into the game and really experience what is being expressed in its systems and content.

Second, the points I am making may seem trivial or bizarre to a lot of people, and certainly the arguments the points are built on are complicated. I am sure they are hard for many game developers to understand and impossible for laymen. Honestly – I only partially understand what I am experiencing when I play a game as thoroughly as I played BioShock, and frankly I only half understand what I am saying as I write this. With the 'language of games' being as limited as it is, understanding what I am 'reading' is hard, and trying to articulate it back to people in a useful way is a full order of magnitude harder.

So take this criticism for what it is worth. It is the complaint of a semi-literate, half-blind Neanderthal, trying to comprehend the sandblasted hieroglyphic poetry of a one-armed Egyptian mason.

In my rebuttal to Roger Ebert's contention that games will never be Art10 – I asserted that GTA: San Andreas11 was a more important work of art than Crash12. Now, I'm not going to bother to announce that BioShock is a work of art. I will, however, point to another often used film-game comparison… the one that states that games do not yet have their Citizen Kane13. Similarities between Orson Welles and Andrew Ryan aside, BioShock is not our Citizen Kane. But it does – more than any game I have ever played – show us how close we are to achieving that milestone. BioShock reaches for it, and slips. But we leave our deepest footprints when we pick ourselves up from a fall. It seems to me that it will take us several years to learn from BioShock's mistakes and create a new generation of games that do manage to successful marry their ludic and narrative themes into a consistent and fully realized whole. From that new generation of games, perhaps the one that is to BioShock as BioShock is to System Shock 2 will be our Citizen Kane.

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