

6 Night-Time Dreams and Wish-Fulfilment: The Struggle for Utopia in BIOSHOCK INFINITE

DeWitt: What are all these lighthouses? Where are we ... who are ... ?

Elizabeth: They're a million, million worlds. All different, all similar. Constants and variables. There's always a lighthouse. There's always a man, there's always a city ...

DeWitt: How do you know this?

Elizabeth: I can see them through the doors. You, me, Columbia, Songbird ... But sometimes, something is different ... yet the same

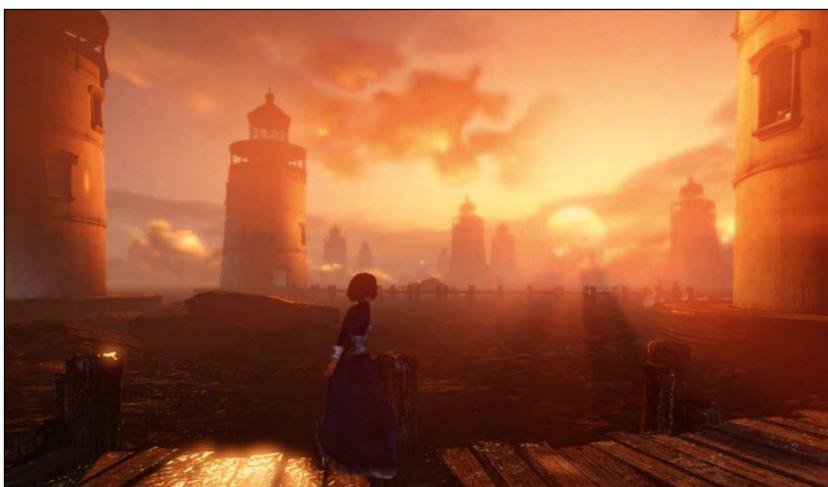
BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Sea of Doors.

BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013) builds its gameworld around the premise and fictional novum of the *multiverse*, in particular Lewis Everett's notion of the *many-worlds interpretation*. According to this understanding of quantum physics, any potential choices and outcomes (taken or not taken) exist in a state of superposition, with each of them creating an alternative universe that follows their logic. In other words, the many-worlds interpretation suggests that the universe is composed of limitless possibility, an infinite array of potential futures, presents, or pasts that have become actualised worlds.

In BIOSHOCK INFINITE, this revelation is reserved for the game's end, where the player encounters a *sea of doors* composed of an infinite array of lighthouses and docks that connect them. These represent entrances to the Utopias behind them, all of which are similar but somehow different. It is a key motif permeating the BIOSHOCK series, which deals with the question of *human agency* (or the lack

thereof) in the face of ideological confinement. This struggle for self-expression was experienced by the player in the first two games—*BIOSHOCK* (2K Boston, 2007) and *BIOSHOCK 2* (2K Marin, 2010)—which had the player explore the capitalist underwater Utopia of Rapture, an alternative history of the early 1960s. The events of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* predate these and lead back to 1912 where the player lays foot in a city in the sky by the name of Columbia. It is a Utopia based on the principles of religious piety and American exceptionalism, in which the player meets a woman called Elizabeth who will help her overcome the dystopia(s) she is facing.

Figure 18: The BIOSHOCK multiverse is composed of an infinite array of worlds, each of which is represented by a lighthouse. These formulate entrances to the Utopias behind them, which were built around a noble dream.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Sea of Doors

What unites the *BIOSHOCK* games, then, is a *vicious circle* of choices that led to the dystopias the player is now facing. As such, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* gives context to the previous games as it reveals their inner connections, but it also sends the player on a journey to aesthetic response and self-sacrifice that brings an end to the circle of ideological delusions. This intimate bond between the *BIOSHOCK* games makes it difficult to discuss *INFINITE* in isolation, and I will integrate the first *BIOSHOCK* and the two episodes of *BURIAL AT SEA* (Irrational Games, 2013, 2014) into my argument later on. For only then can the characters' and player's *search for forgiveness for having lost Utopia and the struggle to regain it* be understood in a nuanced way.

In the following, I will thus describe BIOSHOCK INFINITE as a critical dystopia of variant I that targets the dangers of *ideological delusions* and *oppressive regimes*. Its warning thereby revolves around the perils of theocracy, American exceptionalism, racism, and free market capitalism, which occur in an intertwined fashion. This selfish desire for power, supremacy, and the greed for capital paints a bleak picture of humankind and gives rise to the game's *official narrative*. To counteract this dilemma, the player takes on the role of private detective Booker DeWitt who is sent to Columbia with the task of saving a mysterious woman named Elizabeth. DeWitt is initially unaware of the circumstances surrounding his journey, which is explained by the side effects of trans-dimensional travel. Yet there is a more precise explanation of the events.

In this interpretation, which is influenced by Freud's deliberations on the night-time dream,¹ DeWitt suffers from a *neurosis* stemming from his involvement in the Wounded Knee massacre. He drifted off into alcoholism and gambling, and supposedly gave away his daughter to settle his debts. When the game begins, DeWitt suffers from nightmares, and the player becomes involved in an anxiety dream at whose core lies the *wish for forgiveness*. As such, BIOSHOCK INFINITE's counter-narrative follows a creative path where the player has to decipher an estranged dreamworld and where the struggle for Elizabeth/Anna is symbolically intertwined with that for Utopia. This twofold role is adopted by the player, who has to become aware of these facets, and revolves around a *father's guilt due to alcoholism* and the *failure of humankind in losing Utopia because of racist atrocities*.

In this regard, Elizabeth assumes a pivotal role, for she will lead DeWitt and the player on a journey of gradual realisation. This route will have them discern DeWitt's true agenda of coming to Columbia (his wish for forgiveness) and lead to the cathartic insight that the world as they know it is plagued by the delusive powers of ideologies and the supposed Utopias these create in their image. Such a wake-up call prompts the player to change her empirical surroundings in the same manner as it startles DeWitt at the game's end, when he wakes from his nightmare to hear Anna in the adjacent room. It is an ambiguous ending, which requires a self-sacrificing attitude from DeWitt in his struggle for Elizabeth, and evokes in the player the insight that it is not too late to affect change in the empirical world through selfless action.

To outline such an aesthetic response (which in this case is also ethical), BIOSHOCK INFINITE employs the strategies of *inversion/negation* to conjure up a *flux of images* in the player's mind. Thereby, utopian images pervade the scenery

1 Freud, *Dreams*.

initially, but the game gives subtle hints at another truth. This truth will be revealed more forcefully by further perspectives the player encounters and co-creates, only to negate it one more time when she reaches the game's end, to have the constructed images shown in an ambiguous light.

In the following, I will describe the perspectival arrangements that afford these images and contribute to their renegotiation. Thereby, important images include: the lighthouse and shining allure of Columbia, Monument Tower (a statue built to imprison Elizabeth), and the character relations between DeWitt/Comstock, Elizabeth/Anna, and her guardian, Songbird. In addition, there are two factions that struggle for supremacy in Columbia: the Founders and the revolutionary group of the Vox Populi. These gameworld and character perspectives are complemented by gameplay processes and interactions that fuel the player's acts of ideation. The strategies of inversion/negation affect gameplay in that the game begins with a leisure tour around Utopia to then expose this society's true nature by reappropriating tranquil spaces into a venue for combat and atrocities. All of these images are informed by the player's experience of DeWitt's anxiety dream, which buries the wish to save Elizabeth within all its distortions and doublings and the desire to re-attain Utopia.

To give the chapter a clear structure, it will be subdivided into five areas of investigation:

1. The first part will investigate the player's venture to and tour around the utopian city of Columbia and describe basic perspectival arrangements including the city's architecture, events, and potential player actions.
2. Second, I will focus on how the strategies of inversion and negation expose the dystopian nature of Columbia and lay bare its official narrative as DeWitt's struggle against a dark part of his self.
3. Third, I will explicate Elizabeth's process of realisation and the resultant counter-narrative. The young woman adopts the role of the temptress and will lead DeWitt and the player to seeing beyond the delusions of dominant ideologies.
4. Fourth, this process of realisation is guided by the factions of Columbia and how the characters and the player experience these. In addition, DeWitt's role in the game and his nightmarish delusions will be given further attention.
5. Finally, I will discuss *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*'s ambiguous ending in the context of the *BIOSHOCK* multiverse and its individual games (thereby addressing the first *BIOSHOCK* and *INFINITE*'s DLCs *BURIAL AT SEA: EPISODE 1* and *2*).

6.1 THE UTOPIA OF COLUMBIA AND BASIC BLANK STRUCTURES TO LURE IN THE PLAYER

When the player is introduced to the world of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*, she finds herself on a rowing boat towards an unknown destination. The sea is in turmoil, and the boat is steered by a lady and a gentlemen who are engaged in an argument about thought experiments. They hand DeWitt a box with his name on it and the regiment he served in: “7th Cavalry, Wounded Knee.”² In it he finds information about the job at hand—a gun, postcard, three symbols, a key, and a picture of a woman—while in the background the glaring of a lighthouse can be discerned. It is a mission briefing players have come to know from other games, yet its symbolism points to the dreamlike character of the events: to the repression of memories in the darkest regions of the protagonist’s unconscious but also to the key to redeem these, which is the struggle for Elizabeth and Utopia.

These initial perspective segments foreshadow the events that follow. They include the visual environment, character dialogue, in-game artefacts (such as signs and writings), the labyrinthine structure of the level, and player interactions. Between them several blanks emerge on the level of the *plot* and *gamework* and evoke questions in the player such as: where am I and for what purpose am I here? Who is the character I am playing and who is the woman in the picture?³ Consequently, already from the beginning, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*’s perspectival structure is meticulously designed and guides the player’s involvement in the game. Thereby, images on the level of *significance* are already given contours, and once the player reaches the lighthouse, the process continues when she knocks on the door and encounters a note that issues an unmistakable warning: “DeWitt – BRING US THE GIRL AND WIPE AWAY THE DEBT THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE!”⁴ Blood is smeared on the note, and, stepping through the door, religious symbols and writings complement the image.

The first sign in this respect is located in the player’s field of view upon entrance. It is situated above a basin and holds: “Of Thy Sins I Shall Wash Thee.”⁵ The player is able to glimpse DeWitt’s reflection in the water, which is followed by an upward camera movement towards the sign and the latter’s utterance: “Good luck with that, pal.”⁶ These perspective segments create an initial blank whose

2 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*, (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Lighthouse.

3 Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 252.

4 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*, (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Lighthouse.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

magnitude is opaque to the player and will be closed late in the game. They are self-referential, but the player will only understand them once she has composed an image of the plot and DeWitt's struggle for *forgiveness*. For now, the player's route continues upwards on a spiral stairway, where signs in the environment are highlighted by in-game lighting. These include further religious writings, such as "From Sodom Shall I Lead Thee" and "In New Eden Soil Shall I Plant Thee,"⁷ a map of Columbia's itinerary, and a corpse leaking blood. The initial image of the plot thus remains blurry, but it points to a dangerous yet exhilarating world.

Complementing this sense of wonder is the fact that the journey to Utopia begins with a *lighthouse*, which triggers imaginings about distant locations and a safe haven from the raging sea.⁸ In *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*, the lighthouse grants the player entrance to wondrous city in the sky and comes close in function to More's tower in Utopia in that it works "as a nexus, ... an entry point to all possible parallel worlds"⁹ in the storyworld of the game. For the player this insight remains to be uncovered in a *process of realisation* that will lead her from initial unawareness to seeing beyond the facades of the false Utopia of Columbia. Such a response is anchored in the game's structure, which guides the player through the strategies of *negation/inversion* of composed images. Thereby, the lighthouse assumes a pivotal role, since its positive image will fade and allow the player to discern the gameworld and empirical reality differently.

Before coming to this issue at the chapter's end, I wish to exemplify the route towards it, which continues when the player breaches the clouds into Columbia and is greeted with a magnificent view of the floating city. A gigantic angel's statue appears at the centre of the screen. It is surrounded by city districts illuminated by fireworks and the glaring sun. A mellow piano version of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (Charles H. Gabriel and Ada R. Habershon) is playing, underlining the serene panorama. It is as if the player has reached heaven, but one that was achieved by the marvels of quantum technology. An airship passes the player's way now as the capsule descends into the shadows of a tower. It is adorned with pieces of cloth designed in the style of the American flag, and one can discern a portrait of Father Comstock on it. Like a traveller in a stagecoach, who witnesses her surroundings from an observing point of view, the player is introduced to the

7 Ibid.

8 Nyman and Teten, "Lost and Found," 7-8; Andra Ivănescu, "The Music of Tomorrow, Yesterday! Music, Time and Technology in *BioShock Infinite*," *Time and Technology in Popular Culture, Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (July 2014): 53, <http://ojs.meccsa.org.uk/index.php/netknow/issue/view/34>

9 Ibid.

Columbian society. Thereby, important landmarks are brought into focus, since the player may only move the camera in a limited way while in the capsule. This linear route leads into the undergrounds of the Welcome Center, where the religious undertone is brought into the foreground. It is a first *inversion* from *brightness into darkness* that vaguely implies Columbia's true nature.

Upon entry, the pilgrim disembarks from the stagecoach to investigate Columbia's past and the story behind the prophet, and is sent on a linear journey to *baptism*. This religious tradition is a prerequisite to enter Columbia and represents a first "forced choice"¹⁰ that foreshadows the player's *lack of agency* in the game and the confinements of theocracy alike. What contributes to this sense of *aporia* is the game's linear structure, which largely follows the trajectory of a unicursal labyrinth. As such, the player is led past glorified graven images of Father Comstock and his wife Lady Annabel Comstock to the aforementioned baptism. The place is flooded with water, and candles are placed besides the streams, reminding one of a shrine in which the Utopians kneel before their prophet, while a gospel version of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* resounds through the halls.

Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, by and by?
Is a better home awaiting
In the sky, in the sky?¹¹

The song will reappear in the game in different versions. But whereas in the beginning it evokes imaginings about Utopia, during the game its image and the blank it creates will change, and the *circle to be unbroken* will assume a different addressee.

To enter the city, then, DeWitt undergoes *baptism*, and the preacher almost drowns him in the process. Here again, the dreamlike character of the events comes to the foreground, for it continues with a scene in DeWitt's office outside of Columbia. It is untidy place, littered with alcohol bottles, while the game is now depicted in black and white. A man is knocking on his door, with a reminder for DeWitt to fulfil their arrangements. When the player opens it, the scenery changes to the rooftops of New York City, where Columbia wages war against the Sodom below. DeWitt is hit by a rocket and awakes in the gardens of the flying city.

10 Robert Jackson, *BioShock: Decision, Forced Choice and Propaganda* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 193.

11 BIOSHOCK INFINITE, (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Welcome Center.

Given this introductory sequence (and what is to follow), *religion* (in the form of Christianity) and the dangers of *theocratic regimes* have often been deemed one of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*'s prime targets.¹² Frank Bosman, for instance, links Columbia to "a decadent and violent" version of John "Winthrop's idealistic city upon the hill,"¹³ which shows this concept in a perverted manner in direct extrapolation from our times.¹⁴ Still, one has to be careful in ascribing the role of the culprit to religion here—or "Christianity"¹⁵ in particular—and a precise investigation suggests a specific target. In this respect, Jan Wysocki argues that although religion in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* is depicted in a negative manner, it is rather its *use* that is blamed. Religion, in this sense, is used to marginalise the Other and as a justification for misanthropic behaviour. The aim of the Columbians is to build a pure form of Christianity exempt from the sinners of the Sodom below, and, therefore, the game's point of attack can rather be found in a protestant, evangelical-fundamentalist branch, which creates a sect-like microcosm in Columbia. This society combines characteristics of millennial groups, ultra-nationalism, and racism in the twisted world view of Father Comstock and his followers.¹⁶ For now, the player has only glimpsed at this truth, which will be extended by further analogies to the empirical world.

This implicit comparison to the player's empirical surroundings continues in a telling image after DeWitt awakes from the baptism. Three statues of the U.S. Founding Fathers—Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson—are worshipped by the Utopians. They hold the symbols of the *key*, *sword*, and *scroll*, which are symbolically passed over to the Utopians as a reminder of their great nation's values: *wisdom*, *courage*, and *righteousness*. The place is

12 Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 174; Nyman and Teten, "Lost and Found," 8; Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 241; Buinicki, "Nostalgia," 722; Lizardi, "BioShock;" Frank G. Bosman, "'The Lamb of Comstock'. Dystopia and Religion in Video Games," *Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014): 177, <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/12163>; Ryan F. Peters, "The Global Dystopian: Twenty-First Century Globalization, Terrorism, and Urban Destruction," (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2015), 124, http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1964/; Jan Wysocki, "Die Präsentation amerikanischer Religion im Spiel *BioShock Infinite* am Beispiel des Charakters des Propheten," (master's thesis, University of Heidelberg, 2014), 49, 60-61.

13 Bosman, "Lamb of Comstock," 177.

14 Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 241.

15 Bosman, "Lamb of Comstock," 177.

16 Wysocki, "Religion im Spiel *BioShock Infinite*," 26, 80-84.

called The Garden of New Eden and resembles “a refuge for believers”¹⁷ in which the Utopians immerse in prayers. It is a sterile paradise, linked to the glories of U.S. American history, whose linear route leads to a large door into the city. Upon entry, this bewildering marriage of *religious piety* and the *exceptionalism of a nation* (the United States’ unique position and supposed superiority in comparison to other nations) is fortified.¹⁸ For only slowly does the door open, granting the player a majestic vista on the district. It is a kernel event that follows the typical utopian plot “of an outsider coming to no-place.”¹⁹

As a stranger to an unfamiliar world, the player thus assumes the role of a tourist and is guided by the level’s labyrinthine structure in a linear fashion through a city district called New Eden Square. It is the annual celebration of Columbia’s and the Prophet’s magnificence, and the events remind the player of a “vision of America” that, as Ken Levine remarks, “a lot of politicians think existed. This perfectly idealised summer day”²⁰ and dream of “a simpler, more perfect society and time.”²¹ To outline such an image, the game organises its perspectives in a precise manner: from the docking of the city parts and cheerful Utopians, to a gigantic statue of Father Comstock and the dialogues that praise him. Meanwhile, a parade glorifies the city’s creation and presents the Comstock family in a religiously idealised way. It depicts the moment when the Archangel Columbia descended to the peasant Comstock with the task of building a city in the sky.²²

What follows from these observations is that the *stereotypical guide of the utopian narrative* is replaced by *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*’s discourse and perspectival

17 Nyman and Teten, “Lost and Found,” 10.

18 Wysocki, “Religion im Spiel *BioShock Infinite*,” 23, 47; Bosman, “Lamb of Comstock,” 175-176.

19 Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 239.

20 Colin Campbell, “The Big Ideas of *BioShock Infinite*: An in-depth look at Major Themes with Ken Levine and Shawn Robertson,” *IGN*, January 30, 2013, accessed March 7, 2014, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/01/30/the-big-ideas-of-bioshock-infinite>

21 Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 726.

22 See Wysocki’s *classification of Father Comstock’s roles* in the game: 1) as Moses, who leads the Israelites to the promised land; 2) as saint, for he is depicted in posters with an aureole; 3) as patriotic hero in a glorification of his deeds at the Boxer Rebellion; 4) as sect leader and omniscient father figure who enjoys the absolute loyalty of his followers; and 5) as a simple peasant to whom the Archangel of Columbia descended (see above). (Wysocki, “Religion im Spiel *BioShock Infinite*,” 64-70).

arrangements. In this way, the game's strategies create *a positive image* of Columbia that is reinforced by the city's pompous architecture and how the game channels the player through it. Thereby, it is no coincidence that the experience of Columbia evokes reminders of the great World Fairs of the late 19th and early 20th century, and specifically of the *World's Columbian Exposition* in 1893.²³ The Chicago World's Fair, as it is also known, was initially built to celebrate the anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the 'new world' in 1492, and became a symbol of American extravagance. Of specific interest in this regard is the visitor's tour through the White City, which begins with a trip to the island on a steamer and progresses further in a linear fashion through it. Right away, visitors are greeted with striking vistas that conjure up a sense of the exceptional, which is intensified in that their vantage points are low compared to the enormous buildings and statues that surround them.²⁴

Such a strategy to guide the visitors in an exhilarating manner is also common to theme parks, and *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* takes both examples as inspiration. In contrast to the real-world fairs, however, the steampunk world of Columbia is a floating one, designed as an ecology in itself: a Utopia "of spatial exceptionalism from the discursive norms below."²⁵ This extravaganza is now experienced by the player, whose imagination²⁶ is guided around the city and whose ergodic actions are evoked by the gameworld affordances. The *range of potential interactions*, thereby, includes: the movement within a unicursal labyrinth, which at times opens up to a multicursal one; talking to the Utopians (NPCs), investigating shops, buying, stealing, or picking up objects such as food or Silver Eagles (Columbia's currency). Moreover, the player may watch kinetoscope films about Columbia's past, listen to Voxophones (which are recorded by Columbia's citizens and include personal stories or information about the city), or participate in the activities at the ongoing Raffle and Fair.

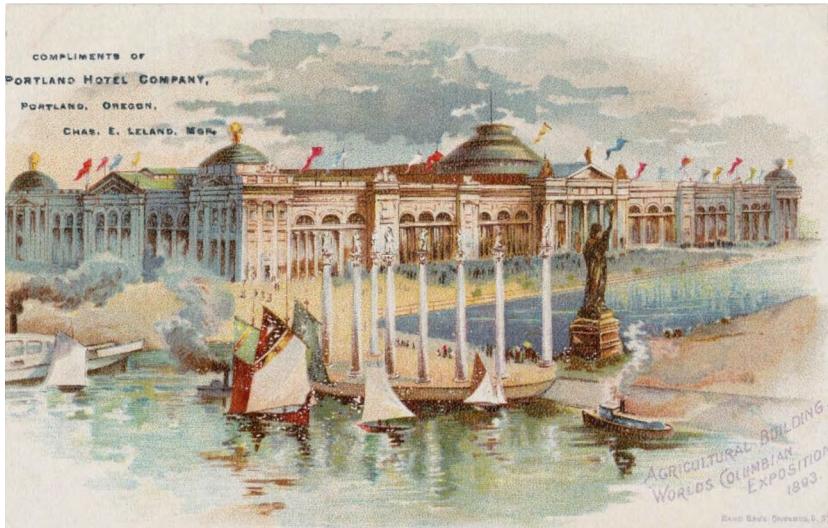
23 Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 171-173; Peters, "Global Dystopian," 123-125.

24 Norman Bolotin and Christine Laing, *The World's Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 29, 34-36.

25 Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 167; cf. 167.

26 Lange underlines the imaginative evoking force of the *BIOSHOCK* games, which requires an aesthetic-symbolic interpretation from the player. (Carsten Lange, ">>Der Freie hat die Wahl, der Sklave gehorcht.<< Entscheidungsfreiheit und Determinismus in *BioShock* und *BioShock Infinite*," in >>*I'll remember this*<< *Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel* (Boizenburg: Werner Hülsbusch, 2016), 107).

Figure 19: Columbia takes inspiration from the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893. Especially Monument Tower, its design, and the perspectives on it, is inspired by the Statue of the Republic.



Agricultural Building at the World's Columbian Exposition.

Given the pleasures of these interactions and the extravagance of the Columbian architecture, the image of Columbia's magnificence is easily evoked. These perspective segments are complemented by the level's labyrinthine structure that leads the player through a narrow gamespace but, nonetheless, evokes the sensation of large open spaces. Such a strategy is common to the creation of game-worlds and links them to utopian architecture, which usually contrasts "small, restricted spaces of work and living"²⁷ to "massive public spaces dominated by the regimes ideology."²⁸ *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* makes use of this method and accentuates the seemingly open spaces through vibrant colours and intense lighting from the sun. According to Levine, this follows the purpose of depicting "a world that's ... bold and ... idealized,"²⁹ which makes it reminiscent of the great public spaces

27 Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011): 113.

28 Ibid., 114.

29 Campbell, "Big Ideas of *BioShock Infinite*."

in ancient Rome that “were designed to impress if not overwhelm, to wed religious, political and military symbols and, above all, to inspire patriotism.”³⁰ The result is an experience of extravagance that in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* is magnified through gigantic buildings situated on miniature islands, oversized statues, or balloons of the Founding Fathers. The player’s POV is thereby similar to that of the visitors to the World’s Columbian Exposition, which creates a feeling of *insignificance* within the confines of the unicursal labyrinth.

Of particular interest in terms of architecture is *Monument Tower*, a colossal statue that was built in the image of the Archangel Columbia. It can be seen from nearly any part of the city and functions as a symbol of hope for the Utopians, for it harbours *The Miracle Child* who shall lead Columbia to greatness. Especially in the game’s early hours, the tower is foregrounded to the player in stylised ways: when she turns a corner or moves through a narrow alley, Monument Tower bombastically re-enters her field of view. Such a presentation of important buildings is known to the tourist in cities like London or the theme park visitor, who are equally surprised when they catch an unexpected view of the Palace of Westminster or Cinderella’s Castle in Disney World—the latter which is visible to the visitor from many vantage points and functions as a landmark for orientation. Monument Tower exhibits a similar function and facilitates the player’s orientation in that it is situated higher than any other buildings in the game and appears larger than it actually is.³¹

As such, the guiding function of Monument Tower helps the player to reach the macro goal of finding Elizabeth—yet its most prominent function is yet to be revealed. Even at this point in the game, it is inevitable that the player connects Monument Tower to similar architecture in the empirical world: whether these include the Statue of the Republic—the main attraction at the World’s Columbian Exposition³²—or better known symbols such as the Statue of Liberty. Most of these inspire hope and the promise of freedom, and it would not be unfair to claim that the libertarian symbolism in Columbia prevails at this moment of play and plunges the city behind the veil of a Utopia. This insight has been contoured by various images in the player’s mind: from the lighthouse that granted her entrance to a safe haven and taking pleasures in the extravagance of the city, to a noble mission to save a damsel in distress, and the entralling vistas of Monument Tower. Still, despite all the utopian beauty of these initial sections, the images

30 Claeys, *Searching for Utopia*, 115.

31 Campbell, “Big Ideas of *BioShock Infinite*.”

32 Bolotin and Laing, *World’s Columbian Exposition*, 62.

created are fragile. Subtle clues point at another truth, and the player may suspect that there is something wrong in this candy wonderland.

6.2 THE SHADOWS OF UTOPIA: STRATEGIES OF DISNEYFICATION AND THE CAPITALIST-RACIST DYSTOPIA OF COLUMBIA

There is a general consensus among scholars³³ that it does not take long for the player to recognise that in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* “[t]he dystopian lurks in the shadows and fault lines of the utopian.”³⁴ I have already described certain clues in the first levels that point in this direction, and the *image of dystopia* continues to foster itself in a part of the city called New Eden Square. Here, the player may eavesdrop on conversations that stain the city’s immaculate veil. Two examples of such are a couple staring at Comstock’s statue with the woman exclaiming: “Hmm. Oh that statue ... I just think it fails to capture Father Comstock’s absolute ... you know ... divinity”, while a mother on a picnic with her son teaches him a lesson in discipline: “‘Like’ does not matter to a Liberty Scout. There’s no room for preference, only ‘duty’.”³⁵ Even though these perspective segments are satellite events, they give the player hints about Columbia’s true nature, in which strict *order* and a religiously inspired *racism*³⁶ dominate the scenery and where the ideological infatuation can be discerned in the *paralysis of the NPCs* after they speak their lines.

This discovery continues when the player reaches the *fairground* and in a playful manner glances behind its shimmering façade. The fair is all a child can hope for, and the adult Utopians are also savouring the ambiance. A multicursal labyrinth now awaits the player, in which she may move around freely, marvel at the attractions, and give some a try. The fairground thus first of all functions as a *tutorial* for the game, where the player is introduced to the world of Columbia and

33 Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 115, 124, 126; Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 725, 728; Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 241-242.

34 Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 126.

35 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Raffle Square.

36 Racism is another target of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* that has been widely acknowledged by scholars. For example: Lange, “Der Freie hat die Wahl,” 107; Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 197; Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 726; Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 124; Wysocki, “Religion im Spiel *BioShock Infinite*,” 49-50.

key game mechanics. There are, for example, automatons to illuminate the technical sophistications of this steampunk world such as mechanical horses or a Handyman—a physically enhanced human being. In addition, the functionality of Voxophones is explained and fairground games invite the player to participate—such as *Cast out the Devil*, where the *Vigor* Bucking Bronco can be tested in a game to save a mother and her child from a devil. To do so, the player uses the ability to airburst the devil from his hiding place and, if successful, is awarded a prize. Vigors are a key game mechanic and a cornerstone of Columbia's scientific marvels. They are advertised by posters³⁷ and endow the PC with biotic abilities such as freezing parts of the gameworld, spitting fire on enemies, or intruding into their minds to have them turn on each other.

Another game worth mentioning is *Hunt Down the Vox*. At this moment of play, the player has heard of a revolutionary group called the *Vox Populi*, who cause unrest in the 'peaceful' society.³⁸ The *Vox Populi*, as the player will learn, constitute the working class of Columbia and is comprised of immigrants from Ireland, Asia, Africa, as well as Native Americans. They are disregarded by the general, white population—*The Founders*—and this mistrust of the Other reaches the Utopians as children. Consequently, by participating in the fairground shooting gallery (*Hunt-Down-The-Vox*), the player creates a perspective on the scenario that, when combined with the remaining perspectives of the fairground, grants her insight into the gameworld's mechanisms. The game resembles an eerie fairy tale where the Vox are hiding in a dark forest. For every hit the player receives points, and now and then the leader of the Vox and 'anarchist' Daisy Fitzroy emerges. Shooting her down grants the player bonus points, which will raise the amount of Silver Eagles she receives as a prize.

As a result, the experience at the fairground gives rise to the contours of an important image and involves the player in a game of estrangement. This image not only familiarises her with the shooting mechanics of the game, but it also fosters an *enemy image* of the Vox through the challenging yet pleasurable encounter. The leaders of Columbian society, so it seems, are teaching their citizens who are the 'good' and 'bad' guys from an early age through playful interactions. These

37 The advertising is a first hint at the *Vigor industry* the player will come to see later. (Buinicki, "Nostalgia," 725).

38 Two hints and perspective segments of the Vox can be found by the player if she overhears two conversations at New Eden Square. In one, there is a woman enquiring about the meaning of the term *Vox Populi*. She quickly loses interest when her husband claims that it is a Latin term. Meanwhile, another couple describes the Vox as brutal savages who attack the peaceful Columbians and with whom one cannot reason.

run the risk of remaining unquestioned by the Utopians and the player alike, because of their pleasurable nature. As such, the game puts such an attitude in perspective and targets the *gamist and achiever player type*, who is interested in achieving the game's goals and gathering points in an efficient manner. This playing style is afforded by the game through its possibilities for action and induces the player to participate in pleasurable combat and scavenging for items. Yet it also creates a perspective on the gameworld that is important for the creation of those images that expose the game's major themes such as humankind's complicity in capitalism and racist atrocities. This form of estrangement through play may go unnoticed by the player if she does not question the agenda behind such processes—but if deciphered in acts of ideation, it makes a lasting impression on her.

Consequently, the player may come to the conclusion that the *scapegoating of societal problems to the Vox* develops between the glamour foregrounded by the game. It is hidden within the satirical nature of the Raffle and Fair section and also comes to the fore in propaganda posters, which alternate between religious, racist, and capitalist symbolism. In addition, the aforementioned statues are reminiscent of Orwell's Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the Voxophone and kinetoscope messages/films incrementally reveal Columbia's past.³⁹ Hence, the player steadily gains insight into the dystopian nature of this world by interacting with both the *gameworld's present and past* that uncovers a sinister ideology.⁴⁰

In this manner, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* fulfils the criteria of the critical dystopia as it illuminates the origins of dystopia and exposes the gameworld for what it is. It then combines this layer with present affairs and induces the player to weave connections to her empirical surroundings through acts of ideation. Thereby, the above-mentioned technique of estrangement is employed in a creative fashion. It aggravates the referentiality of the fictional to the empirical world and coaxes the player through enticing gameplay in “a vast capitalist dream machine dedicated to colonizing the imagination in the interest of the maintenance of the status quo.”⁴¹ This claim rests on the observation of the fairground processes and the capitalist-authoritarian agenda behind them, which might go unnoticed by players, for they are generally accustomed to certain gameplay conventions that they conduct automatically. For example, having arrived in Columbia, the player is tempted by the shimmering sight of Silver Eagles or other flickering objects such as food supplies and ammunition. She picks them up to satisfy her need for scavenging and

39 Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 174, 197, 199-201; Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 242, 250-251.

40 Ibid., 250-251.

41 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 231.

uses the currency to participate in the attractions. She *playfully consumes* without questioning the dehumanising industry behind these façades—buying Vigors, health, ammunition, or other utensils from vending machines—and has become victim of what Suvin calls the strategy of *Disneyfication*: this “case of a dystopian misuse of eutopian images,” to be found in “the edulcorated fables and fairy tales of Disneyland.”⁴² These resemble “a privileged *pars pro toto* of the capitalist and especially U.S. admass brainwash”⁴³ and can be regarded as “a shaping of *affective investment* into *commodifying which reduces the mind to infantilism*.”⁴⁴

BIOSHOCK INFINITE employs this strategy to the fullest and involves the player in interactions that mitigate the critical nature of the experience but which, at the same time, create a vital perspective on the gameworld. To do so, the game aligns the mechanisms of gameplay to those of people’s daily routines in a *capitalist/consumerist*⁴⁵ world such as buying food or goods without questioning their origins. It does so in a distorted manner, however, by hiding these empirical world processes in gameplay activities like scavenging or combat interactions. The result is a form of *estrangement through play* that is critical to bringing out the VGD’s warning and the novelty a work of art promises.

6.2.1 From a Peaceful Visit to Utopia to a Brutal Escape from Dystopia

Whereas initially, BIOSHOCK INFINITE involved the player in subtle games of estrangement, it will soon become more obvious in the *negation of utopian images*. At the Raffle and Fair only a few perspectives conjured up the *image of dystopia* in the player’s mind, and the game did so by involving the player in a defamiliarised theme park of capitalist excess. This truth will become more obvious now and is fortified through an *inversion in terms of gameplay* that is about to occur at the raffle. The route there prepares the player for it and continues to foster an image

42 Suvin, “Theses,” 194.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 195.

45 Other scholars who have implicitly or explicitly seen *capitalism* and *consumerism* as a target in BIOSHOCK INFINITE include: Lizardi, “BioShock,” 9; Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 171-172; Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 126, 129; Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 250; Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 725.

that has been subject to heated debate in the *BIOSHOCK* games: the player's *lack of agency* and the issue of *determinism*.⁴⁶

After the baptism, the player is shrouded in a veil of agency while exploring the fairground and interacting with the attractions. This sense of freedom is about to be negated more forcefully, when the player again encounters the lady and the gentleman. These will later be unmasked as the Lutece twins (Rosalind and Robert), and they invite DeWitt to participate in a game of *heads or tails* whose outcome will always be the same. To proceed in the level, the player's sole choice is to press the square button on the PlayStation 4 gamepad to have DeWitt choose tails. The result of the coin flip will be heads, however, no matter how often the player replays this section. In addition, the many strokes on Robert's chalkboard suggest that this was and will always be the sole result, implying that DeWitt has taken this journey many times before.⁴⁷ Combining these perspectives and closing the blanks between them, the player may view her previous interactions (and those that are to come) differently, and in terms of *aporia*. What complements this image is that the scene is presented hilariously, and it is fair to say that the Lutece twins are the game's most powerful satirical element. Whenever the player meets them, the music changes to a stand-up comedy tune, and their dialogue suggests they are playing a game of their own with DeWitt.

Having completed this event, the player's route continues towards the raffle and is guided by a chanting crowd. A poster is placed in the middle of an alley. It shows the devil's hand and warns of a False Shepherd by the mark *AD*: an abbreviation of the Latin term *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God.⁴⁸ When approaching it, DeWitt raises his right hand, and the player can discern the same mark on it. As such, the event not only forebodes the plot twist later in the game, where Elizabeth is revealed to be DeWitt's daughter, Anna, but it also foregrounds the dreamlike nature of the game. This *surreal impression* will intensify once the player reaches the raffle, where she is surrounded by a crowd whose eyes centre on her. A woman winks DeWitt over now. She distributes the lottery baseballs to have him pick the winning number 77. It is a divine number, sometimes connected to Jesus Christ or to the 77 generations that, according to the Lucan genealogy of the New Testament

46 Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 191-193; Lizardi, "BioShock," 10-11; Peters, "Global Dystopian," 119; Maziarczyk, "Playable Dystopia," 251; Lange, "Der Freie hat die Wahl," 120-121.

47 Lange, "Der Freie hat die Wahl," 120.

48 Bosman, "Lamb of Comstock," 177.

(the Books of Enoch), were necessary to pass from Adam to Jesus.⁴⁹ Shortly after, the announcer (Jeremiah Fink) rewards DeWitt with the first throw at an interracial couple. They are strapped to poles, and the stage scenery includes monkeys hanging from a tree and an ape version of Abraham Lincoln decorating the background.

Evidently, the event exposes the *racist undertone* of the Columbian society, its “xenophobia and elitism”⁵⁰ and paves the way to a more *fundamental inversion in terms of gameplay*. To do so, it confronts the player with the choice to throw the baseball at the interracial couple or Fink himself. Such a choice is more obvious than whether to participate in the Hunt-Down-the-Vox game, and has long-term consequences, however minor they may seem. For if the player throws the baseball at Fink, she will meet the couple later in the game and they will express their gratitude. In any case, the player is able to express herself through ergodic action, and this potentially develops the *emergence of a counter-narrative* to an ever-clearer image of dystopia.

Thus far, the *official narrative* of the Columbian society has remained in the shadows, but with DeWitt’s intervention at the raffle and his exposure as the False Shepherd, an outburst of violence marks the scene. This *inversion of the use of gamespace* turns the multicursal labyrinth into a *battlefield* and changes the range of actions the player may perform—which have come a long way from the leisure tour around Utopia and the playful interactions at the fairground. They now cater to a brutal skirmish and include the use of the Sky-Hook, a device that enables the player to melee attack opponents and use the Sky-Lines. In addition, firearms are now at the player’s disposal, and the gamespace is littered with items such as health, ammunition, or Salt (a substance to recharge the Vigors, and a religiously inspired term). It is this standard equipment of first-person shooters that transforms the scenery and gameplay processes into a venue of intensity, scavenging, and combat. Diverse combat strategies are thereby available to the player, as the Sky-Lines, melee attacks, firearms, and Vigors can be used in various combinations. Moreover, vicious enemies, like the Firemen, now plunge the streets of Columbia into a burning chaos. They are reminiscent of Bradbury’s eponymous characters in *Fahrenheit 451*, as their agenda is contrary to their job description.

What follows from this inversion of *gameplay and the use of space* is that the player becomes overtly involved in an *official narrative*. She is only about 40-60

49 Paul C. Schnieders, *The Books of Enoch: Complete Edition*, trans. Robert H. Charles (Las Vegas: International Alliance Pro Publishing, 2012), ch. 10.

50 Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 125; cf. 125-126; Lange, “Der Freie hat die Wahl,” 121; Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 726-727.

minutes into the game (with a total length of approximately 15 hours), yet her imaginings have already been subjected to a rollercoaster ride, as the horizon of past perspectives and creation of images are continually revised. The blanks closed thereby inspire the player's actions and result in a wandering between sensorial impressions and ergodic actions, themes and horizons.

6.2.2 Saving the Damsel in Distress: DeWitt's Unconscious Struggle for Forgiveness

I now wish to continue with the player's first encounter with Elizabeth and the events leading up to it. Meeting the young woman is a kernel event in the ongoing plot and on the conceptual level of DeWitt's unconscious struggle for forgiveness. This struggle primarily involves two levels: 1) a *personal* one in which DeWitt seeks forgiveness for the agonies he exposed Anna to and 2) a *universalised* one that revolves around his guilt about having lost Utopia by participating in the racial atrocities of Wounded Knee.

In this regard, it is no accident that the path leading towards Elizabeth is accentuated with marvellous vistas of Monument Tower, which, as the player comes closer, gains in pomposness. It is not easy to get there, since police forces are gathering to stop the False Shepherd. One microcosm the player has to pass here is *The Fraternal Order of the Raven*, Columbia's version of the Ku Klux Klan and its darkest underground operation.⁵¹ The experience there makes explicit what the player's imaginings have implied before, and sets in context the worship of the Founding Fathers. While inside the Order, the player encounters a sombre location and organisation whose purpose is the protection of the white race. There are hints at a rejection of Native Americans and experiments in phrenology, while in one room, a portrait of a figure resembling the devil awaits discovery. On closer inspection, the player may discern Abraham Lincoln, because of the recognisable hat. This perspective segment is complemented by a statue of John Wilkes Booth, the known murderer of the former president, who is presented in a glorifying pose: outstretched forearm and a gun in his hands.

Closing the blanks between these perspectives, the player might come to the conclusion that the game creates a *reversal of the positive myth around Lincoln*, which explains the pompous image of the Founding Fathers. For from the Columbian view, it was Lincoln who accepted the risks of war in a heretic attempt to abolish slavery.⁵² The attentive player comes to see this *distortion of history* and

51 Wysocki, "Religion im Spiel *BioShock Infinite*," 44, 84.

52 Ibid., 44.

the racist perspective on it, while a Voxophone message by Father Comstock gives further context.

What exactly was the Great Emancipator emancipating the Negro from? From his daily bread? From the nobility of honest work? From wealthy patrons who sponsored them from the cradle to grave? From clothing and shelter? And what have they done with their freedom? Why, go to Finkton, and you shall find out. No animal is born free, except for the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation.⁵³

Demonising Lincoln in this manner and having the Founding Fathers worshipped by the Utopians places the latter under a negative image and construes them as antagonists. It is as Lizardi and Buinicki hold: in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* “accepted and beloved icons of US history are called into question because of their complex backgrounds, such as the game’s transformation of the images of Washington and Lincoln into violent religious icons.”⁵⁴ This inversion interrogates “the construction of history itself” and reveals “the dystopic quality of US history ..., its violence concealed beneath conventional imagery of patriotism and nationalist mythology.”⁵⁵

Guiding the player’s imaginings in such a way and confronting her with a brutal regime fuels the urge to save Elizabeth even before she meets the young woman. To reach her, the player needs to take Sky-Lines to Monument Island. These ensure rapid transportation, and the police forces are using them to pursue DeWitt. As a result, the player becomes involved in hectic combat on a linear route upwards or in three-dimensional multicursal arenas, which at times disrupts the unicursal labyrinth. Moreover, barricades are placed in strategic positions to hinder her progress, and these perspectival arrangements allow a certain interpretation of the events, especially if taken up from a psychoanalytical point of view.

In Freud’s deliberations on the night-time dream, the Austrian psychoanalyst describes the formation of dreams originating in the human *unconscious* to then chart their way to perceptibility. It is reached once the *dream-thoughts* (the original *wish*) arrive in the human *consciousness*, but the route there is plastered with hurdles and disruptions. This is because a filtering apparatus, the *preconscious*, ensures the dreamer’s sanity from repressed memories—and so the original wish needs to undergo distortion in order to pass said barrier (see chapter I).⁵⁶ In

53 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Comstock Center Rooftops.

54 Lizardi, “*BioShock*,” 9.

55 Buinicki, “*Nostalgia*,” 723.

56 Freud, *Dreams*, 382-383, 410, 415.

BIOSHOCK INFINITE it is known that DeWitt struggles from past deeds as a soldier of the 7th Cavalry, where he took part in the massacre at Wounded Knee, and as a Pinkerton agent. He buried these memories through alcoholism, which is what supposedly led him to give away his daughter, because of accumulated gambling debts. During the game events, DeWitt is initially unaware of these wrongdoings, and only a few soliloquies hint at another conclusion, which points to a *repression* of past deeds.

Participating in the game events, the player will thus explore DeWitt's unconscious and uncover the *wish* together with her PC. The result is a creative use of the dystopian narrative's process of realisation, which can be linked to the *interpretation of DeWitt's nightmarish delusions* stemming from the previously described neurosis. The original wish behind them is opaque, and the *dream-work*—which distorts the original wish and turns it into the perceptible *dream-content*—hinders the player's progression *and* coming to awareness.⁵⁷ Consequently, the hurdles and combat she encountered before (and will continue to encounter) prevent the player and DeWitt from unmasking the latter's well-hidden secrets. Naturally, they also function as ludic obstacles, but in doing so, they conjure up images on the level of significance.

One of these is an exploration of DeWitt's past as a mercenary, whereby the player engages in violent combat processes herself. She thus assumes the role of mass-murderer DeWitt, who always puts his mission objective first. Such a perspective specifically comes to the fore when the game is approached with the attitude of a gamist or achiever, who strives to attain their game goals most efficiently. This player may fall prey to the pleasures of combat and scavenging, without having in mind the greater picture, and, therefore, runs the risk of an uncritical playthrough and succumbing to the trap of mass media entertainment.⁵⁸

To evade such a pitfall, BIOSHOCK INFINITE offers the player several perspectives that lay a different light on the combat processes. This occurs, for example, when Comstock accuses DeWitt of his wrongdoings. It is an eerie scene in which the prophet orders his followers to stand down to then appear on a projector. To trigger the event and to uncover the truth behind the dream-content, the player has to pull a lever.

57 Ibid., 169, 351.

58 Equally, *narrative* or *wanderer* player types, who engage with the game to explore its gameworld and plot, may downplay the importance of the combat processes and scavenging perspectives.

I know why you've come, False Shepherd. I see every sin that blackens your soul. Wounded Knee. The Pinkertons. The drinking. The gambling. And, of course, Anna. And now, to repay your debt, you've come for my lamb. But not all debts can be repaid, Booker ...

What brought you to Columbia, Booker? 'Bring us the girl and wipe away the debt?' This will end in blood, DeWitt. But then again, it always does with you, doesn't it?⁵⁹

Comstock, so it seems, knows about DeWitt's sins. Intuitively, this knowledge could be explained with the player believing Comstock to be a prophet, but paying attention to the gameworld events enables a more appropriate conclusion. In this scenario, DeWitt and Comstock are one and the same person existing in different universes, and DeWitt is addressed by a *repressed part of his own self*. Although the game implicitly plays with such a conclusion, DeWitt fails to acknowledge this truth for now—and so, potentially, does the player.⁶⁰

Step by step, a more comprehensive image of DeWitt's struggle for *forgiveness* emerges and paves the way to the encounter with Elizabeth. The young woman will later turn out to be DeWitt's daughter, but neither of the two (nor the player) can know about this at this moment of play. As such, the encounter forebodes an image that deals with *the culpability of the father towards his daughter*.⁶¹ This fact can be explained in that DeWitt gave Anna away to wipe away his gambling debts, while Comstock imprisoned Elizabeth in a tower. Such a constellation leads back to Freud's deliberations on the night-time dream, who describes the original wish, "existing in repression," to be "of infantile origin."⁶² The child's relation to its parents thus becomes the focus of investigation, in particular the

59 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Comstock Center Rooftops.

60 Another example are the events surrounding Comstock's speech, where the player may create an additional perspective on the described scenario. Once Comstock's voice appeared through the loudspeakers, the enemies in the area kneeled down before their prophet and started praying to the Founding Fathers. Being astounded by the sudden lack of challenge, the player now has the possibility to walk past them or execute them most brutally. The Utopians will not resist in the latter case, showing the player how far these people might go for their beliefs. Moreover, this action creates an important perspective on DeWitt and the player, because they have become complicit in the slaughter of defenceless people, similar to how DeWitt solved the issues at Wounded Knee and as a Pinkerton agent.

61 Lange, "Der Freie hat die Wahl," 119.

62 Freud, *Dreams*, 392.

son's relation to his mother and the daughter's to her father.⁶³ However, when extended with Ferns and Jameson's deliberations (see chapter I), there is a *more fundamental repression* at work here. It can be vindicated by the game's upcoming events and revolves around *humankind's yearning for Utopia*. Consequently, to decipher the wish's true nature and to uncover DeWitt's neurosis, the player embarks into the depths of her PC's unconscious—not only to playfully enact this struggle for Utopia but also to awaken from the false dreams of ideology herself.

This gradual journey to aesthetic response continues once the player arrives at Monument Tower and encounters a sealed-off area resembling a version of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. As before, barricades hinder the player's progression, and signs warn about the interaction with a specimen. It is as if a dark secret lies hidden within the tower, and its inside confirms the worst imaginings. The place is littered with medical equipment and suggests that experiments on test subjects, particularly Elizabeth, have been conducted. In fact, the player is given a comprehensive introduction to the young woman before she meets her. There are projector films that documented Elizabeth's steps—while she was dancing or trying to lock pick her way out of her imprisonment—and a large blackboard illustrates Elizabeth's morphology from ages one to seventeen.

The player may ponder the reasons for Elizabeth's imprisonment as she penetrates further into the tower. It fortifies the negative, mysterious image of the Columbian society and points to Elizabeth's importance (or danger) to the ruling ideology. It is thereby striking that the place is deserted, as if DeWitt would have disabled the dream-work's defence mechanisms that bury the secret behind them. Given this *semantic charging*, it is little wonder that in a second playthrough, the closing of the blanks works differently here. For the player has now accumulated enough information about DeWitt and Elizabeth to see the tower's true function, which refers to the cruelties an alcohol-addicted father may inflict on his newborn child. In fact, it would seem that DeWitt here visualises his own *manifestation of guilt* and the agonies he exposed Anna to. These come under the guise of an angel's statue and eventually pave the way to the charming encounter with the young woman and the inception of her complex coming-of-age story.

The moment the player meets Elizabeth is perfectly staged. Once DeWitt arrives in the Specimen Observation Room and pulls the lever, the iron curtain is raised and rewards the player with a glance at the young woman. Elizabeth is in

63 In this sense, the events of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* could be interpreted as Elizabeth's unconscious wish for paternal security. This is expressed by her desire to go to Paris and see the Eiffel Tower (a phallic symbol *par excellence*), while it hides a struggle for emancipation from such wishes.

the Dressing Room, looking at herself in the mirror and immersed in reveries about Paris. She runs off, and the player follows her to a place where a child's drawings of a bird and a further painting of the Eiffel Tower decorate the walls. Elizabeth opens a *tear* now, a dimensional window into another period and time, and finds herself in the Paris of the future. As the player will soon find out, the young woman resembles what Peters calls a "cyborg,"⁶⁴ equipped with *posthuman abilities* that will be revealed as *wish-fulfilments*. For the moment, however, the player meets a literate young woman who is vulnerable and innocent yet enthusiastic about discovering the world outside the tower. She thus resembles one of Disney's princesses, such as Rapunzel or Cinderella, who were also imprisoned by a family member.

The scene culminates in Elizabeth's and DeWitt's escape from Movement Island, which marks the beginning of their getaway from dystopia. It is a turbulent ride in which the two are pursued by Elizabeth's guardian *Songbird*, a large mechanical automaton. Elizabeth has a special relation to *Songbird*, who is both her friend and jailer—and this constellation gives rise to the inception of an image that, according to Lange, revolves around the thought experiment of uniting two contrary aspects or persons.⁶⁵ In this respect, the imagery of *the canary and the cage* and its inversion in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* becomes of importance. For the player has experienced the twisted relation between Elizabeth and *Songbird*—with the woman caged up in the angel's tower, while the canary makes his rounds in the Columbian skies to guard the ruling ideology's secret.⁶⁶

As such, the created image is of semantic ambiguity, and Elizabeth's tower and her relation to *Songbird* assume the role of *floating signifiers*. From the symbol of hope in the beginning of the game to a place of imprisonment, and to a manifestation of another father figure who lovingly encages his daughter in the ramifications of parental failures, narcissistic hubris, or alcohol abuse. Once the player closes the blanks here, a strong connection between *Songbird*, DeWitt, and Comstock is created. These imaginings notwithstanding, the tower's semantic range is far from exhausted, and its most prominent point of reference has yet to be established. This image is closely linked to Elizabeth's attempts to lock pick

64 Peters, "Global Dystopian," 130.

65 Lange, "Der Freie hat die Wahl," 105-124.

66 Peters, "Global Dystopian," 121-122; Toh Weimin, "The Limits of the Evolution of Female Characters in the *BioShock* Franchise," *Proceedings of DiGRA 2015: Diversity of Play: Games – Cultures – Identities* 12 (2015): 12-13, <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-limits-of-the-evolution-of-female-characters-in-the-bioshock-franchise/>

her way out of her imprisonment and manifests itself not only in the attempt to free herself from father figures—as some critics have suggested⁶⁷—but also in the emancipation from the machinations of ruling ideologies and from the iron cage of Anti-Utopia.

Such a conclusion illustrates and underscores the diversity of the blank in its function. Various meanings emerged from the perspectival constellations on the level of the plot and significance, which differ in a second playthrough. This may come as a surprise to the player—because one is not always specifically aware of semantic ambiguity at first glimpse—and leads to the conclusion that the closing of the blanks offers fuel to the player’s process of realisation. Consequently, through its complex structures, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* bewilders the player yet guides her towards aesthetic response. For there are manifold ways one can construe the events so far, and the game will continue this semantic ride until its end.

6.3 ELIZABETH AS THE FIGURE OF THE TEMPTRESS AND HER PROCESS OF EMANCIPATION

Before jumping ahead to the game’s point of convergence, I wish to further illustrate *Elizabeth’s* role, who designates a fundamental perspective for the player’s acts of ideation. Once outside the tower and at a safe distance from Songbird, Elizabeth is eager to explore the new and unfamiliar world.⁶⁸ This curiosity marks the inception of a *realisation process* that will affect not only the young woman but also leave its mark on the player, who is taking on the role of DeWitt. Scholars have described Elizabeth’s role in this regard as one that shows “significant character development”⁶⁹ from *insecurity* to *capacity/tenacity* in a struggle for emancipation that will lead the young woman to see “with greater clarity the world around her; in particular … *the wires of the cages* working together to form a system of dominance.”⁷⁰

67 Ibid., 12; Catlyn Origitano, “‘The Cage is Somber’: A Feminist Understanding of Elizabeth,” in *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*. Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, edited by Luke Cuddy (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 40-41.

68 Ibid., 43.

69 Weimin, “Limits of the Evolution,” 13.

70 Origitano. “Cage is Somber,” 45; emphasis mine; cf. 41-45; Weimin, “Limits of the Evolution,” 10-11; Franziska Ascher, “Es gibt immer einen Leuchtturm …” *Paidia: Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung* (2013): 7, <http://www.paidia.de/?p=2499>

In the following, I will thus describe Elizabeth's diverse roles, which revolve around ludic, narrative, and emotional characteristics, and the emancipatory task of *freeing herself from the confinements of ideological structures and the sweetened images these employ to hide their agendas*. This relentless struggle for Utopia will lead Elizabeth from initial naiveté to enlightenment, to seeing beyond the falsifications and unspoken truths of the fictional reality. In doing so, she offers the player an *affordance and appeal structure* the latter may accept or decline, but which may affect her judgement of empirical reality. For the player has experienced a distorted version of it in the game events and has witnessed Elizabeth's reactions to the ideologies they encountered. As such, the charming young woman assumes the *role of the temptress*, who seduces the player to certain imaginings and ergodic actions within and outside the diegesis.

For Elizabeth, this process of realisation begins with the flight from Songbird, who is tearing down Monument Tower. It is a hectic scene characterised by a rapid descent on the Sky-Lines and Elizabeth and DeWitt falling into the depths of an ocean region. A brief interlude in DeWitt's office once more highlights the dream-like character of the events—since in dreams, one tends to awake after intense sections, such as falling or drowning. When the game returns to Columbia, DeWitt is swept to the shores of Battleship Bay, an artificial beach and place of leisure for the Utopians. Battleship Bay is part of a larger array of mini-islands that form the amusement district Soldier's Field. Upon entry to Battleship Bay, the player encounters a gateway to the beach in the form of a turtle head, while the Utopians are engaged in activities such as relaxation, sports, dance, or flirtation. Elizabeth is fond of these activities and invites DeWitt to dance. Again, the player witnesses a vibrant young lady who wishes to escape the Columbian society and go to Paris, but who is also vulnerable to the pleasures that await. This expresses itself if the player shows patience and allows Elizabeth to participate in activities such as flicking stones into the ocean or gymnastics. Even the player may participate here, by mimicking the movements of the Utopians (move the right analogue stick up, down, right, left, or jump, in various combinations).⁷¹

71 Meanwhile, the musical score of the level underlines Elizabeth's newfound freedom. Once DeWitt intervenes in Elizabeth's dance and pulls her from it, a cover version of Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* (1983) is played on a calliope—replacing the Irish folk music from before. This change of tone grants the player a further perspective on the events. Given the song's lyrics—which deal with women's emancipation from father figures and men—it underscores Elizabeth's wish to escape the confines of male imprisonment and to discover the wider world. (Ivănescu, "Music of Tomorrow," 58–59).

Notwithstanding these ludic pleasures, Battleship Bay's function within the Columbia society is quite the contrary. A slogan places the inception to this image, which holds "STRENGTH THROUGH LEISURE,"⁷² while the gameplay processes of the activities are juxtaposed with it. To close this blank, the beach's garish presentation and the symbolism of its name (Battleship Bay) fuel the player's acts of ideation and have her connect the section to the previously encountered Disneyfication strategy. A further perspective is added to the conundrum, however, as it now includes Elizabeth. She was raised in this ideology but savours its candy pleasures for the first time—which places her in conflict between the desire to flee this society and its enticing, childlike pleasures.

This becomes clearer in the upcoming events, where the Lutece twins offer Elizabeth a choice between two necklaces: the one adorned with a *bird* motif, the other with a *cage*. Elizabeth seeks advice from DeWitt which one to choose, and this reminds the player of the symbols' inversion and the (seeming) artificiality of choice in this respect.⁷³ However, one can discern the game the Lutece twins are playing. While at first glance they seem indifferent to the ever-repeating events, Robert, at least, has not lost hope. This can be seen in how on several occasions he adopts a more optimistic stance than Rosalind, as he believes in the thought experiment he desired (bringing DeWitt to Columbia to make things right). For example, when Elizabeth picks the cage instead of the bird, he is frustrated. Such a satellite event is not easy for the player to catch, but it adds to her understanding of the gameworld and to the conceptual level of the struggle for Utopia.

This struggle is first and foremost reflected in Elizabeth, yet it begins with a naive young woman who is torn between conformism to the ideology she grew up with and the wish to question and later oppose it. The player can detect this conflict when Elizabeth witnesses the collapse of her angel's statue and in the events at the Arcade. Here, the player is introduced to the cartoon characters *Duke & Dimwit*, a pair of toy soldiers who remind the young Columbians to be valiant and determined instead of clumsy cowards. As one of the arcade machines narrates:

Are you a Duke or a Dimwit? When Duke sees a suspicious-looking character, he reports him to his authorities straight away. When Dimwit sees a suspicious-looking character, he ignores him, and focuses on his new scooter. Remember, boys and girls, don't be a Dimwit.⁷⁴

72 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Battleship Bay.

73 Lange, "Der Freie hat die Wahl," 121-122.

74 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Battleship Bay.

Elizabeth is enthralled by them, for she grew up with their stories. Full of excitement, she operates the arcades. It is a scene in which the young woman can be the child she was never allowed to be, but where she also succumbs to the pleasures of the Disneyfication machine. Duke & Dimwit are a fundamental method of coaxing young Utopians into joining the military and teaching them order and discipline, thus downplaying the atrocities of war.

Figure 20: Soldier's Field closely resembles the structure of Disney World, Florida, and involves the player in a vital inversion of gameplay and space.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Soldier's Field.

Still, Elizabeth does not succumb entirely to the candyfloss spinning around her imagination as she questions the existence of two separate bathrooms: one for white people, the other for Irish and coloured. The construed image is complemented by a Kinetoscope short film of Father Comstock that explains how to deal with the Irish problem. The Irish are depicted as drunkards, which comes as a contradiction to the player, who before entering the Arcade potentially met the friendly interracial couple from the raffle. Given these facts, the racist overtone of the Columbian society merges even more with its capitalist and cult-like structure. What remains to be shown in this respect is how the labyrinthine structure, together with the ludic encounters (interacting with the Utopians, participating in the attractions, scavenging, or combat) contributes to a reversal of the gameplay the player has experienced before. This reapportion of space took place at the Raffle and Fair, and a second inversion is about to occur when the player enters *Main Street*, the central section of Soldier's Field.

On Main Street, the player experiences a vast place that fortifies the negative image of the Columbian society. It is no coincidence, thereby, that Soldier's Field's map—and the names of its microcosms—resemble the structure of Disney World, Florida. Main Street itself is designed as a spacious multicursal labyrinth in which the player may move around freely, witness a Duke & Dimwit show, go on a carousel ride, or explore shops that sell ice cream and propagandistic war toys. Moreover, the place takes inspiration from modern malls in which, as Jackson notes, a central hub connects the different parts, allowing swarms of people to consume its goods and attractions.⁷⁵ Again, the young are brainwashed by leisurely participating in these Disneyfication processes, which mitigate the ramifications of war and encourage them to sign up for duty.

At this point, the strategies of *negation/inversion* once more grasp the player's attention. Similar to the game's beginning, these involve the player in a leisure tour around Main Street to then invert these processes by reinterpreting the multicursal labyrinth into a venue of atrocity. During the initial tour, hints at another truth are hidden within the environment such as propaganda posters, dialogues, and the eerie impression of the place. However, once the player wishes to leave the area to the First Lady's Aerodrome and calls a gondola by pulling a shining lever, a more explicit inversion awaits. That the gondola does not arrive as planned is a gameplay device to trigger combat, for one has to obtain the Vigor Shock Jockey to power it. DeWitt's way now leads to the Hall of Heroes and to the cathartic experience of revisiting his deeds at Wounded Knee. As such, the dream work intensifies its efforts to keep DeWitt from accessing this painful experience. It litters the place with enemies, ranging from police forces and soldiers using heavy weaponry to Zealots of the Lady (a dark figure with a coffin strapped to his back) or Motorized Patriots (automatons equipped with machine guns that resemble George Washington). Moreover, items are scattered throughout the environment and affordances help the player to succeed in combat such as puddles of oil she can incinerate. The result is a section of rapid combat that again exposes the ruthlessness of the Columbian society and lays the focus on DeWitt's inner struggle to uncover the secret behind the nightmare.

Elizabeth assumes a crucial role in this respect, as she helps DeWitt to access further areas of the game and his unconscious. She does this by lock picking doors DeWitt cannot open and by providing assistance in combat. Elizabeth therefore fulfills a "functional,"⁷⁶ ludic role. She never comes as a burden to the player but instead helps him obtain Silver Eagles or supplies such as ammunition or health.

75 Jackson, *Forced Choice*, 179-181.

76 Ibid., 182.

In addition, she will later be able to open tears in the environment, which grant the player access to supplies and combat strategies such as ammunition, blockades, a gun turret, or additional hooks in the environment the player can grab on to manoeuvre in strategic positions, and so on.⁷⁷

Describing Elizabeth's function in such a way is appropriate in terms of game-play rationale, yet it overlooks her role as temptress and how interacting with the young woman creates an emotional bond to DeWitt and, by extension, the player. Evidently, Elizabeth is vital to the game's plot, and her role invites the player to reflect upon aspects of the gameworld. Thereby, Elizabeth's experience of the ideologies in Columbia not only affects her perception of this world, leading to a pessimistic view of it, but also the player's, who witnesses the changes in the young woman and role-plays DeWitt's struggle against a dark part of his self. Combining these perspectives, a clearer image of the struggle for *forgiveness* emerges. Its origins can be traced back to the agonies DeWitt (Comstock) exposed Anna (Elizabeth) to, yet this also involves something greater. Especially when combined with the political perspectives of Columbia, *the struggle for Utopia* is foregrounded and *humankind's guilt* for succumbing to animal instincts and taking pleasure in the atrocities of war and racism.

6.4 THE ROUTE THROUGH THE MAZES OF IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

BIOSHOCK INFINITE lets the player enact the story of an alcoholic, depressed neurotic who struggles for forgiveness for his past deeds. These involve not only his treatment of newborn Anna, who suffers from the repercussions of her father's alcoholism, but also the racist atrocities DeWitt committed as a soldier of the 7th Cavalry and while he was a Pinkerton agent. What it means to follow this path will be experienced by DeWitt and the player in the estranged and dreamlike gameworld of Columbia, where Father Comstock established a supposed Utopia that follows the principles of a religiously inspired nationalism. Similar to the player, Elizabeth experiences this world afresh and absorbs the newly found impressions, which gradually change her character. The route is both terrifying and enlightening as the player passes through the *microcosms* that compose the Columbian society. Thereby, like those of the World's Columbian Exposition—which was divided into regions and headquarter buildings, each of which reflected

⁷⁷ Ibid., 181-186; Weimin, "Limits of the Evolution," 10-11; Origitano, "Cage is Somber," 41-43.

“the heritage and character of the state it represented”⁷⁸—each area of the city fulfils its own function. I have already addressed the Welcome Center and the Raffle and Fair, which introduced the utopian traveller to a picturesque world, only to have her experience inverted by events and places that followed. These included the Order of the Raven and two areas at Soldier’s Field—Battleship Bay and Main Street—and I now wish to address further, important ones.

The experience of moving through these islands and microcosms of Columbia stimulates the player’s acts of ideation in a similar manner to how Elizabeth’s perceptions of them are shaped. This route will now lead through a museum of DeWitt’s sins in the Hall of Heroes, to the capitalist glamour of Finkton and its underground region Shantytown, where the working class of Columbia lives, to the encounter with Comstock, the story’s high priest, in Emporia. Here, Elizabeth will come to see that the problem fundamentally lies within human nature itself, in the agenda for power and the ruthlessness necessary to obtain it.

6.4.1 The Hall of Heroes as DeWitt’s Journey into the Horrors of his Past

The *Hall of Heroes* awaits the player with an enormous statue of Father Comstock (DeWitt) erected on top of its roof. In essence, the place can be described as a museum that sends the participant on a tour into the past and has her immersed in the narrative of DeWitt’s deeds at Wounded Knee and Comstock’s at the Boxer Rebellion. These are presented in a glorifying manner, and the location thus holds the function to remind the Utopians of the Chinese and Native American threat. Yet, as the player will see, “The Hall of Heroes is also a graphic reminder of how historical narratives are shaped and refashioned, often to cover up racial injustice.”⁷⁹

For this purpose, the environmental storytelling of the level proceeds in meticulous detail. There are at first two routes to follow, which deal with both of the above-mentioned historical venues, respectively, and have the player move past animated cardboard cutouts or stone statues that illustrate the events. The colour shade of the environment depicting the Native Americans and Chinese is comprised of a mixture of threatening red and dark tones, while statues of Comstock embody the Prophet in a heroic fashion. To complement the arising image, the player becomes involved in combat against the veterans of the 7th Cavalry under the leadership of Cornelius Slate, and in a *re-enactment of the brutalities* at

78 Bolotin and Laing, *World’s Columbian Exposition*, 32.

79 Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 729; cf. 728-729.

Wounded Knee and the Boxer Rebellion. Of course, the enemies are different (Slate's men who wish to die an honourable death), but combining the perspectives the player witnesses (the historical narrative in form of the environmental storytelling) and those she enacts (the combat), the player comes to see the connections between her relentless mowing down of enemies and the historical massacres.

As a result, this form of “procedural rhetoric”⁸⁰—which involves the player “in a situation where he has no choice but to respond with violence to the hostility of the environment”⁸¹—unfolds its subversive potential only if seen in the context of the remaining perspectives offered and afforded to the player. An additional perspective is a conversation between Elizabeth and DeWitt, in which the latter offers an interesting insight:

Elizabeth: Booker ... I can tell what Slate said bothered you. You showed me – sometimes you have to do what's necessary to survive.

DeWitt: There is survival ... and then there is *finding pleasure in the act*.⁸²

In this scene, DeWitt not only speaks to himself (for having found pleasure in the acts at Wounded Knee) but implicitly addresses the player, who most probably enjoyed the frenetic and challenging combat action before. As such, BIOSHOCK INFINITE targets again the gamist player type in an estranged form and links her to a non-reflective being, unwilling to view her ludic actions within a greater ethical context. What is more, this facet plays with the *relative distance and proximity* between DeWitt and the player. One part of the truth is that the player, as a being outside of the diegesis, is free to criticise DeWitt for having participated in the atrocities at Wounded Knee.⁸³ The other part holds up a mirror to her and creates an intimate connection to the PC through gameplay. These conclusions are the result of a blank between DeWitt and the player that can be closed differently depending on the player's actions and imaginings, while having in mind the ethical context or not.

80 Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 253.

81 Ibid., 252-253.

82 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Hall of Heroes Gift Shop; emphasis mine.

83 Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 729.

6.4.2 The Allures and Undergrounds of the Capitalist Dream Machine in Finkton

Throughout this chapter, I have described a faction of Columbia that goes by the name of the Founders. They are the ruling party in Columbia and are led by Comstock, whose conviction paved the way for an ideology built around the myths of American exceptionalism and a sect-like belief in the Founding Fathers. This supposed Utopia was uncovered by the game's perspectival arrangements and the player's acts of ideation to be a dystopia based on zealotry and xenophobia. Also, it is supported by a capitalist production machinery that commodifies aspects of the Columbian dream, which have an irresistible allure for the Utopians and coax them into participating in the system. Elizabeth and the player have potentially fallen for this trap, if the player participated in the candy wonderland of the earlier levels and gave Elizabeth the time to do so. Once the player arrives in Finkton, she will now be shown the industry behind the façade of the previous levels, which might come as a surprise to her or confirm previous expectations.

The microcosm of Finkton is named after "the city's most powerful industrialist and its wealthiest citizen," Jeremiah Fink. Fink is a "businessman and criminal, capitalist and baron"⁸⁴ who built a manufacturing district within Columbia. Finkton is thus a pompous location where factories and clock towers abound. They remind the Utopians of discipline and punctuality, and the constant ticking of clocks and the crunching of cogs creates a chilling scenario in which workers move according to their rhythms. In the meantime, golden statues embody the grand capitalist. It is, as Peters claims, "a self-indicting horror show of neoliberalism" in which "Big Business and the Church" join forces and "are presented as poisonous, violent institutions with monomaniacal leaders."⁸⁵ Such an observation can be justified in that people are participating in tombolas over jobs and spend the few Silver Eagles they earn on goods from Fink Manufacturing. This greed for power and the oppression of the Other is combined with a superstitious belief in higher beings and formulates a dark triangle of human nature. It fosters a pessimistic image of the Founder ideology and presents the Vox Populi as victims of white male supremacy.

84 Peters, "Global Dystopian," 127.

85 Ibid.

6.4.3 Descending into Abyss of Shantytown: The Route to Revolution

The next section initially supports this observation. When taking an elevator down to Shantytown, the player experiences the underground of the Columbian society. It is a dirty place and home to most of the Vox Populi. Thieves roam the streets by night, and there is sickness and a shortage of food. One scene especially illustrates the precariousness of the situation, in which a boy is scraping out the remainder of a food can, while opposite him a field of tomato cultivation is guarded by a steel fence. A sign on it explains that it was seized by the Columbian police to punish sympathisers of the ‘terrorist’ Vox Populi faction. Closing the blanks between these perspectives fortifies the image of the Founders as antagonists and potentially affects the player’s ergodic actions.

For this purpose, the possibility space of the level affords the player several ways to proceed. The player’s goal is to reach a gunsmith called Chen Lin to supply the Vox with weapons for a revolution against the Founders. Before doing so, she may however help these people in asking Elizabeth to open a tear that will provide people with food. Alongside this ethical possibility, there is also the choice to become a thief who exploits the workers in a manner not much better than Fink. Here again, the gamist attitude is linked to unethical behaviour, where the player’s interest lies in personal gains rather than a critical observation of the greater picture.

The perspectives, so it seems, are straightforward and suggest the need for a liberation from the Founders. Yet there are hints that suggest a different truth. Right at the level’s beginning, the player experiences a satellite event of utmost magnitude. A preacher is giving a speech to denounce the Founders for exploiting the people of Shantytown and letting them suffer from starvation and sickness. He promotes Fitzroy’s cause, and various editions of a book called “The People’s Voice”⁸⁶ are lying on the table he is standing on. As such, it would appear that his words are genuine, but if the player takes a closer look, she might discover another truth. During his speech, the preacher is holding a book whose cover he is cautiously hiding. Now and then he reveals it for less than a second, giving the player time to discern the cover through the scope of her sniper rifle—which grants a clearer look at it. The book turns out to be “The Word of the Prophet,”⁸⁷ the religious manifesto of the Founders and a subtle hint that the Vox ideology might not be much different than that of their oppressors.

86 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Shanty Town.

87 Ibid.

Elizabeth still believes in the revolution, however, which is expressed in dialogue between her and DeWitt, while the latter is doubtful, for he has experienced such conflicts before. Unconsciously, Elizabeth opens a tear now to the wish she seeks and to another dimension in which the guns can be supplied to the Vox. The event is complemented by the following dialogue:

DeWitt: Come on, let's head back to the gunsmith and finish our deal. I aim to be on that airship, and well shut of this place for long [in a decisive voice].

Elizabeth: Booker, if the Vox get their weapons, there's going to be a revolution just like *Les Misérable* [Victor Hugo, 1862]! These people are gonna have better lives [in an enthusiastic, naive voice].

DeWitt: Yeah [in a doubtful, indifferent voice].⁸⁸

Once the player steps through the tear, she experiences a world in flames where DeWitt has led to the Vox to greatness and has become a martyr. The gameworld is now covered in red cloth curtains—which reminds of the Red Army Faction⁸⁹—while posters of DeWitt plaster the player's route. She might be flattered at the recognition her PC is given, but this revolution is by no means just. For the Vox Populi have slaughtered the Founders and are now posing for pictures on their dead corpses. Elizabeth (and maybe the player) are shocked at this sight, while DeWitt already suspected what was to come.

Besides these sensorial and participatory perspectives, *diegetic music* underlines the negation of the Vox perspective as liberators of Columbia. Shortly before Elizabeth and DeWitt stepped through the tear, the player can encounter a scene in a basement where DeWitt takes a guitar and plays *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, while Elizabeth sings. The event creates a utopian enclave within the dystopian microcosm of Shantytown—and there are additional musical pieces that follow the same direction. In this respect, Ivănescu has observed that Elisabeth Cotton's *Shake Sugaree* (1967) is performed by three kids in the streets of Shantytown and comments on the misery of their lives, while the “anti-war anthem” *Fortunate Son* (1969) by John Fogerty and Creedence Clearwater Revival is sung by a woman after the revolution has taken place.⁹⁰ All of these songs and their lyrics contribute in different ways to the counter-narrative and to the formation of blanks that can be closed by suggesting that “the new rule is just as bad as the old one.”⁹¹ It is a

88 Ibid., ch. Bull House Impound.

89 Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 128.

90 Ivănescu, “Music of Tomorrow,” 59-50.

91 Ibid., 60.

first glimpse at the true meaning of *the circle to be unbroken*, which will become clearer by the game's end.

This insight, that “power corrupts strong leaders,”⁹² leads Elizabeth to a *turning point*. Similar to Comstock, Fitzroy is not the leader she promised to be, and when she threatens to execute a child (Fink’s son), Elizabeth intervenes and kills the Vox Populi leader. This brutal event is a vital step in Elizabeth’s *coming-of-age*. As a sign of the young woman’s loss of innocence (or virginity), Elizabeth cuts off her pony tail and changes into a more revealing dress.⁹³ To come to this point, Elizabeth was influenced by the gameworld perspectives, the same perspectives the player experienced and co-created. She thus assumes a role exemplary to the player, who may either accept or decline the ethical offer her character affords. In any case, Elizabeth has gone through a process of realisation that has come far from the enthusiastic, naive woman she was before. In contrast, DeWitt works on a more subtle note, and the player may easily dismiss his utterances as of disinterest or striving for the personal goal to wipe away his debt. This task, however, is more intricate and far-reaching than one might believe, and DeWitt’s character steadily changes.

6.4.4 Entering the Darkest Regions of DeWitt’s Unconscious in Emporia

Throughout this chapter, DeWitt’s character was described as riven by guilt from the atrocities he committed at Wounded Knee and the agonies he exposed Anna to. He re-experienced these deeds in distorted form in the dreamworld of Columbia, where the journey will now lead into the darkest regions of his unconscious and to the encounter with a repressed part of his self: *dystopia’s high priest*, Father Comstock. In these final moments, the player has reached *Emporia*, a district where the rich and powerful reside, and a word that implies both the terms *above* and *market place/bazar*. The macro goal is to reach Comstock House to obtain a means of stopping Songbird, who has fervently pursued DeWitt and Elizabeth ever since they escaped Monument Tower.

Once the player lays foot in Emporia, the noble residence of the upper class is covered in plumes of smoke. The presence of the Vox Populi is terrifying the Founder population, and ships with refugees are leaving the area. Emporia is a further manifestation of DeWitt’s guilt, for in this reality another version of himself led the Vox revolution. What was left in its wake is the sight of a massacre,

92 Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 128.

93 Ascher, “Leuchtturm,” 5-6.

corpses and scalps. It is as if the game would like to remind the player one last time of the dangers of ideological delusions and how easily people turn into savages while following a supposedly noble cause. These themes of *guilt* and the search for *forgiveness* have accompanied the player throughout the game, and, to confirm my hypothesis, can be seen on two levels.

On the one hand, there is DeWitt's *personal guilt* for the way he treated his daughter Anna, but this individual level is inexorably connected to a universalised one. Consequently, combining the perspectives of DeWitt's deeds at Wounded Knee, Comstock's in Columbia, and the player's re-enactment of brutalities in the gameworld, the blank to be closed here evokes the image of Utopia's loss. It speaks to a *universal guilt* in humankind that concerns not only the characters of the fictional gameworld but also those of the empirical world. In this light, Elizabeth can be regarded as a symbol for Utopia, or for the struggle for it, which begins with an escape from the confines of her iron cage and leads her to see beyond the delusions of ideologies. Both DeWitt and Elizabeth are thereby in need of each other to attain the forgiveness they seek, for Elizabeth has also become involved in atrocities she cannot easily discard.

As such, the young woman facilitates DeWitt's journey into his unconscious in that she helps her father uncover his secrets by lock picking certain doors that open further regions of the game. In Emporia, this lock picking intensifies, and the doors the player encounters are fortified with golden bars and shining locks. In the meantime, combat encounters have worsened and dark clouds are lying over the region, underlining the dreamlike nature of the events.

Indeed, Emporia not only showcases humankind's violent nature but also their innate greed for power and money. When the player passes through the Bank of the Prophet, the gamist and achiever playing styles are again linked to mindless consumerism in an estranged manner—by gathering points and scavenging the environment for treasures. In fact, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* offers so much unnecessary loot that the player will find herself hammering on the square button of the PS4 gamepad to gather supplies or Silver eagles. Because these abound, the player rarely runs out of them, but she may succumb to the addiction of collecting them—and this frenzy of scavenging reaches its climax in The Bank of the Prophet, where a myriad of safes and lockers conjure up the player's lust for money.

To strengthen this impression, the game utilises additional perspectives to help the player ideate the image of her own succumbing to the pleasures of capitalist exuberance. This is done via Elizabeth noticing that “[f]ifty percent of everything people earn here goes right to Comstock as tithe” and a sign on the wall that says

“hoarder.”⁹⁴ It was smeared on it by the Vox in a vibrant red and addresses both Comstock for imposing excessive taxes on the Columbian citizens as well as the gamist player, who has participated in this gluttony and in the accumulation of things she does not need.

6.5 THE GUILT OF HAVING LOST UTOPIA AND WAYS TO REGAIN IT

The foregoing descriptions of BIOSHOCK INFINITE have followed the trajectory of the game’s plot and progression structure. This was conducted in such a manner as to simulate the player’s experience of the game and explain her acts of ideation in a chronological manner. Various images have formed during this process on both the level of the plot and significance, some of which were negated or inverted by subsequent events. They will now lead the player to the game’s plot twist and climax, and it is here that DeWitt and the player will face their inner demons and encounter a dark part of their selves against which they struggle. As a symbol of oppression and the loss of Utopia (for which all of humankind is to blame), the gameworld has darkened and black clouds surround Comstock House. They eventually pave the way to the encounter with dystopia’s high priest, Father Comstock.

This last part of the chapter will lay focus on how the individual strings of the BIOSHOCK multiverse converge at INFINITE’s ending, thereby considering the first BIOSHOCK and INFINITE’s DLCs BURIAL AT SEA: EPISODE 1 and 2. In this context, I will continue to explain the previously mentioned *levels of guilt and forgiveness*, which involve a *personal level* and a *universalised* one. The first level revolves around DeWitt’s guilt for having exposed a child to the cruelties of alcoholism and bad fatherhood. It is extended in BURIAL AT SEA to Elizabeth herself, where she seeks revenge on Comstock in an alternate universe. For this purpose, she uses a Little Sister, called Sally, to lure him out of his hiding place and subsequently suffers from the guilt of having exploited the child. In all the BIOSHOCK games, then, “self-sacrifice” and “the atonement of … past deeds”⁹⁵ assume the means to challenge dystopia in different ways. They create *utopian enclaves* within the possibility spaces of these games and conjure up the question whether ideological Utopias, however noble their initial dream was, are worth *the suffering of even one child*?⁹⁶

94 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Downtown Emporia.

95 Maziarczyk, “Playable Dystopia,” 252.

96 Sargent, “Flawed,” 226-227.

The characters' (and the player's) individual guilt is thus inexorably linked to a universalised level and to the struggle for Utopia of which these children (Elizabeth or the Little Sisters) are symbolic of. The question, now, is whether such deeds can be forgiven at all—be they private or affect the majority of the population, as with Comstock's establishment of a theocratic regime and Andrew Ryan's free market capitalism—and is shifted into the foreground. Therefore, and to answer the question of the utopian enclaves, it is necessary to regard the individual strings of the *BIOSHOCK* multiverse and how they converge at *Infinite*'s climax. I thus claim that to interpret *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* in a meaningful manner, both its predecessor (*BIOSHOCK*) and subsequent DLCs (*BURIAL AT SEA: EPISODE 1* and *2*) have to be taken into account. For only if seen in conjunction can the pessimistic though ambiguous ending of *INFINITE* and *BURIAL AT SEA* be explained in a nuanced way, with the characters DeWitt, Elizabeth, and, by extension, the player showing significant change and *the will to self-sacrifice in the struggle for Utopia*.

6.5.1 Self-Sacrifice and the Will to Agency as the Struggle for Utopia

The plot twist and climax in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* takes time to build up and begins with Songbird recapturing Elizabeth. Once the young woman falls back into Comstock's hands, she slowly transforms into his heir and fulfils her role of drowning New York City in flames. Many years have passed, and the indoctrination in the asylum has consumed the woman. What really broke her, though, was time and the lack of a father. It is another example of DeWitt and Elizabeth's mutual dependence in their struggle for forgiveness. When DeWitt finally locates the now elderly Elizabeth, the player is back to the vision from the game's beginning, where Columbia bombards the Sodom below, under Elizabeth's control. She now hands DeWitt the melody to control Songbird, who always managed to stop them in any of the constellations, and sends him back in time to undo the events. The screen changes back to the year 1912, and the player sees a cage with a rose in it and the 'Word of the Prophet' beside it. This juxtaposition of perspectives once more shows the sophistication of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*'s perspectival arrangement. Certain combinations evoke concrete imaginings in the player and guide her acts of ideation—in this particular instance, aligning the destructiveness of war with a certain ideology and the cage within which it encloses its followers. This ever-repeating image is the most prominent and nuanced in the game and builds up to the climax where Elizabeth will free herself from the confinements of ideology.

Before turning to this universalised level, DeWitt's personal struggle for forgiveness continues in the encounter with a dark part of his self and with dystopia's

high priest. The event is surrounded by the game's most intense combat sections, on board an airship, where De Witt and Elizabeth eventually find Comstock in a tranquil shrine.

Comstock: DeWitt, I'm a fool, I've sent mighty armies to stop you. I've rained fire on you from above. I did all that to keep you from her, when all I needed was to tell her the truth. Ask him child. Ask him what happened to your finger. Ask DeWitt. [Comstock grabs Elizabeth's arm violently]

Elizabeth: Let go of me ...

Comstock: Ask him, ask the False Shepherd. Tell her, False Shepherd! Tell her the truth!

Elizabeth: My hand! Please let go!

[DeWitt/the player intervenes and smashes Comstock's occiput against the font and drowns him—this happens by the push of a button]

DeWitt [in anger]: She's your daughter, you son of a bitch! And you abandoned her! Was it worth it? Huh? Did you get what you wanted? Tell me! Tell me!

Elizabeth: Booker ... Booker ...

Comstock: It ... is ... finished [Comstock's last words].

DeWitt: Nothing is finished! You lock her up for her whole life. You cut off her finger, and you put it on me!

Elizabeth: Booker, stop it! You killed him.⁹⁷

In this scene, DeWitt is not only confronted with a horrible secret he is unconsciously aware of (that he is Comstock), but it is also illustrates a first step towards redemption, in killing a part of himself that is culpable for abandoning his newborn child, Anna.

The difference between DeWitt and Comstock here is remorse. In contrast to DeWitt, who has changed over the course of the game's events, Comstock's life ends on the last words from Jesus Christ on the cross: *it is finished*.⁹⁸ It shows that the prophet believes in the Utopia of his creation and dies for this conviction. DeWitt, on the other hand, has taken steps towards the forgiveness he seeks, which will culminate in a self-sacrificial act for Elizabeth. To get there, he needs to destroy the *Siphon*, a device built inside Monument Tower that holds back Elizabeth's powers. Elizabeth compared the *Siphon* to a "leash" her father put on her and that begs the question: "What would happen if I [Elizabeth] took off the leash, and I found I was ... as obedient as ever?"⁹⁹ The answer to this question is revealed

97 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Command Deck.

98 Bosman, "Lamb of Comstock," 177.

99 *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. The Atrium.

once DeWitt uses the notes to control the Songbird and orders him to tear down Monument Tower.

It is a metaphorical act to cut his daughter loose from the confines of daughterhood and ideological imprisonment alike, and completes Elizabeth's emancipatory journey. The counter-narrative has led the young woman to a specific insight. For with the destruction of the iron cage of Anti-Utopia, Elizabeth turns into "a force that can move in and out of these systems of control,"¹⁰⁰ a being that sees beyond the realities of the BIOSHOCK multiverse. She is thus a *utopian enclave* in herself, one who can look behind the façades and lies of dominant ideologies and has served the player as a role model.

Such a realisation is a first crucial step towards Utopia, and Elizabeth's role becomes more explicit once she leads the player to a moment that merges the individual threads of the BIOSHOCK games. With the Siphon destroyed, the young woman brings DeWitt to the underwater city Rapture, where the player witnesses an intimate scene between her and Songbird, whom she kills in an act of liberation by drowning the automaton in the ocean.¹⁰¹ DeWitt and the player are astounded by the interconnectedness of Rapture and Columbia, and this imagery will become explicit in the following events.

Elizabeth leads DeWitt to a *sea of doors* now, a vast ocean region that is composed of an *infinite array of lighthouses* and *docks* that connect them. This panoramic view explains the game's name (INFINITE) and conjures up a beautiful yet terrifying image. For these phallic towers and gateways to the supposed Utopias behind them remind the player of the fragility of human nature, the greed for power and financial gain, be it in the form of the xenophobic Utopia of Columbia or the capitalist one of Rapture. Elizabeth places this inception more clearly when she explains that "[t]here's always a lighthouse [, t]here's always a man, there's always a city ..." ¹⁰² and thus addresses a second level of guilt, which revolves around humankind's *failure in losing Utopia again and again*. The player has experienced this loss in both BIOSHOCK and BIOSHOCK INFINITE and compares these events to those of her own empirical world, where troublesome similarities abound.

Given this semantic charge, it is no coincidence that the final scenes of BIOSHOCK INFINITE are heavily discussed by scholars, who mostly describe the ending in a pessimistic manner. For the game to conclude, the player is brought back to the baptism DeWitt initially took to become Comstock. He refuses this

100 Peters, "Global Dystopian," 134.

101 Ascher, "Leuchtturm," 4.

102 BIOSHOCK INFINITE (Irrational Games, 2013), ch. Sea of Doors.

time, and Elizabeth leads him to a revealing moment, where DeWitt gave away Anna. The scenes are changing rapidly now, since Elizabeth leads DeWitt through various periods of time and places, which culminates in the moment of Comstock's birth. Only there can the chain of events be severed and the manifold versions of Comstock averted—most of which created their own Utopia in alternate universes. Several versions of Elizabeth approach DeWitt now, who finally realises that he is both Booker DeWitt and Zachary Comstock. Consequently, DeWitt willingly embraces the women drowning him in the river stream, and with each piano note playing, one Elizabeth disappears after another. It is a selfless act on DeWitt's part to undo the things he has done to his daughter and to attain the forgiveness he was seeking from her. The screen turns black, and the game switches back to DeWitt's office where he awakes from his nightmares and hears the voice of a baby in the adjacent room. When he approaches Anna's cradle, blackness.

Given the events of *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*'s ending, Buinicki describes the game as a “closed anti-utopia.”¹⁰³ He justifies this claim by arguing that “the apparent death of both protagonist and antagonist do not provide an escape from this vision”¹⁰⁴ and that in such a world, agency is non-existent—for all the choices are predetermined before the player makes them. “Like their avatar, players are not able to free themselves from a past they've both inherited and helped to create.”¹⁰⁵ They are simply “fulfilling the role's that's been written for them.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Peters explains that in *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*, the player enjoys no agency to counteract the system. He specifically deems interesting the contradiction of the infinite array of lighthouses and the player's triviality in this respect: “In a realm of endless lighthouses—literally, limitless choice—the player-protagonist has none ... the premise of choice is consistently invalidated.”¹⁰⁷ Notwithstanding this hopelessness, Peters finds a utopian enclave in Elizabeth. For in contrast to DeWitt, who is only “given the chance to embrace it [his death] willingly,”¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth “has a modicum of control ... The cyborg here is the one who finally does make the active choice to die, not to the aggrandizement of an ego, but to end a cycle of violence and destruction by deleting it entirely.”¹⁰⁹

103 Buinicki, “Nostalgia,” 734.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid., 732.

106 Ibid., 733; cf. 732-734.

107 Ibid., 134.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid., 135; cf. Lange, “Der Freie hat die Wahl,” 119-121.

6.5.2 Reuniting the Individual Strings of the BIOSHOCK Multiverse

Although Peters finds a glimmer of hope within a pessimistic ending, I claim that these interpretations fail to regard BIOSHOCK INFINITE in a nuanced enough way. Besides, the events of BIOSHOCK and the DLCs BURIAL AT SEA: EPISODE 1 and 2 have to be taken into account, which will fortify the image of *self-sacrifice* and the *willingness to change* as utopian enclaves. To view BIOSHOCK INFINITE in this context, Elizabeth's actions in BURIAL AT SEA become of importance, since it is here that the now emancipated woman (of whom the player takes control) selflessly struggles for a Little Sister called Sally. The second DLC ends with Elizabeth's death to free the young girl. It is an ambiguous ending with glimmers of hope for Sally, and its events lead to the first BIOSHOCK game. In a vision before her death, Elizabeth sees Jack breaking the circle of greed and violence by saving the Little Sisters and peacefully succumbs to her wounds. Meanwhile, Sally is singing *La Vie en Rose* to her (Édith Piaf, 1945).

The Little Sisters assume a pivotal role in the first BIOSHOCK game, which can be classified as critical dystopia of variant II—because the player may choose the faith of this world in how she deals with the little girls. The events of BIOSHOCK revolve around Andrew Ryan's creation of an objectivist Utopia in Rapture, an underwater Atlantis cut off from libertarian and communist parasites. Ryan chose to leave this world behind and built a city in which *art, science, and industry* would not be restrained by petty moral and governmental institutions. As a Utopia built around these ideals of free market capitalism, BIOSHOCK involves the player in the ramifications of such a thought experiment and virtualises the collapse of this vision. As such, the game targets both the hubris of Ayn Rand's Objectivist Utopia *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), its “*laissez faire politics*,”¹¹⁰ and similar exuberances of capitalism in contemporary society.¹¹¹

This “rational self-interest” and the “greed”¹¹² of Rapture’s citizens are not only ingrained in the game’s audio-visual presentation and plot but also in its mechanics and gameworld processes.¹¹³ Similar to BIOSHOCK INFINITE, the player of BIOSHOCK is “made complicit in the schemes of the game”¹¹⁴ by participating in

110 Packer, “Galt’s Gulch,” 109.

111 Tulloch, “Ludic Dystopias.”

112 Schmeink, “Dystopia.”

113 Peters, “Global Dystopian,” 209-211, 221.

114 Tulloch, “Ludic Dystopias.”

rapturous capitalism in an estranged form. This expresses itself in fighting degenerated objectivists (Splicers) or the player's use of vending machines and plasmids (which are similar to Vigors in that they grant posthuman powers). Yet the most prominent form of complicity is to be found in how the player deals with the Little Sisters.¹¹⁵

BIOSHOCK INFINITE mostly followed its predecessor in terms of strategies of estrangement, but chose to deny the player real choice in terms of the plot. This is not the case in the first BIOSHOCK, whose ending depends on how the player treats the Little Sisters. These girls were genetically modified to harvest ADAM from corpses of Splicers—a substance which grants the citizens of Rapture supernatural abilities by altering their DNA—and are protected by Big Daddies.

The first time the player encounters a Little Sister is a vital moment in the game and confronts the player with an important choice. Thereby, the aesthetic staging of the scene and its perspectival arrangements proceed in a meticulous fashion. When the player sees the Little Sister, only few perspectives guide the player's imaginings and the decision she is about to make: to *save* or *harvest* the girl. The scene begins with a helpless child whose Big Daddy has been killed. Her outward appearance resembles that of a monster, but the little girl is afraid when the player approaches. This juxtaposition of perspectives creates *uncertainty* in the player and is fortified by additional positions: 1) Atlas, who the player trusts, tells her that the Little Sister is no child anymore; 2) Dr. Tenenbaum pleads for the girl's protection; 3) the horizon of past perspectives the player has gathered, which evokes an image of insanity and violence permeating Rapture.¹¹⁶

These constellations create a *blank* the player will close through imagination and ergodic efforts. However, were it only for these perspectives, the choice would remain bland—and the player would most likely save the little girl for ethical reasons. What fuels the desire to *harvest* the Little Sister, conversely (an indeed semantically charged term), is the player's *greed for power* and *immediate desire for gratification*. This is because before making the choice, she is influenced by Atlas' claim to gain a substantial amount of ADAM for harvesting the girl, while her reward will be less for saving her (or so the player believes). Although Tenenbaum promises to reward the player later on if she spares the girl, the choice speaks to the player's desire for power in a FPS—to level up and complete the game in an effective manner—and, thus, to the gamist and achiever attitude in her. The strategies of estrangement thus work in an implicit manner here and connect the

115 Packer, "Galt's Gulch," 209-211, 215-219, 221.

116 Lange, "Der Freie hat die Wahl," 112-113; Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 156-157; Packer, "Galt's Gulch," 218-219.

gamist/achiever attitude to the modes of behaviour in a capitalist world. To harvest the Little Sisters is therefore to follow “the extreme of the Objectivist ideology of self over others,” which fosters the image that “being selfish grants more power” and that this “greed ultimately causes the suffering of innocents.”¹¹⁷

Given this semantic charge, the outcome of the Little Sister choice is not only connected to the immediate outcome the player witnesses—for harvesting even just one girl in the course of the game will deny the prospect of a utopian horizon to this dystopia. This facet connects the game to literary fictions such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), in which the utopian society’s welfare is built around *the incarceration and suffering of a child*. Everybody knows about the child’s existence and function, and the people of Omelas visit it regularly. Every once in a while, however, some of the visitors cannot bear the sight of the child and their knowledge about its suffering. Consequently, they walk out of its cell and straight out of Omelas. For Sargent, Le Guin’s story can thus be classified as a “flawed utopia” which asserts “that neither truth nor harmony (read eutopia) is worth the suffering of a child.”¹¹⁸ It thus raises a “question about our behavior[,] because in modernity people suffer so that others can live in the material eutopia of the world’s developed countries.”¹¹⁹ This insight applies to Rapture or Columbia as much as it does to Omelas.

Utopia, so the inevitable conclusion here, is *not worth the suffering of one child*, and so it makes sense that if the player falls victim to the enticing mechanisms of a ludic capitalism, she is denied the utopian enclave at the game’s end. Three such endings await the player and are triggered by her actions: 1) save all the Little Sisters, which allows them to lead a happy life outside of Rapture; 2) harvest the Little Sisters, and the Splicer Objectivists escape to the outside world; 3) harvest one or more Little Sister while saving some of them, which triggers the second ending but with a sad undertone of Tenenbaum narrating the events.

The options seem clear at first glimpse; however their ambiguity is expressed in some critics’ argument that *BIOSHOCK* is a closed anti-utopia in all of its endings. This claim they base on several reasons, one of which is the player’s apparent lack of agency in the game. After the plot twist, it is revealed that the PC is a clone and that Atlas (alias Fontaine) commanded his actions with the phrase ‘would you kindly’. This “revelation … renders any of the ‘choices’ you thought you had made through the course of gameplay … purely illusory.”¹²⁰ A second reason can

117 Packer, “Galt’s Gulch,” 219.

118 Sargent, “Flawed,” 227.

119 Ibid., 228.

120 Aldred and Greenspan, “A Man Chooses,” 490; cf. 490.

be found in the hopeful ending itself, which, according to Van den Berg, envisions a clichéd prospect for life after the Little Sisters escaped from Rapture, where they graduate from college, find love, marry, and have children. Such a succession of events leads to a “reinstatement of traditional devices of the retainment of capital and a means of production”¹²¹ and, therefore, BIOSHOCK fails to imagine an end to capitalism and a world beyond it.¹²²

Despite these pessimistic claims, I come to a more positive conclusion about BIOSHOCK’s ending and the series in general. For it is not necessarily the envisioning of a radical end to capitalism but steps in the right direction that describe Utopia’s resistance. This route towards the gradual betterment of society can be found in many enclaves BIOSHOCK and BIOSHOCK INFINITE hide within their dystopian systems, which most prominently revolve around the characters’ and player’s struggles for forgiveness and towards ethical actions. Whereas in BIOSHOCK INFINITE this includes Booker DeWitt on his selfless journey to free Elizabeth, the player has only minor influence on the plot. Her agency mostly revolves around connecting the events to her empirical surroundings on an imaginative level and encountering similarities between both realities. Similarly, Elizabeth needs to glimpse behind the façades of the ideological Utopias before she is driven to action. She thereby assumes a figure exemplary to the player, and once the inception is placed, she continues to struggle for Utopia and for the one child, Sally, she has exploited for selfish reasons.

On the other hand, BIOSHOCK involves the player directly in the decision for Utopia. Choice is no illusion here and lies with the player’s treatment of the Little Sisters. To do the “right thing,”¹²³ the player needs to *delay her desire for immediate gratification* (for power and loot) and save the little girls. Such a choice is a first, crucial step towards Utopia and leads to the downfall of Rapture’s extreme form of capitalism. As such, and through a playful trial action in the gameworld, it points the player into the right direction and towards a way of conduct that may attenuate the consequences of her capitalist world.

6.6 CONCLUSION

BIOSHOCK INFINITE represents an anxiety dream in which the dreamer struggles for forgiveness from past deeds and the loss of Utopia. What remains from the

121 Van den Berg, “Playing at Resistance to Capitalism,” 26.

122 Ibid., 1, 26.

123 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 158.

experience once she wakes is the realisation that there is still time to change the inevitable and to strive for Utopia in the real world. Given the complicated nature of social totality, it is not easy to attain a radically different Utopia. The *BIOSHOCK* games aim to solve this dilemma in a subtle manner without proposing grand solutions to it. They follow the model of the critical dystopia and virtualise game-worlds that are plagued by the issues of theocracy, racism, American exceptionalism, and an extreme form of capitalism that either bewitches the citizens by means of Disneyfication strategies or turns them into rapturous objectivists whose appearance and actions magnify humankind's lust for power and consumption. These are dark worlds against which it is difficult to struggle, but utopian enclaves are hidden within these visions of nightmare.

Both games, thereby, play with the norms of the FPS genre, in which the player is used to gather items and experience points to complete the game in an efficient manner. Such a gamist and achiever attitude is aligned in an estranged way with consumer conduct in a capitalist world: buying goods one does not necessarily need, or not paying attention how these products were produced—be it in the form of child labour or other exploitation of workers. Following Elizabeth's model as she undergoes a process of realisation, the player steadily comes to see behind the shimmering façade of *INFINITE*'s gameworld. Such an insight and aesthetic response is primarily due to her acts of ideation in which the player combines the perspectives that she co-creates. These include the gameworld, its signs, music, and labyrinthine structures, the secondary cast of characters such as Fink, Fitzroy, the Luteces, Lady Comstock, Slate, and the primary cast including DeWitt, Comstock, Songbird, and Elizabeth. Moreover, the tranquil tour around Columbia and its processes are inverted into a battlefield to involve the player in a renegotiation of utopian images. She thereby creates her own perspective on this world by participating in the events and enjoying agency in some instances. Filtered through a first-person perspective, which nonetheless is distanced by the roundness of DeWitt's character, the player conjures up private images in her acts of ideation. These are outlined by the game's strategies of inversion/negation which seduce the player into creating utopian images of Columbia to then negate them in turn. The result is a juxtaposition of perspectives—such as those of the factions of the Founders and Vox Populi—which, through their subtleties, do not result in a clear image of who the antagonists are.

This flux of images and their negations begins with the lighthouse as a symbol of hope, which change to an image of despair in a picturesque environment of infinite lighthouses and possibilities. These stand as a reminder of the glimmering allure of ideological Utopias and how easily humankind succumbs to such promises. In addition, Monument Tower reveals itself as the iron cage of Anti-Utopia,

and also DeWitt's character undergoes significant change, from a selfish mercenary to a loving father who will do anything for his child. This struggle for forgiveness and Utopia continues after *BIOSHOCK INFINITE*'s conclusion in Elizabeth's struggle for Sally and the player's potential struggle for the Little Sisters in *BIOSHOCK*.

The main question, then, is: *how can the unforgivable be forgiven?* Both games take similar routes to answer it, as they describe a selfless struggle for Utopia on the part of some of their characters, but involve the player differently in the resolutions. In this respect, *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* can be classified as a critical dystopia of variant I in that it explains how the dystopian society came to be and leads the player on a linear journey to an ambiguous ending. This journey is open to the player's imagination but denies any possibility for true agency. On the contrary, *BIOSHOCK* leaves the choice for Utopia to the player and can be classified as a critical dystopia of variant II. The issue of self-sacrifice and the willingness to agency are expressed in how the player deals with the Little Sisters.

All in all, the player's playful interactions in the estranged gameworld of Columbia and Rapture serve as an example to facilitate her struggle for Utopia in the real world and stand as a reminder of the potential of such trial actions for guiding humankind towards a brighter future. I thereby described the player's acts of ideation for both the individual games and on an intertextual level between them. The resulting images were ambiguous, but they tend towards a counter-narrative as the interpretation of a dream, which suggests that even if the system cannot be changed on a large scale, a selfless and ethical attitude might bring Utopia a little closer. Such a perception of dreams, fiction, and reality views the games not in terms of possible worlds—which, although infinite in number, are closed and finished objects—but as *indeterminate spaces* that may be shaped through player action and desire.