

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Bioshock Infinite*
Platform: PC / Xbox 360 / PS3
Genre: First-person shooter
Release Date: March 26, 2013
Developer: Irrational Games
Publisher: 2K Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ken Levine

Overview

“The mind of the subject will desperately struggle to create memories where none exist.”
-Opening Title Card

Bioshock Infinite is a 2013 first-shooter person in which players play the role of a harried private investigator tasked with retrieving a young woman, Elizabeth, from a theocratic, seemingly utopian city floating in the sky, Columbia. As the player works to rescue Elizabeth, the two team up to unravel the true nature of the dystopian city, and themselves, as they find themselves stuck in the middle of a heated conflict between the city’s elite Founders and the repressed, lower class Vox Populi.

Characters

“There is always a lighthouse, a man, a city.”
-Elizabeth Comstock

- **Booker DeWitt** – A disgraced private investigator, Booker DeWitt is shell shocked from the atrocities he committed during the Battle of Wounded Knee. Searching forgiveness and redemption, Booker ultimately finds himself skeptical of the sin-absolving nature of converting to religion. He declines a baptism and resorts to gambling and drinking. Financially ruined, he must now find a young woman, Elizabeth, to “wipe away the debt” of his mysterious, foreboding clients.

- **Elizabeth Comstock** – Intelligent, perceptive, and somewhat naive, Elizabeth Comstock has been held captive in Columbia for nearly her entire life. Being groomed as the next leader of Columbia, she is hailed as its upcoming savior by the city's denizens. She is capable of creating “tears” in space-time, allowing her brief glimpses into the past, present, and future of alternate realities, and her time in captivity has given her plenty of time to hone this ability. It is revealed that Elizabeth is Booker DeWitt's daughter, having been taken by the sterile Zachary to fulfill his nefarious prophecy.
- **Zachary Comstock** – Manipulative, charismatic, and deeply religious, Zachary Comstock is the ruler and self-proclaimed prophet of Columbia. Comstock has created a cult of personality around himself and Elizabeth, and hopes that Elizabeth is the key to dominating the rest of the world and cementing his legacy. It is revealed that Zachary is an alternate reality version of Booker DeWitt who accepted his baptism.
- **The Luteces** – Mysterious and overly ambitious, Robert and Rosalind Lutece are Columbia's leading quantum physicists. Presented as identical twins, they are revealed to be the same individual from two alternate realities, brought together by their dimension-manipulating experiments. Employed by Zachary to capture Elizabeth, the Luteces are nearby assassinated by him in an attempt to cover his tracks. Now, the Luteces act as a mysterious guide to DeWitt, influencing his actions to correct the unstable side effects of tampering with alternate realities.

Breakdown

“We swim in different oceans, but land on the same shore.”

-Elizabeth Booker

One could write several papers covering the incredible amount of themes within *Bioshock Infinite*, spanning the social, political, metaphysical, and moral: American exceptionalism, duality of self, fanaticism, the nature of reality, the absolution of sin. But perhaps the most compelling theme of *Bioshock Infinite* is free will, choices, and the consequences thereof.

At the core of the *Bioshock* series is the necessity of the player to make tough decisions. Even in the original *Bioshock*, in which the player character is a brainwashed assassin who must obey any command preceded by the phrase “Would you kindly...?”, the player still has the agency to decide the fate of the Little Sisters, choosing whether to harvest them for in-game resources or take the moral high-road and protect them instead. *Bioshock Infinite*, however, subverts this expectation of the series, not only denying the

player the ability to have any effect on the game's storyline, but actively flaunting the fact by giving the player choices that clearly do not matter.

There are four story decisions the game presents to the player:

- Whether to harm an interracial couple in front of a cheering crowd at the fairgrounds.
- Whether Elizabeth should wear the bird pendant or the cage pendant.
- Whether to hold up the ticket seller or request to buy tickets,
- Whether to kill or spare one of Columbia's military leaders.

All four of these decisions ultimately have no bearing on the plot or the gameplay:

- Whether or not you choose to harm the couple, the crowd realizes you are what Zachary calls "the false prophet" and attacks you.
- The pendant decision is purely cosmetic.
- The ticket seller and his cronies attack you regardless of your decision to hold him up or not.
- If Columbia's military leader is spared, he is captured and lobotomized shortly thereafter, effectively dead and having no bearing on the plot either way.

Under typical circumstances, players would decry such false decisions as empty and insulting to the player. However, *Bioshock Infinite* has presented these "decisions" in a context that draws attention to and deconstructs the very idea of linearity and decision making in interactive fiction. A series of absurdist encounters with the Luteces (see "Strongest Element" below) explicitly present the themes of fatalism and the lack of free will, grounding the audience in such a way that the false decisions support the narrative rather than distract from it.

The theme of choices (or the lack thereof) take a self-reflexive turn in the endgame, in which Elizabeth, having opened a tear to escape Columbia with Booker after having killed Zachary, leads Booker through an otherworldly dimension filled with countless variants of lighthouses, each with their own alternate reality version of Booker and Elizabeth. The scene functions as a call back to the opening scenes of both the original *Bioshock* and *Bioshock Infinite* (in which the protagonist enters a lighthouse that brings them to the dystopian setting of the game). Elizabeth explains to Booker that they are one of an infinite number of Elizabeth/Booker pairs, each pair making subtly different choices but nevertheless ending up on the same path.

This sequence serves as a self-reflexive commentary on the nature of a single-player game: thousands of players play through the game, each making subtly different choices in how they play the game. Some players might play through the game as quickly as possible, while others might stop and search for every last collectible item and audio log.

Some players might play on the hardest difficulty, meticulously optimizing their gameplay strategies, while others might play on the easiest setting simply to sit back and enjoy the story. Some players might choose the bird pendant, while others choose the cage pendant, but regardless of these decisions, every player shares a common path through the game. Every player will walk into the room containing an infinite number of lighthouses, Bookers, and Elizabeths. By giving us this sequence, the game's creators not only reinforce the theme of fatalism and the irrelevance of choice, but also give us the opportunity to reflect on the collective experience that every player will share. In this way, *Bioshock Infinite* becomes a game about games and how people interact and experience them.

Strongest Element

"It would seem the universe does not like its peas mixed with its porridge."

-Rosalind Lutece

Throughout the game, Booker has a series of strange encounters with the Luteces, very rigidly characterized by a quirky leitmotif and back-and-forth absurdist dialogue that draws parallels to Tom Stoppard's 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which explores similar themes of fate, existentialism, and individual identity. In fact, one of your first encounters with the Luteces in Columbia, in which the Luteces tally the results of a series of coin flips (over 100 heads, and zero tails), is a direct homage to the first scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, in which the two main characters gamble on a coin flip that turns up as heads over 100 times in a row.

The other encounters are equally absurdist, featuring the Luteces engaging in activities such as casually playing the piano (a melody that accompanies their own leitmotif quite nicely, leaning on the fourth wall in a way that comes off as fitting for this kind of character) or digging their own graves. While these encounters in another game might come off as non-sequiturs, the game's creators give the encounters meaning by using them to reinforce the game's themes, as well as occasionally introducing the more unintuitive gameplay and story elements, such as Tears.

For example, one such encounter gives you one of the aforementioned meaningless choices, in which Booker must choose the bird pendant or the cage pendant that Elizabeth will wear for the rest of the game. This encounter, which has only a minor cosmetic impact on the game, pushes the theme of the illusion and irrelevance of choice. Another encounter, in which a Tear reveals that the gunsmith who is dead in "your" reality is in fact alive in another, provides a simple explanation of Tears as both a gameplay mechanic and a story device. Overall, the encounters with the Luteces add an unforgettable flavor to *Bioshock Infinite*, while also reinforcing the themes and gameplay elements of the game.

Unsuccessful Element

Like the other *Bioshock* games, *Bioshock Infinite* uses collectible audio logs to provide exposition on the history of Columbia. *Bioshock Infinite* also introduces kinetoscopes, silent film projectors that perform a similar narrative function to audio logs. However, unlike audio logs, which can be listened to passively while progressing through the game, kinetoscopes take control away from the player when activated, showing the player a 15-20 second silent film cutscene. As the films are cleverly designed to pay homage to early silent films, their pacing is intentionally slow and stilted. As a result, this heavily disrupts the momentum of gameplay, interrupting whatever the player was currently doing while also making the process of discovering the backstory tedious. Overall, kinetoscopes come off as redundant and strictly inferior to the audio logs already provided by the game, encouraging players to simply skip past them rather than discover more about the history of Columbia.

Highlight

“Hello! Oh, this is wonderful! Come dance with me, Mr. DeWitt!”
-Elizabeth Booker

After having barely broken Elizabeth out of her ivory tower, Booker wakes up on an idyllic beach and discovers Elizabeth dancing with the locals on the pier. It is the first time Elizabeth has interacted with people outside of her prison, and perhaps, the happiest moment of her life, especially considering the dark events that occur throughout the remainder of the game’s story. To continue the game, however, the player cannot stay in paradise forever, and instead must snap Elizabeth out of her ecstasy and lead her away from the peaceful bay. It is a tranquil sequence, devoid of any violence or enemies, serving as both a palate cleanser between two intense, violent chapters of the game, as well as giving us one final glimpse of Elizabeth’s profound, naive innocence before it is ripped from her in the game’s second and third acts.

Critical Reception

Bioshock Infinite received almost universal acclaim amongst critics, becoming one of the top three video games of 2013 by average rating (alongside *Grand Theft Auto V* and *The Last of Us*). In general, critics praised the game’s storyline and its integration of both gameplay and story, with *IGN*’s Ryan McCaffrey giving the game a 9.5/10, referring to it as “a brilliant shooter that nudges the entire genre forward with innovations in both storytelling and gameplay.” Critics also praised the game’s world building, with Joe Juba

of *Game Informer* claiming that “almost everything you encounter contributes to your understanding of the floating world [of Columbia].”

Most of the negative criticism of the game revolved strictly around gameplay mechanics, which some critics, such as *Videogamer.com*'s Steven Burns, calling it “stagnant” and “shamelessly padded.” Despite potential gameplay flaws, even Burns calls *Bioshock Infinite* “one of the most compelling games of this generation.”

Lessons

- **Not every game needs to offer the player limitless choices.**
 - A recent trend amongst game designers, especially in story-driven titles, is to offer gamers a staggering number of choices, with an equally staggering number of story branches. While this approach works well for the *Mass Effects* of the world, *Bioshock Infinite* proves that a modern game can tell a compelling narrative entirely on rails.
- **Exposition can be presented in ways that do not interrupt the flow of the narrative.**
 - One of *Bioshock Infinite*'s major successes is in its ability to integrate gameplay with story. Ironically, one of the game's major shortcomings is in the use of kinetoscopes, which interrupt the flow of the narrative to provide a 15-30 second chunk of exposition. However, the game's audio logs show that you can provide backstory in a passive manner, without forcing the player to a halt.
- **If possible, every encounter should reinforce the themes of the game.**
 - Many of the game's encounters are designed to feel off-putting, disorienting, and perhaps even non-sequiturs. Nevertheless, these encounters are extremely engaging, primarily because they establish and push the themes of the game.

Summation

“If we could perceive time as it truly was... what reason would grammar professors have to get out of bed?”

-The Luteces

Bioshock Infinite has taken linearity, a game design choice increasingly thought of as lazy, limited, and unfulfilling of the very promise of interactive media, and has used it to push game narrative in a direction a AAA title has simply never ventured before. By exploring a fatalistic world filled with choices that do not matter and events the player

has simply no agency over, the creators of *Bioshock Infinite* have given us a game that evokes comparison to existential, absurdist works of other mediums, truly pushing video games as just as much an art as film, theater, or literature.