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Title: Bioshock

Platform: Xbox 360 / PlayStation 3 / PC / Mac OSX

Genre: First Person Shooter / Role Playing Game

Release Date: August 21, 2007

Developer: 2K Boston

Publisher: 2K Games

Writer: Ken Levine

## **Overview**

In *Bioshock*, the player takes the role of Jack, a seemingly average man sitting in an airplane. After a mysterious explosion, wherein the plane crashes into the ocean, Jack swims to safety and takes shelter in a lighthouse nearby. Suddenly, the lighthouse springs to life, inviting Jack lower and lower into its depths to the tune of “Beyond the Sea.” One Bathysphere ride later, Jack is in Rapture, an underwater civilization built by objectivist Andrew Ryan as a shelter to those who have been shunted by the socialist, regulated society that exists on the surface. However, twenty years after its construction, Rapture has seen better days— class-warfare has decimated the population, and the remainder have developed near-cannibalistic tendencies to survive.

Guided by a stranger named Atlas, Jack makes his way to Andrew Ryan in hopes of finding a way to the surface.

## Characters

- **Jack** – The character controlled by the player, Jack is the protagonist, an illegitimate child of Andrew Ryan kidnapped and raised under the direction of Ryan's sworn enemy, Frank Fontaine. Jack has been psychologically conditioned from birth to obey commands prefaced with the words "would you kindly." In the climactic encounter with his father, Jack discovers that none of the decisions he has made in life have been of his own free will. From there, Jack must fight against his own conditioning to reach Fontaine and earn his freedom.
- **Frank Fontaine** – The first character the player communicates with, under the pseudonym Atlas, Frank Fontaine is a master of disguise and excellent con-man. After weaseling his way into Rapture, Fontaine raised an illegitimate corporation to compete with Andrew Ryan's. A crackdown on Fontaine's smuggling operations, leading to a violent shootout, caused Frank to fake his own death and take the name Atlas, becoming a proletariat figurehead of the burgeoning lower class previously fostered by Fontaine himself. He then sparked the Civil War that killed much of the population and put Rapture in lockdown. Trapped with no more options, Fontaine calls on his ace in the hole, Jack, to come and kill Ryan so he may spread his influence to the surface.
- **Andrew Ryan** – The initial antagonist of *Bioshock*, Andrew Ryan is an industrialist magnate, fed up with bureaucracy and policy, who decides to construct an

underwater objectivist utopia, where anyone is free to pursue their capitalist dreams. However, by catering to the economic and intellectual elite, Ryan created a neglected and dissatisfied lower class, dependent on people like Frank Fontaine for financial support. In the events of the Civil War, Ryan issued a city-wide lockdown, trapping everyone inside the city for a decade. Unbeknownst to Ryan, his illegitimate son now returns to Rapture, a slave to Fontaine, with orders to remove any obstacles between Fontaine and the surface – including Ryan himself.

## **Breakdown**

The narrative in *Bioshock* is excellent because it is centered around three primary symbols that permeate the game's design. The first is movement and direction. This symbol is apparent the minute the protagonist Jack steps into the bathysphere and is forced to watch as he is lowered deeper and deeper into unfamiliar territory. In the symbology of many cultures, including the Native American medicine wheel, the south is often represented by trust and the unknown. Whenever he descends – a southerly direction – Jack must place his trust in something, be it his intuition when he enters the bathysphere or Atlas when he acts as Jack's guide.

From the initial descent – the Monomyth's Crossing The Threshold – Jack meets The Mentor, Atlas, who directs Jack further south and into his trust. With his path blocked, Jack goes east – the direction of learning and illumination – and discovers the twisted place that Rapture has become. From the abstract plastic surgery of Dr. Steinman to Fort Frolic and its psychotic ringleader Sander Cohen, Jack must confront and understand the hostile city before he moves further into the unknown.

When Jack reaches Hephaestus, the red-hot geothermal venting station and deepest, most southerly part of Rapture, he confronts the current antagonist, Andrew Ryan. As the south is also characterized by the aspect of emotion, this confrontation also is the most intense of the story, where the major twist is revealed that Ryan is Jack's father, and that Jack has until now been acting as a slave to Fontaine. Ryan forcing his son Jack to kill him is the most emotional scene in the game, instantly creating empathy for a character you thought was the villain thus far. Here the story reaches the Monomyth's Revelation, as Jack is reborn, struggling to gain his free will.

The story of *Bioshock* now begins its ascent, as Jack makes his way north to the highest location in all of Rapture, Point Prometheus. The northern direction here represents wisdom and knowing, as well as maturity – Jack knows what he has to do to right the wrongs that have been committed. The final battle at Point Prometheus is the Monomyth's Atonement, where Jack attempts to right his wrongs by killing Fontaine and ending the plot to control the surface world.

*Bioshock* is also laden with political symbolism, specifically that of Russian-American author Ayn Rand. Rapture was constructed as an implementation of Rand's political philosophy, objectivism. Andrew Ryan, whose name and philosophy have both been derived from Rand's, believed that the purpose of life was to seek individual happiness. In Rapture, the individual has the ability to improve himself without any resistance. However, the first half of *Bioshock* is actually an indictment on objectivist philosophy. The events it portrays illustrates why pure objectivism is not a feasible way to live.

The first notable figure of Rapture Jack meets is Dr. Steinman. JS Steinman was one of the best plastic surgeons in his field. Spending time in Rapture, he grew tired of everyone asking for the same procedures and instead sought a new vision of perfection. Inspired by Picasso, driven by hard drugs, and unrestricted by the society of Rapture, Steinman horribly disfigured and murdered many of his patients. Steinman represents the flaws of Rapture being isolated from society. His corrupted sense of beauty went unimpeded due to the individualism that Rapture and objectivism so values.

The next part of Rapture Jack visits is Neptune's Bounty. Here, the inherent corruption of a capitalist system has been exemplified in the form of Fontaine Fisheries, a massive smuggling operation put on by Frank Fontaine. Fontaine, the con-man and criminal mastermind, has a gift for exploiting people and rules. In a society where man's only goal is to better himself, people like Fontaine will appear to prosper at the expense of others. Without any authority to deal with these people, as idealized in an objectivist society, corporate corruption will run rampant and, like in Rapture, ruin the economy.

The next member of Rapture's rogues gallery Jack encounters is Sander Cohen, patron of distractions and showmanship. His domain is Fort Frolic, the entertainment and vice district of Rapture. Keeping the artistic nature of the district alive, Cohen coats the Splicers he kills with plaster and poses them in various places. The theater is still open, where Cohen holds tryouts for a piano player with explosive consequences. Sander Cohen represents the lavish, indulgent lifestyle that comes with catering to upper class citizens like the pure-capitalist system of Rapture. Given enough time and money, most upstanding citizens will resort to the pleasures and vices down in Fort Frolic, another tragic flaw of the Rapture system.

Rapture represents a perfect society, built on high-minded principals, that fails because of human nature: a utopia. Any one of the seven deadly sins – the Pride and Envy of Dr. Steinman; the Greed and Wrath of Frank Fontaine; or the Lust, Sloth, and Gluttony of Sander Cohen – can lead to a utopia's downfall.

Of all the symbolism in the game, the most subtle set is also the most obvious: mythology. Many of the names and places in *Bioshock* are derived from Greek and Roman mythology. However, the names are almost always more than skin deep.

When Frank Fontaine goes into hiding, he takes on the pseudonym Atlas. This meaning is very specific and important. When Atlas was defeated with the rest of the Titans, Zeus punished him by forcing him to hold the Sky away from the Earth. When Fontaine faked his death and downfall, he became a hero of the people and figurehead of the lower class. In a sense, Fontaine as Atlas further stratified the socioeconomic classes, keeping the upper class – or Sky – away from the lower class – or Earth.

The pivotal scene of the first half of the game takes place in the pumping station Hephaestus. Hephaestus is the Greek god of technology and fire, and so it is only fitting that both Rapture's control center and its geothermal plant are located in a region with his name. However, a more delicate connection can be made with the events of the plot. While in Hephaestus, Jack discovers that he has been genetically and psychologically conditioned to be a slave to Fontaine from birth. This genetic predisposition to be inferior was very subtly foreshadowed by choosing the name Hephaestus, for Hephaestus was also known as the lame god – he was born a cripple.

The final scene of the game takes place in Point Prometheus, the production facility of the Big Daddies and Little Sisters. Naming this spot after Prometheus, the

Greek Titan, accomplishes a number of things. First, Prometheus created man from clay, much in the same way the facility has engineered and created the unnatural Big Daddies and Little Sisters. Also, as Prometheus gave the gift of fire to humanity, so do Little Sisters give the gift of ADAM to the denizens of Rapture. Moreover, placing Frank Fontaine at the peak of Point Prometheus gives the name additional meaning.

Prometheus was said to be the creator of humanity. When Fontaine becomes Atlas (a brother of Prometheus), he champions the lower class, defending them from Andrew Ryan's capitalist machine. Fontaine was also trapped in Rapture, unable to escape to the surface because of Ryan's lockdown, much like Zeus binding Prometheus to a rock in Greek mythology.

### **Strongest Element**

The strongest element of *Bioshock* is the first half of the game. From the beginning of the game to the climax at Hephaestus, the game expertly guides the player through all the worst parts of Rapture, building a sense of alienation and disgust for what the city has become, all the way up to the person who created it all, Andrew Ryan. The build-up to this point is very well done, immersing the player in a world in which they feel they do not belong. Every tiny detail – from the items strewn about each level to the bits and pieces of dialog that can be heard echoing through the halls – makes the setting that much more unnerving. The use of audio diaries give the player near-limitless insight into the characters they encounter. The player can choose to follow each antagonist into their madness, hearing them in their further and further state of decline. The scariest part about the setting and characters of *Bioshock* is how normal and relatable everything was. It offers a haunting reflection of society that the player

identifies with and has to fear. The first half of the narrative serves as an establishing shot for this eerily identifiable dystopia called Rapture.

### **Unsuccessful Element**

Unfortunately, the weakest point of the game takes place after the climax. The emotional reversal presented in the climax between Andrew Ryan and Frank Fontaine also drives a complete thematic reversal. Whereas the first half of the narrative is warning about the dangers of individualism – displaying an array of isolated characters in their own downward spirals of insanity – the story after the climax seems to promote the very same individualism. The remainder of the game is spent fighting against Jack's slavery and earning his free will. The game presents Jack's final struggle as a lone, heroic one. According to Ayn Rand, the heroic struggle is an objectivist ideal, the likes of which the game should be trying to indict. As a result, the final battle is nowhere near as impactful as the climax. Most players have no idea which way they should feel when they finish the game, which is a structural failure of the narrative.

### **Highlight**

Right as the player is about to feel the self-righteous pleasure of saving the people of Rapture from their tyrant, the twist is revealed that Jack has been a slave to Fontaine all along. It becomes apparent that the corruption and dilapidation of Rapture is all due to Fontaine's efforts to undermine what Ryan stood for, and that Ryan was never really the antagonist. However it's too late for Ryan, because to make a point and give Jack the only chance of ever escaping Rapture and ending the nightmare, Ryan forces Jack to kill him using the words Fontaine has been using all along: "would you kindly?" The story elements presented thus far are presented again, this time in a

completely different context. This scene allows the player to instantly empathize with the character they hated all along and to hate the character they empathized with all along. This complete reversal of emotion is the most impressive feat in the entire narrative.

### **Critical Reception**

- “All of it blends together to form a rich, interesting world that sucks you in right away and won't let go until you've figured out what, exactly, is going on in the undersea city of Rapture.” (GameSpot.com, Jeff Gerstmann, 96/100)
- “Even though Ryan spits out what seems to resemble totalitarian propaganda, you can't help but sympathize with him. He has alluring ideas, speaks them with conviction, and comes off as a sympathetic visionary despite his severe eccentricities.” (IGN.com, Charles Onyett, 9.7/10)

### **Lessons**

- Symbolism in games can have multiple levels of depth that subconsciously affect the player
- In their current state, video games call for heroic endings, making stories like the one presented in *Bioshock* very hard to tell.
- Immersion works both on macroscopic and microscopic levels.

### **Summation**

There is a lot that can be learned from *Bioshock*. It has a fantastic premise enforced by an appropriate art style and quality voice acting. However, the ending was poorly executed. Some aspects were the results of poor managerial decisions, while others stemmed from the difficulty inherent in telling a tragic story in a video game. Players of games want to control a hero. If Jack were to be killed at the end of the

climax, it might make for a better, more compelling narrative, but most players would not like it, and sales would suffer. Much in the same way that summer blockbusters are almost always predictable, triple-a video game titles have become very formulaic. *Bioshock* is an example of a commendable effort to break that mold, and it is equally important to know why it worked as why it did not.