

A slave obeys, a player chooses

A new videogame combines fighting mutants and critique of the utopian vision of Ayn Rand, **Benjamin Hourigan** discovers.

When you escaped, not long ago, from the burning wreckage of a passenger jet crashed in the middle of the Atlantic, you entered a lonely obelisk rising from the water. Inside that obelisk, a bathysphere waited to take you down to the art deco-inspired city that rests upon the ocean floor.

There you fought its mutant denizens and had your genes altered to give you powers over the elements. You also delved into the story of Andrew Ryan, the city's libertarian founder, and of his struggles with Frank Fontaine, a professional criminal who Ryan's commitment to *laissez-faire* let flourish.

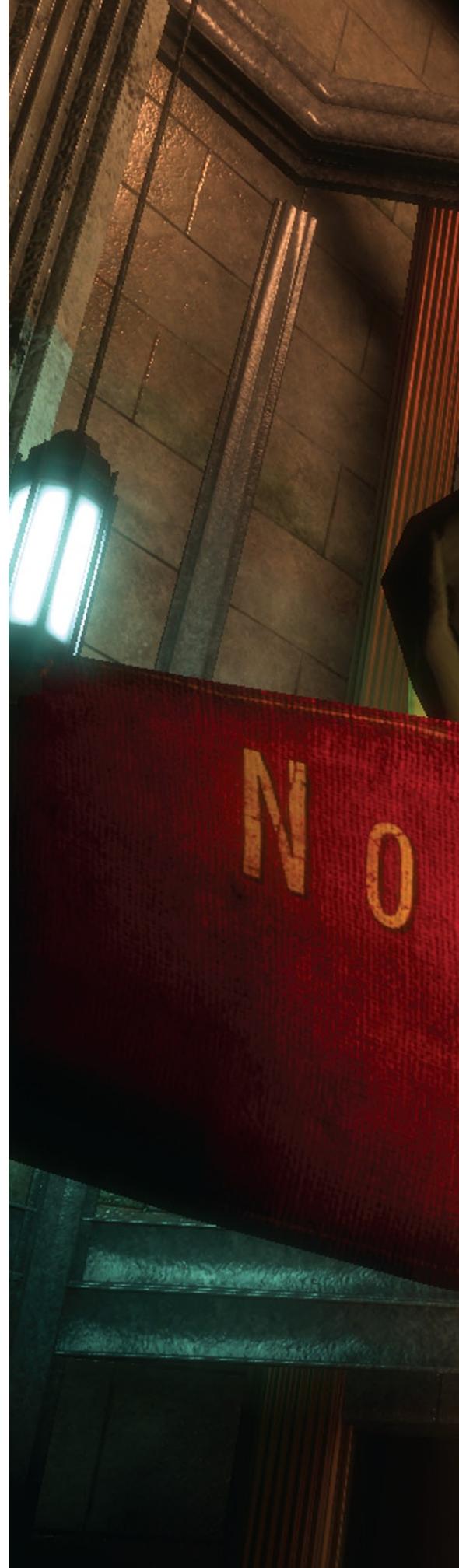
Little did you know that it was this very Frank Fontaine who had kidnapped you, artificially aged you, and had you reprogrammed as a weapon designed to kill Andrew Ryan. In disguise, Fontaine guided you by radio through the city, and convinced you that Ryan had to die. When you finally tracked Ryan down, he revealed that he himself was your father, and explained how Fontaine had manipulated you since your arrival.

Your reprogramming has made it so that whenever you hear the words 'would you kindly,' you cannot refuse any request that follows. Now you realise that with these words, Fontaine has controlled your every move, stripping you of your free will. Confused by the revelations of your past, and horrified, perhaps, by the ruin into which Ryan's paradise of liberty has descended, your impulse is to give up on what you thought was your mission, and leave the man—your father, after all—to live.

But Ryan has been broken by his city's failure. Making use of what Fontaine has made you, he asks 'Would you kindly ... Kill!' As you club Ryan to death, he taunts you with his maxim: 'A man chooses, a slave obeys.' And you ask yourself, what does it mean to be free? And, if freedom leads to the chaos and depravity I see around me, what could it be worth?

This sequence is the emotional and philosophical climax of *Bioshock*, a videogame developed by 2K Boston/2K Australia, published first on Xbox 360 in 2007 and rereleased on PlayStation3 for the Christmas season of 2008. Through Ryan, the city he created, and its horrific downfall, the game critiques libertarianism at its extreme. This is represented, for the game's creative director, Ken Levine, by Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, which exalts capitalism, sees tax as theft, decries altruism and religion, and demands unbending, austere honesty and integrity of its adherents.

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GODS OR KINGS.
ONLY MAN.

Could *Bioshock* act as a proving ground for the political beliefs of those young media consumers who are now having some of their most important cultural experiences with a videogame controller in their hands?

In their present form, videogames can't replace literary discussions of political ideology. The players usually have the freedom to determine at what pace and in what order events will unfold. They typically cannot be fast-forwarded or rewound, can't always be walked away from at any point, and can't be flipped through or searched for useful quotes. More importantly, they are not pure exposition. The challenges of gameplay—fights, tests of reflexes and agility, puzzles, and navigation—act as roadblocks in the way of a smooth path from start to finish. Could *The Constitution of Liberty* have made such an impression on Margaret Thatcher if she had to win a virtual fight with an undersea mutant every time she wanted to turn the page? Books, we may hope, will never die.

But by tackling the issues involved in applying political ideology to a 'real-world' society, *Bioshock* demonstrates videogames' ever-growing seriousness and maturity. The game had sold over a million copies by mid-2008, and is one of the most highly rated titles on the current generation of videogame systems. Its critical and commercial success indicates that the mainstream is ready to embrace games of its kind, even if they usually have to be lured with action and pyrotechnics.

Is *Bioshock's* popularity good for libertarianism? It is, after all, a critique of one very influential strand of individualist thinking. In an article for the gaming blog *Kotaku*, Levine admits that despite *Bioshock's* uncomplimentary depiction of Objectivism's consequences when applied, he's sympathetic to it as a philosophy. 'I find a lot of positive in it,' he says. 'I find [Rand's] notion of selfishness is very interesting, not living for ... others, believing in the individual

man as the central powerful force in the world rather than a government or a supreme being.' The same article quotes Yaron Brook, President of the Ayn Rand Institute, saying, 'Ultimately it doesn't portray objectivism well, but the mainstreaming of objectivism is important too. And it's important to see the willingness to debate those ideas even in a video game.'

Levine's concern in *Bioshock* appears mainly to be with the extremity and uncompromising nature of ideological positions, and the effects of putting them into practice. Speaking to *Gamespot*, Levine describes his concerns. 'My discomfort with extreme ideology,' he says, 'tends to focus around [the fact] that often when the ideology meets reality, people don't turn out as well as they might hope.' This same discomfort about Rand and her ideals is often present when pragmatic libertarians discuss them.

Bioshock doesn't rely on pure exposition for its exploration of political unease. Its gameplay mechanics of combat, puzzle-solving, and exploration, within a claustrophobic and decaying city festooned with libertarian propaganda, sets up a field in which to offer the player messy moral choices. The key to these choices is 'Adam', the mutagenic resource that acts as money in the city and gives the player access to a range of superhuman powers. Adam is collected from the bodies of dead mutants by Little Sisters, girl children who roam the city protected by giant armoured mutants called Big Daddies. As you journey through the game, you confront and defeat these duos, and upon victory, you have the choice to free the Little Sisters, or to increase your power by killing the girls and harvesting the Adam from their bodies. Whether killing here is a brutal necessity or an inexcusable horror, and how you respond to your moral inclinations in this virtual dilemma, is left an

open question until you reach one of the game's two very different endings and see the final consequences of your actions.

Though the choices for real-world libertarians may not be so stark, the philosophy of liberty raises many interesting conundrums. *Bioshock* probes the limits of freedom by suggesting that the laissez-faire inclinations of libertarianism may leave open some roads that are too dangerous to countenance (such as genetic manipulation). On Objectivism more specifically, *Bioshock* speculates that its more inflexible elements, such as its intolerance of religion, could create an underground that fosters dissension and criminality, as does Fontaine's sideline in smuggling bibles into Ryan's atheist city.

The situations *Bioshock* presents may be fantastic and extreme, but they can cut close to home. When I was a university student, I volunteered as part of an anarchist (mainly anarcho-communist) bookshop collective, putting my political beliefs to the practical test. At one of the collective meetings that governed our enterprise, it fell upon us to decide how to deal with the behaviour of someone on the periphery of our community who had been causing some serious trouble for other anarchists: smashing up their cars, setting things on fire, and making death threats.

Being anarchists, we weren't about to call the cops. So the question was, should we expel the man from our community, or leave him be, hoping his continued participation would improve him?

After much hand-wringing, the 'consensus' decision was to do nothing—something I could not reconcile myself with. The winning argument had been that disciplining the man would be incompatible with our community's commitment to freedom. But by our

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inaction, we exposed ourselves (not to mention others in the population at large) to terrorisation from an unstable person who had stated his willingness to destroy life and property but who no one was about to stand against. This turned out to be the end of my engagement with left-wing anarchism, as it taught me that a political doctrine has to have a certain steel to it, a willingness to apply limits to human behaviour so that it can protect the values it holds most dear.

Could *Bioshock* act as a proving ground for the political beliefs of those young media consumers who are now having some of their most important cultural experiences in front of a high-def television with a videogame controller in their hands? It wouldn't be the first time that games have reached out to enmesh their players in politically potent issues.

As *Bioshock* attests, videogame makers can find potent inspiration in ideas that have promoted the transcendence of human personal or social limitations. Rand's fiction holds out the vision that also animates Andrew Ryan's undersea city, of men stripped of frailty and imperfection to become as powerful, glorious, and self-determined as gods. Given the opportunity such ideas offer for epic conflict and magical imagery, this Nietz-

schean quest to overcome ordinary human weakness and step into an awesome superhumanity has animated numerous other videogames, notably the Japanese role-playing games *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and the series encompassing *Xenogears* and the three *Xenosaga* games (1998-2006). The tales are always cautionary: the Nietzscheans' hubris and overreaching ambition destabilises society and unleashes forces that threaten to destroy whole worlds.

On the more obviously liberal side of the spectrum, the 1988 role-playing game *Ultima V* cautioned players against the dangers of state-legislated morality. While guiding a party of heroes to destroy three demons, find their country's lost Lord, and restore peace and justice, players would come across such heart-breaking characters as a poor man put in the stocks because he chose to feed his family rather than follow the state's crippling demand that he give 40 per cent of his income to charity.

We also find games that take other viewpoints. Michel Ancel's underappreciated *Beyond Good and Evil* (2003), developed against the backdrop of the case being made for invading Iraq, had its photojournalist heroine working to expose a phony case for militarism. There, the political comment was barely disguised, but if you prefer truly naked

partisanship, you can't go past *Bushgame*, a 2004 side-scroller that had figures including Hulk Hogan, Jesus, and Mr. T teaming up to defeat George W. Bush and a horde of tax-evading pig-men.

The odd thing about *Bushgame* is that whatever your politics, it's undeniably fun. Though the cutscenes that break off into illustrated explanations of Bush's purported economic and social crimes may not be to everyone's taste, it's hard not to get excited when it comes time to make Mr. T take down a giant, club-wielding Dick Cheney.

A similar sense of fun—as adventure, trepidation, wonder, and curiosity—animates *Bioshock*. The combination of art-deco aesthetics, biotechnological superpowers, and the prospect of exploring a collapsing, mutant-filled underwater city are the source of its mass appeal, and could never be dispensed with. But it's the game's engagement with ideas that leaves a lasting impression. There's probably a few hundred thousand players out there who've had their first contact with libertarian ideas thanks to Ken Levine and the *Bioshock* team, and at least some of them will think carefully and realise those ideas can end, not in dystopia, but in freedom and prosperity.

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