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ROWAN TULLOCH
University of New South Wales

'A man chooses, a slave obeys': agency, interactivity and freedom in video gaming

ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of interactivity through a close reading of the 2007 video game Bioshock *(2K Boston & 2K Australia 2007). By analyzing the interconnections between the game's storyline and ludic mechanisms I argue that* Bioshock's *narrative twist can be read as a powerful deconstruction of the notion of player agency (cf. Ruch, this issue). I therefore offer an analysis of this game as a problematization of traditional understandings of choice. By highlighting the role of pedagogy in* Bioshock *I reveal the importance of processes of training in the medium of video gaming. I conclude by drawing upon a post-structuralist framework to suggest that the subjectivity of the video game player is constructed through the play experience.*

KEYWORDS

interactivity
agency
post-structuralism
pedagogy
narrative
Bioshock

INTRODUCTION

> A three-word pleasantry – 'Would you kindly?' – set up the most stunning plot twist in gaming history and made *Bioshock* a lasting icon. Many games have stolen its moral-choice device […] but the copycats miss the real insight of the 'Would you kindly?' moment, which showed players that the notion of choice in a game is just an illusion anyway.
>
> (Alexander et al. 2009)

The stylish 2007 first-person shooter *Bioshock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia 2007) was both a critical and commercial success. The game's complex exploration of free-will, individualist ideologies and the dangers of unfettered science resonated with reviewers and the game buying public alike. *Bioshock* presents the player with a dystopian world, a technologically advanced underwater city that is collapsing under the weight of its own hubris.

While *Bioshock* offers a sophisticated mix of role playing and action gaming in a unique and imaginatively realized setting, it is not just this that makes it such a celebrated game. For games journalists and players alike it is *Bioshock*'s clever deconstruction of the notion of choice and agency that makes this game stand out (see Alexander et al. 2009; Jones 2008; Zacny 2009; cf. Ruch, this issue). In this article I will explore the means by which *Bioshock* presents this deconstruction. I will analyze the techniques by which the game subverts the prominent discourses of interactivity, and in doing so suggests the need for a radical reconceptualization of the act of video game playing. I will argue that *Bioshock* sets up a complex equivalence between its own ludic machinations and the operation of power in society, and through this offers the player unique insight into his or her own cultural construction, as well as highlighting the problematic assumptions underpinning liberal humanist and libertarian ideologies. And finally, through my close reading of *Bioshock*, I will show how a post-structuralist Foucaultian framework can be mobilized to avoid the inherent problems with popular contemporary framings of interactivity.

RAPTURE

> 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 censors. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. With the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city, as well.
>
> (2K Boston & 2K Australia 2007)

With these words, from the city's founder and despotic leader Andrew Ryan, the player is introduced to the underwater world of Rapture. Rapture is an individualist paradise gone wrong. It is a city where everything was allowed, nothing forbidden, where gene splicing and body alterations have had chaotic consequences. It is a city with few surviving sane citizens, where young girls harvest the DNA of the dead, and genetically engineered superhumans prey

on the helpless. The art deco splendour of the city's architecture stands in contrast to the madness and depravity of its citizens. In its dystopian vision of a city torn apart by self-interest and arrogance *Bioshock* is a classic morality tale. Rapture was a grand city that lacked laws, rules and restraints. It was an individualist dream that became an uncontrolled nightmare as its citizens upgraded their bodies but lost their minds.

The player takes on the role of Jack, a plane crash survivor who finds his way to Rapture. After narrowly avoiding death at the hands of a violently deranged inhabitant of the city, Jack is contacted by shortwave radio by a man calling himself Atlas. This unseen ally with a friendly Irish voice enlists Jack's help in rescuing his family and fighting the tyrant Ryan who, Atlas informs Jack, is responsible for the death and destruction that has befallen Rapture. Atlas' explanations construct the player's knowledge of what has taken place in Rapture and through his polite requests of Jack, who he asks 'would you kindly' perform tasks, Atlas guides the player's actions and choices. He teaches the player how the world operates, where to go and how to survive. Atlas thus serves as the primary pedagogic mechanism in *Bioshock*; he trains players' practices, and their understanding of the gameworld. In the early sections of *Bioshock*, he helps them navigate the dilapidated buildings and tunnels of Rapture, and instructs them in how to fight enemies and how to upgrade their body's abilities so as to have a better chance of survival. In this role Atlas operates akin to a tutorial level or game manual: he teaches the player how the game works, and like a tutorial or a manual for most players he is unquestioningly followed.

However, as *Bioshock* reaches its climax, the player's obedience to Atlas is shown to be a dangerous decision. Andrew Ryan reveals that Atlas has been secretly controlling Jack's actions through the phrase 'would you kindly'. Any task that Jack is asked 'would you kindly' do, he is subconsciously compelled to do so. A point Ryan makes clear by first controlling Jack's movements by use of the phrase and then, in a brutal suicide by proxy, ordering Jack to kill him. Jack does this (the player has no control) beating Ryan to death with a golf club, while the collapsing Ryan bellows one of *Bioshock*'s most memorable and quoted phrases: 'a man chooses, a slave obeys'.

Soon after, Atlas reveals himself to be the ruthless Fontaine, a rival to Ryan whose quest for power brought about much of the death and destruction visited upon Rapture. Jack was genetically conditioned by Fontaine in order to be used against Ryan. The plane crash was an engineered occurrence to bring Jack (implanted with fake memories and no knowledge of his origins) back to Rapture. In a final section that many (Dahlan 2007; Crecente 2008) have argued undermines the power of the twist, the player breaks Atlas/Fountaine's mental hold and eventually kills him.

DYSTOPIA

The power of *Bioshock*'s twist comes from a number of intersecting factors, not least of which is the way in which it harnesses many established themes and ideas from the dystopian genre and adapts them for the video game form. Like many of the seminal dystopias of recent decades, such as *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984), *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) and *Robocop* (Verhoeven 1987), *Bioshock* presents a bleak account of corporate domination, technological disaster and totalitarian control. It can be read as embodying deeply engrained cultural anxieties and concerns about individualist and laissez-faire ideals

and policies. The game offers a complex rendering of an ideology taken to its extreme: a society of self-motivation, self-advancement and, consequently, the abandonment of ethics and social responsibility. It shows the player a world where the end outcome of a free market, free-for-all culture has caused societal collapse and the monopolistic domination of one corporate entity: Ryan Industries. Like many of the classic dystopias that have come before it, *Bioshock* asks its audience to consider the terrible risks of excessive power wielded by corporations and individuals, the role of technology in our lives and, ultimately, what it means to be human.

Thematically *Bioshock* is explicitly inspired by the work of American novelist and popular philosopher Rand. *Bioshock*'s chief designer Ken Levine has stated that the game was in part a critique of Rand's magnus opus *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), in which Rand presents a dystopian world in which the talented, creative and entrepreneurial are hamstrung by government intervention and social obligation (Bray 2007). In this work and in subsequent publications Rand outlines a philosophy known as objectivism: founded in rationalism, self-interest and laissez-faire capitalism. *Bioshock* is a response to objectivism. Rapture reveals the dangerous potential that Levine and his team see in Rand's ideas. It is a world where a Rand-like figure, Andrew Ryan (his name, itself, a play on Rand's) has not been restrained by government interference or conventional morality. But as previously noted, it is a world that has fallen apart. *Bioshock* can thus be read 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. Importantly, however, as I will show, it is not just a critique of the ethicality or effectiveness of objectivism, but a challenge to the basic tenets and assumptions that underpin Rand's thinking.

Bioshock uses the specificity of the gaming medium to challenge its audience. So despite the many commonalities between the dystopic world of Rapture and those that have come before it in novels and films, an analysis of this game requires a number of new theoretical issues to be addressed. The adaptation from traditional media forms like literature and cinema to video games is never a process of direct translation (Juul 2001). The conventions established by literary and cinematic dystopias have been altered and reconfigured in important ways by their remediation to the video game form. While *Bioshock* can be useful read as a traditional dystopia, there is an additional facet of this work that must be acknowledged in any exploration: its ludic (i.e. play) dimension. It is in the way *Bioshock* constructs the ludic experience and the play practices in context of its dystopian setting that make it 'a lasting icon' (Alexander et al. 2009). The critique of self-serving individualism presented in this game is not only furthered, but made vastly more complex and nuanced, by the way it is embedded within its ludic mechanisms.

INTERACTIVITY, AUTHORSHIP AND AGENCY

Video games, more than any other media entertainment form, are premised on the notion of user agency. Key to our understanding of video games is the concept of interactivity, a term that is both widely used and widely debated within academic and industry discourse. The debates surrounding interactivity are particularly revealing about the nature of digital media, and highly pertinent to the way *Bioshock* defies audience expectation, and therefore I will touch on them briefly here. These debates are, however, multifaceted and

complex, and thus I will focus only on the way the term 'interactivity' is used to mark digital mediums out as new and unique, and then how this uniqueness is positioned as ideologically superior.

The popular usage of the term suggests that interactive forms differ from traditional media in their requirement for user input, and afford users the possibility of altering the textual, visual and audio elements of a medium (Dovey and Kennedy 2006: 6). Yet from a theoretical perspective the term is problematic. Many theorists have taken issue with this representation of interactive media as a rupture with traditional media (see Aarseth 2003; Manovich 2001: 49–61). These theorists have queried the conception of digital media as being unique in requiring agency, pointing to the types of agency and meaning-making required in other forms, and have suggested that the marking of digital media as interactive and, as such, discontinuous from traditional forms in terms of agency privileges a very limited understanding of agency that emphasizes physical action at the expense of the various cognitive and interpretative acts that take place when engaging with all texts (Manovich 2001: 57).

Despite such critiques, the term interactivity has remained in constant use, particularly in popular and industry discourses. Many accounts, like Salen and Zimmerman's survey of the field in *Rules of Play (2004)*, make brief concessions to the critiques of interactivity by flagging cognitive agency. Ultimately, however, they argue that one can still draw a productive distinction between interactive and non-interactive texts (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 60). Salen and Zimmerman, despite acknowledging the contested nature of the term interactivity, assert that '[a]n interactive context presents participants with choices' (2004: 69). Within this model choices are those strategies and tactics, both conscious and reflex, that alter in-game outcomes in a meaningful way (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 61). In this Salen and Zimmerman build off a definition of interactivity from prominent human–computer interaction theorist Laurel. For Laurel, 'something is interactive when people can participate as agents within a representational context' where '[a]n agent is "one who initiates actions"' (1993: 112). Interactivity is thus located in texts or systems where the user can initiate action.

This narrow conceptualization of agency as being about initiating action is one that media theorist Murray powerfully critiques. Moving beyond debates about the uniqueness of new media Murray (1998) offers a complex analysis of the concept of agency in digital environments. Murray explores the creative pleasures (such as problem solving and navigation) offered by such systems. Key to her analysis is a distinction between agency and authorship, a distinction recognized by Salen and Zimmerman elsewhere in their work, but neglected when defining interactivity. For Murray, participating in an electronic world is a performance within a predetermined system; the user has power to shape the experience but not freedom to do whatever they want. This notion of restricted freedom is central to her distinction between authorship and agency. She argues that players (or in her broader terminology, interactors) are not authors because whilst they creatively shape the experience, they are reliant upon a system put in place by someone else: 'all of the interactor's possible performances have been called into being by the originating author' (Murray 1998: 152). Thus, whilst players do trigger certain actions in that they call forth certain pieces of the programmed code and thus certain experiences, they are far from the original creators of the action:

> [The electronic] author is like a choreographer who supplies the rhythms, the context, and the set of steps that will be performed. The interactor, whether as navigator, protagonist, explorer, or builder, makes use of this repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances the author has enabled.
>
> (Murray 1998: 153)

Like many other theorists, Salen and Zimmerman do not make this distinction clear. As such, within their framing of interactivity there is an easy slippage between the notion of originating an action and calling forth a predefined one. Murray notes this tendency amongst theorists to conflate authorship and agency. She suggests that theorists often ascribe authorship to the act of interactivity because they lack an understanding of the nature of the way electronic 'texts' like games function (Murray 1998: 153). However, it is not only theorists unfamiliar with the workings of games who mistake agency for authorial freedom (Salen and Zimmerman are themselves games designers). As I will show in the remainder of this article, the confusion reflects a deeper problem. The root of the issues lies in our contemporary understandings of selfhood and freedom, and the way in which these ideas have come to be associated with interactivity.

The conflation of agency with authorial power has brought about an association of interactivity with free will. New Media theorist Jensen has argued that the imprecise definition of the term interactivity has meant that it has become 'loaded with positive connotations […] along the lines of individual freedom of choice, personal development, [and] self determination' (1998: 185). Thus, the term interactivity does not simply function as a descriptor of a specific 'new' type of engagement practice, but also as a marker of a celebrated quality within a contemporary western ideological and ethical framework. Rose has argued that freedom has come to be an unquestioned positive ideal, despite the many brutal acts done in its name (1999: 61). Freedom is positioned as a universal and unambiguous 'good' within twenty-first century discourse.

Video games are thus implicitly understood as an ideologically superior media form, a more 'democratic' medium than others (Williams 2010). Video games are understood to empower the audience in ways other media simply cannot. However, as *Bioshock* demonstrates, this empowerment is carefully constructed. It is the utopian desire built into the discourse of interactivity that *Bioshock*'s dystopia so powerfully sabotages. *Bioshock*'s deconstruction of interactivity does not mirror critiques such as Manovich and Aarseth's, which note the potential of all forms for interactivity. Rather it questions the applicability of any concept of interactivity to video gaming, by problematizing the fundamental notion of player freedom or what we can call complete individual agency. *Bioshock* demonstrates, indeed maliciously celebrates, the lack of authorial control players have over their ludic experience and the particularly finite bounds within which their agency is contained (cf. 'illusory agency' as discussed by MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007).

LUDIC DECONSTRUCTION

It is *Bioshock*'s implementation of pedagogy that challenges the popular conceptualization of interactivity and makes possible the 'the most stunning twist in gaming history' (Alexander et al. 2009). Through its carefully constructed pedagogic system *Bioshock* fundamentally undermines a simple notion of

interactivity and exposes the dangerous potential of an uncritical belief in individual unconstrained agency. It is this moment that makes *Bioshock* an important dystopia. It subverts its own ludic nature to go beyond many of its dystopic forebears and in doing so reveals its very contemporary unease. In a playful deconstruction of the concept of interactivity *Bioshock* shows itself as a particularly postmodern project, a game implicitly and explicitly influenced by the theoretical and popular 'deconstructive turn' of recent decades. It is a game willing to break apart its own conventions and illusions, and to expose the inner workings of this medium.

As with most single-player video games, in *Bioshock* the range of potential play practices afforded the player is always necessarily limited. Game development resources are always finite: the size and scope of a game, and the software's ability to meaningfully adjust the gameworld to player actions, are inevitably constrained by production budgets and technological limitations. More importantly most game designers are looking to create a specific kind of experience for the player, and, as such, limited options, narrative possibilities and paths through the game are necessary. The player must therefore take on a particular range of play strategies for the game to progress and for the player to successfully navigate it. Thus, many video games take on a pedagogic relationship to the player. They train the player to play in specific ways. The mechanisms through which they do this are varied, from tutorial systems, direct instruction or systems of reward like points, lives and health. All these systems, however, are designed to make the player take on the logic of the game. A player who is playing in this encouraged manner is therefore less likely to encounter the limits of the gameworld system.

As I noted earlier, *Bioshock*'s primary pedagogic mechanism comes in the form of Atlas. Atlas explicitly instructs the player as to where to go and what to do. He initially appears to be a clever framing device to enable the game to provide the necessary guidance to familiarize the player with the world of Rapture whilst minimizing the need for non-diegetic instruction (such as on-screen text), which might break the fiction of the gameworld. In this way Atlas' role matches up with what players have experienced in other games. The game's twist, however, shatters the illusion that this pedagogic process is simply designed to assist the player, and shows it as a technique of standardization and control. The mechanisms of the game so carefully hidden behind a fictive facade are exposed for the player to see, and brings the player's own decision making process into question.

This twist functions to reveal two parallel manipulations: Atlas' manipulation of Jack, and the game's manipulation of the player. The former is a compelling narrative twist, but it is the latter that is most academically significant. Where Jack was subconsciously compelled, the player voluntarily followed along because this is standard video game practice, and indeed the process of playing a game like this is about learning (or obeying) the logic of the ludic system. The act of video game playing is not defined by complete freedom or absolute agency, but rather the observation of and conformity to very specific practices of play, and *Bioshock* draws attention to this process. As video games journalist Rob Zacny observes:

> Gamers are conditioned to follow orders without question. *Bioshock's* twist played on this convention and pointed out the extreme degree to which we do things without bothering to ask why.
>
> (Zacny 2009)

Thus, an understanding of interactivity as premised on an agent (the player) freely initiating action, such as Laurel's, or Salen and Zimmerman's, is shown to be deeply problematic when applied to the video game form. Indeed the player's lack of control and ability to initiate his or her own course of action is highlighted. It is perhaps a risky design decision in a medium so privileging user agency to reveal the player's inevitable subservience and lack of control and indeed *Bioshock* has been critiqued for this (Hocking 2007), but it is this decision that makes *Bioshock* such a unique ludic experience. This game implicates players in a way other mediums cannot; they are made complicit in the schemes of the game, and thus the schemes of the game's fictional madman, and then that complicity is revealed to them. *Bioshock* exploits the specificity of its medium, to offer a new relationship between a ludic world and its audience, and thus a new self-reflexive experience for video game players.

Bioshock's twist encourages players to question their own actions, and ask why they so willingly followed Atlas; however, the game does more than just trigger players to question themselves. *Bioshock* frames this twist within a complex engagement with broad political ideas. The crucial element of *Bioshock*'s deconstruction of interactivity is that it does not just present the player's subservience as a personal failing but rather shows it to be a ludic and political inevitability. The coupling of the deconstruction of complete agency with the game's narrative advances the overall thematic problematization of ideologies of individualism.

Bioshock presents a world destroyed by objectivist ideologies, ideologies that privilege the right of the individual above all, equate individual rights with freedom, and that understand truth as accessible when a person has individual freedom. Yet in its twist *Bioshock* suggests that truth, freedom and the individual are far from self-evident cohesive concepts. In the revelation of Atlas' manipulation, *Bioshock* transforms the player's experience from one of truth and freedom and thus individual empowerment, to one of falsehood, control, disempowerment and the knowledge of just how much a game shapes and constructs one's desires and behaviours as a player. The notion that the individual can exist external to power is shown to be dangerously naïve. Training, discourse and mediation all shape how we 'individually' understand and choose to respond to the world. It is not that the player lacked power in the world of Rapture: there were very few occasions where the player had no control over proceedings. It is rather that what the player freely decided to do in the game was a product of the various forces the designers mobilized to shape play practices, most importantly the character of Atlas.

SUBJECTIVITY AND PLAY

To really understand the process of video game play we must go beyond the limited discourse of choice and agency dominating many theories of interactivity. Game studies is far from the only discipline that has struggled with the complexity of understanding the links between individual autonomy and outside influence. These are issues that political theory and philosophies of power have engaged with for many years, and many of the ideas from these fields are pertinent here. As Jensen noted, the term interactivity has already taken on a political dimension as it has become loaded with connotations of personal freedom and self-determination. These very ideals, however, have been vigorously debated, within a variety of contexts, and as we shall see the

critiques offered are as relevant to video gaming as they are to any other cultural formation.

There are many useful challenges to simplistic models of individual freedom and empowerment. Here I will discuss one of the most influential, and directly applicable to our case study: the work of post-structuralist philosopher and theorist of power Michel Foucault. Foucault and *Bioshock* each reveal that the individual is both subject and agent of power. They demonstrate that individualist, objectivist and liberalist doctrines that presuppose humans as capable of independent thought outside of cultural influence and mediation are deeply problematic.

Foucault theorizes that the very concept of the 'individual' is a construct of power, where power cannot be understood simply as a restrictive force. Rather it is a set of relations produced through our understandings and engagement with the world. Power is not about repressing freedom, knowledge and desire, but the construction of those very things in specific ways that reinforce the existing structures of power (Foucault 1980: 98). Norms of sexuality, conduct, personal appearance, etc. become established and we position ourselves in relation to them, often striving to match these norms, and judging others who do not. Societies thus function to produce individuals: self-monitoring subjects who want to freely act in certain acceptable ways because this behaviour matches the knowledge of the world they have gained and systems of pleasures they have taken on. It is therefore in the cultural logics of a society (those forces that shape contemporary expectations, perceptions and desires) and in individuals, who construct, replicate and reinforce these cultural logics, that power is manifest. For Foucault cultural power and individual agency are not opposite but rather mutually constructive:

> [t]he individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. […] The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.
>
> (Foucault 1980: 98)

What Foucault means by this is that how we define ourselves and choose to act is influenced or determined by the norms of a society, and in turn how we act informs, reinforces or challenges societal norms.

What is important about this model of subjectivity construction is that it dispenses with the binarized notion of freedom and agency that we see running through contemporary conservative, libertarian and objectivist thinking. As post-Foucaultian political theorists Miller and Rose note, '[p]ersonal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations' (1992: 174). If we apply this to video gaming we can suggest that a player's obedience to the privileged logics of a game does not take away his or her agency as long as that agency is not assumed to mean the singular initiator of action. Game after game, players have unquestioningly (with some exceptions) learnt to follow the pedagogic mechanisms offered in order to succeed. It is this repeated obedience that has enabled the video game form to evolve as it has, and players to experience the complex worlds that they offer. However, it is this system, and the player's voluntary adherence to it, that makes Atlas' manipulation of the player so difficult to detect, and so likely to succeed.

Within a Foucaultian framework, we have a dynamic subject. Individuals are not preformed and immutable – they alter based on context and past experiences. The twist in *Bioshock* is only surprising because the player has for so long been understood as the single initiator of action, the only participant with influence, and now he or she must reconceptualize themselves as a subject in flux. The revelation of Jack and the player's pliability suggests the dangers of equating the ability to act with individual freedom, and highlights the power of pedagogy and media (in this case Atlas' instructions) to shape our understandings of the world. As such, in its twist *Bioshock* can be read as exposing not only its own (and indeed all video games') careful construction of the player's understandings, but also the way in which contemporary subjectivities are formed through media engagements and the discourses and formations of knowledge they articulate. While it is highly unlikely that the designers of *Bioshock* were explicitly influenced by Foucault, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Bioshock* offers a similar problematization of individual autonomy. Both Foucault and the *Bioshock* designers are critiquing the idea that choice and agency are ever truly independent of our engagements with the world (real and virtual).

CONCLUSION

Andrew Ryan's dying statement that 'a man chooses, a slave obeys' is a powerful objectivist pronouncement. However, ultimately this crude opposition of freedom versus obedience is not what *Bioshock* reveals. Video games work by constructing the player's subjectivity; they produce specific understanding, expectations and desires in the player, so that the player freely performs in the way necessary. Choice and obedience are never mutually exclusive; desire and pleasure are always culturally influenced and mediated through the logics and systems of society. As such agency is never independent of power; rather, as Foucault suggests, it is a performance of it. Constructing player agency is part of the authorial process of building a video game. How players choose to navigate the gameworld and what their expectations might be are, in part, consequences of the design decisions made by the game authors. As video game theorists it is essential that in any account of interactivity we do not rely on a simplistic binary where individual agency and cultural power are assumed to be opposites. It is important that we leave behind the notion of players (or subjects of society more broadly) as able to operate outside and removed from the norms of knowledge, pleasure and discourse. *Bioshock* carefully deconstructs its own operation and in doing so forces us to deconstruct ourselves. It demonstrates that we are all products of the forces that operate on us: be it the machinations of a would-be despot, or the training mechanisms of a video game, we are formed through our engagement with the world.

Rapture is a world of modernity gone wrong. *Bioshock* revels in the destruction and deconstruction of the pillars holding that world up: the grand narratives of technological progress and capitalism. More significantly it also breaks apart the central figure of modernity, the autonomous individual, that figure who operates outside of power, outside of society and independently determines their own course of action. It demonstrates through its ludic mechanisms that such a construct is founded on a deeply flawed separation of the individual from society, pedagogy and mediation. *Bioshock*'s twist reveals to us just how deeply this modernist conceit is entrenched in our understanding of

ourselves and of the processes of interactivity. Whilst as players we recognize that our choices in a video game are limited, we still like to think that we have control – that we shape the play experience. What makes *Bioshock* an unsettling experience is that it explicitly reveals to us that whilst we may shape the play experience, the play experience also shapes us.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Rowan Tulloch, Ph.D. is a new media and video game theorist currently teaching at the University of New South Wales. In 2009 he completed a doctoral thesis entitled *Powerplay: Videogames, Subjectivity and Culture* exploring the role of cultural logics and technologies of subjectivation in the shaping of video game play practices.

Contact: University of New South Wales, Australia, 12/146 Pitt St Redfern, NSW, Australia, 2016.
E-mail: rowan.tulloch@gmail.com