Interactive Emotions: Empathy in the *Bioshock* Series*

*Spoiler Warning: This paper contains spoilers for the *Bioshock* series of video games.

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Abstract

Video games are a multi-billion dollar industry, embraced by a large majority of U.S. households. People of all ages and from all backgrounds participate in the stories and experiences offered by these games. Unfortunately, most of the research done on videogames considers them only from a technical aspect: how they assist in cognitive abilities (see Oei and Patterson, 2013) or how they make us violent or cooperative (see Saleem, Anderson, and Gentile, 2012). Both of these research foci underestimate video games as an interactive form of storytelling. My undergraduate research project attempts to address this gap by studying video games as a medium of literature that creates an emotive experience for the user through interactive storytelling. Building upon interviews conducted at the *Escapist Expo* in Durham, NC, and current game theory scholarship, this paper deconstructs the use of emotion within the critically-acclaimed 2013 video game "*Bioshock: Infinite*," and the entire *Bioshock* series. In particular, I analyze how the games' interactive/empathetic components force players to question our conceptualizations of the culturally relevant themes of religion, race, and social class.

1. Playing Emotions

In *The Art of Videogames*, scholar Grant Tavinor posits that "imagination can elicit real emotion" (Tavinor 144). His statement is true for all literature (and all art in general) but the context of his quote specifically relates to the emotional reaction that people experience while playing video games. The emotions we receive from works of art are not artificial in any sense, according to Tavinor; indeed, a tragic event in literature can scar us as easily as tragedy in reality. In novels or in games, we feel real love or real loathing for a character; we feel real fear or real comfort from a setting. The truth of this conceit is evident within the interviews I conducted as a part of my research at the Escapist Expo gaming convention in Durham, NC in October, 2013. Though I have often experienced emotional moments of my own while playing video games, I was surprised at the sheer number of interviewees who nearly cried when recounting memories of tragic events within their favorite games—some of which occurred more than twenty years ago. The *Final Fantasy* series, in particular, was chosen by five gamers as containing their "most emotional experience from a game," including multiple mentions of the game *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). Every mention of *Final Fantasy VII* involved the same narrative event: the moment in which one of the Player's allies—a healer named Aeris—is murdered in front of the Player's character. When describing the scene, multiple interviewees expressed having felt love and attachment for the character Aeris, which left them with a real sense of depression and loss upon her death.

  As evidenced by my interview data, video games can have a lasting emotional impact upon their players. Author Tom Bissell attempts to explain this phenomenon, stating that videogames "elicit emotion from their players" by utilizing familiar elements of literature, such as narrative and characters (qtd in Murphy). While this quote suggests that video games have all the tools of traditional forms of narrative art at their disposal, the medium of video games is unique in the extent of its interactive nature. A reader of a novel might participate in creating meaning from the

text, but the Player of a video game might choose how or when the narrative unfolds. The death of Aeris is not only tragic because of the game's narrative, characterization, relatability, and presentation, but also because the Player is as helpless to prevent the murder as are the characters within the game. The murderer is far too strong to defeat, and no magical item or cheat-code can bring Aeris back to life. The Player experiences the helplessness and frustration of the game's protagonist due to the immersive nature of an interactive artform. Emotions in videogames are not simply told through words or shown through vivid imagery and symbolism; instead, emotions are felt, experienced, lived. Video games are a profoundly important form of literature because they are designed against passivity. To play a game is to actively participate within the game's narrative, and this interaction creates a sense of empathy within the Player. By utilizing this empathetic component, well-crafted video games can force us to question our beliefs.

   While the *Final Fantasy* series is a spectacular example of the emotional effect of well-crafted video games, it is by no means the only franchise to utilize literary-quality narratives within the medium. The critically-acclaimed *Bioshock* series—a set of First-Person-Shooter games that incorporate elements of suspense—is often praised for both its story and presentation. Grant Tavinor cites the original *Bioshock* game (simply called *Bioshock*) in his book *The Art of Videogames* due to its "self-aware" nature and "its themes of control and manipulation, and the moral consequences of our choices" (Tavinor 61, 110). *Bioshock*'s self-awareness allows the series to both participate in and comment on the narrative peculiarities of video games as a literary medium, making it an ideal candidate for scholarly research.

   Each game within the *Bioshock* franchise tells a different story, sometimes in a different location and with new characters. However, every *Bioshock* game contains common game/narrative elements that tie the series together. As Elizabeth Comstock, a principal character within the newest game, explains in one of the many meta moments of the series, in each *Bioshock* story "There's always a lighthouse. There's always a man. There's always a city" (Bioshock: Infinite). The first two games—titled *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*—set you in the city of Rapture: an underwater metropolis of unregulated Capitalism. The newest game—*Bioshock: Infinite*—sets its city in the sky. The floating city is named Columbia, a beacon of American Exceptionalism and Christian ideals. While both cities differ in physical location, mood, intention, and creator (the ubiquitous "man" in Elizabeth's quote), they both offer a close examination of human beliefs. The city of Rapture in the original *Bioshock* considered the moral ramifications of a world ruled by the philosophy of *Atlas Shrugged* author Ayn Rand (a parallel that has been well documented in interviews and articles. The newest game in the series uses the floating city of Columbia to examine our skewed perception of American history and the corruptive nature of religion. As I will address here, *Bioshock: Infinite* utilizes the immersive element of interactive fiction in order to force the Player to reevaluate their beliefs of religion, race, and social class, by creating a deeply-emotive, interactive experience.

2. Rapture

It wasn't impossible to build Rapture at the bottom of the sea.
It was impossible to build it anywhere else.
--Andrew Ryan, Bioshock

In an article within the journal *Games and Culture*, scholars Aldred and Greenspan provide a succinct introduction into the complex environment of the first *Bioshock* game. The story takes place in 1960, where the Player discovers a passage into an underwater city called Rapture. Rapture, once intended as "a haven from the will of God, the people, and the State," now lies in ruins, and it is up to the Player to "learn the story of the city's demise" (Aldred and Greenspan 482). The future of the devastated city is uncertain, as two capitalists—the city's architect and founder Andrew Ryan and the businessman Frank Fontaine—battle for control of the city's remains.

   Like all great works of literature, the *Bioshock* series uses thematic elements to tie together our understanding of character, scene and plot, as well as convey certain emotions and concepts to its audience (in the case of games, the audience is the Player). One such thematic element, which persists across the entire series, is the concept of water. Throughout the different games of the *Bioshock* franchise, water plays a pivotal role in both creating the atmosphere of the game's city as well as acting as an allegory for the political or religious beliefs of the antagonist. Since the city of Rapture is constructed far below the sea, the ocean waters act as a shield and a buffer, protecting the supposed-perfection of Rapture from the rest of the world, and shielding Rapture from the influence and restriction of the political climate of America. However, the Player arrives after a horrible incident has corrupted the utopia, and for the extent of the game the city is in disrepair. The pressure and chill of the ocean are constantly busting

pipes and spilling water into the city's streets. The water—once intended as a shield—has become the greatest threat posed to the city. The Player can immediately sense that when Rapture finally falls, the city's inevitable destruction will come from its intended protector.

This tension—where the "protector" and the "destructor" exist within the same force—may be symbolic of the Player's own struggles while experiencing the first *Bioshock* game. "Jack" is the only name given to the main character: the body through which the Player experiences the game. Jack is intended to be the protector and weapon of one of the game's characters—a family-man named Atlas. By following his orders, the Player murders the city's chief architect/entrepreneur Andrew Ryan in order to assure Atlas's safety. It is only after this event that the truth is revealed: Atlas is only an alias used by businessman Frank Fontaine, the sinister competitor of Ryan's. Enraged, Jack destroys Fontaine at the game's end, essentially embodying the same role that the ocean waters provide for Rapture: a single entity acting as both a protector and destroyer.

This sense of duality is woven throughout the entire narrative, including in each type of enemy. The Splicers are both human and zombie, the Little Sisters are both human and experiment, and their protectors—the Big Daddies— are horrendous monstrosities composed of man and machine. The constant exposure to dual natures existing within single entities forces the Player to carefully consider the options and ramifications of every in-game action. If the *Bioshock* series teaches us anything, it's that the world is far more complex that we might like to imagine. Heroes can be villains, antagonists can set us free, and nothing is as simple as it seems.

Given that the original *Bioshock* deals with the concept of capitalism and governmental restriction, it's unsurprising that social-class becomes a major issue in the game's narrative. Throughout the game, the Player finds recordings from Ryan, Fontaine, and several other characters from the narrative, but Ryan's recordings are of particular interest given that the city of Rapture was his personal vision. Several of his quotes concern lower-class individuals and the concept of welfare or government assistance. Ryan often calls thee poorer citizens of the world "parasites," and even compares welfare recipients to rapists (Bioshock). By stating such an extreme opinion, Ryan forces us to reconsider our own beliefs on the subject of social class. Can motivation alone guarantee wealth? Are the impoverished simply lazy and stupid? Ryan certainly believes so. His dehumanization of the poor is familiar, as it mimics the discussions in our own country concerning taxes, welfare, and the monetary aspect of social justice. Blaming the impoverished population for their own station in life makes it easier for those in power—be they our own government and the architect of Rapture—to ignore the pleas of the poor. Ryan's vision is of a pure capitalist utopia, where anyone with an idea and motivation can and will be rewarded with wealth. But while his speeches of Rapture often mimic the zealousness of a preacher, his utopia lies in ruins around the Player.

3. Columbia

> *What is Columbia if not another Ark, for another time?*
> *-Zachary Comstock,* Bioshock: Infinite

When *The New York Times* interviewed Ken Levine, the creative director for the *Bioshock* franchise, the columnist asked about the detailed research that had gone into the games.   Levine's answer revealed the historical basis for the setting of the newest Bioshock game, *Bioshock: Infinite*. Levine became inspired by the 1893 World's Fair through Erik Larson's non-fiction book *The Devil in the White City*:

> Our game starts about 20 years before that book begins. The bookends to that period to me are the World's Fair and World War I. It's also an idealized environment, all built at one time. The World's Fair was all fake, right? But it allowed us to see a pure city. (Goldberg)

In the opening pages of *The Devil in the White City*, Larson explains the significance of the World's Fair of 1893. Officially known as "the World's Columbian Exposition," the fair celebrated Columbus and his discovery of America 400 years before. The World's Columbian Exposition "became something enchanting," and despite the fair's original intention, the exposition was eventually "known throughout the world as the White City" (Larson 4). A historical website developed by UCLA suggests that the name derived from the neoclassical architecture of the fair's buildings, and adds that the construction of "The 'White City' transformed Jackson Park on the shore of Lake Michigan from a muddy swamp to the ideal of civilization with lagoons, gorgeous landscapes, and awe-inspiring buildings that reportedly brought many visitors to tears" (Amerian).

The concept of an idealized, controlled environment—one in which an architect or team of constructors organize your setting and how you perceive it—is a familiar notion to artists, scholars, and fans of art. It is the job of an artist, whether they be a painter, a novelist, or an organizer of a World's Fair, to create an illusion (we see a landscape, not a series of brushstrokes; we see a story instead of a book of individual words). The same is true for the art of video games. The artists behind *Bioshock: Infinite* recognized the similarities between building a World's Fair and building a virtual city, and set out to craft a narrative that might only be possible with the medium of video games. As Levine explains in the *New York Times* interview, "Both Rapture (the underwater city in *BioShock*) and Columbia [the floating city in *Bioshock: Infinite*] were built in a very short period of time with a similar controlled aesthetic" (Goldberg). While he's speaking specifically about the construction of these cities within their relative stories, he's also commenting unintentionally on the crafting of the games themselves. Video Games, much like the World's Fair and the fictional cities of *Bioshock*, are large art projects crafted in short periods of time, designed with a specific aesthetic, to elicit a certain emotion or set of emotions in the audience.

In the game *Bioshock: Infinite,* the floating city of Columbia is designed along the same basic principles as the "White City" of Chicago. Set in 1912, the architecture of Columbia is clearly neoclassical. The city's buildings are heavenly and covered in white stucco, often glowing in the unfiltered sunlight due to Columbia's placement above the clouds. Columbia is full of anachronistic technology and grand monuments, much like the original World's Fair itself, and the citizens of Columbia are cursed with a skewed patriotic concept of American history. Even the name—Columbia—is a direct reference to both Columbus and the World's Columbian Exposition. Columbia exudes a sense of wonder when the Player first encounters the city and its peculiarities. However, just as its namesake, the city of Columbia is a marvelous illusion. If the first *Bioshock* was the history of Rapture's demise, *Bioshock Infinite* is the story of the truth which hides below the surface of Columbia. Upon arrival, the Player is presented with a distinct image of the city. The streets and shops are full of people and portraits, all upbeat and enthusiastic. The citizens discuss an important raffle that will occur during the ongoing celebration. The mood is purposely reminiscent of the World's Fair, and despite the fact that *Bioshock* tends to be a First-Person-Shooter game, there are no enemies to battle or escape from. The Player is free to wander as an anonymous citizen, experiencing the sites and participating in the carnival games. Aside from the odd sense of peace in a game whose previous titles included elements of horror, nothing seems particularly alarming about the presentation.

Sadly, given the monochromatic racialized state of video game characters, few players would find it odd that all of the happy citizens of Columbia happened to be white. As explained in Chuck Wendig's article "The Pasty White Person is King," modern video games—even games that allow the Player to create and customize their own character from multiple fantasy-races—will rarely allow "characters whose ethnicity is something other than Pasty White Person" (Wendig). It is only after the first major plot-point of *Bioshock: Infinite*, where the Raffle is revealed to be a public stoning of a mixed-race couple, that the Player understands that *Bioshock: Infinite* is a work of literature that discusses important social issues such as race and social class, as well as the qualities and faults of the video game industry. The sudden reveal of Columbia's horrific racism reminds the Player that *Bioshock: Infinite* takes place above 1912 America, fifty-two years prior to the Civil Rights Act.

When the Player "wins" the lottery, they are asked to throw the first "stone"—a baseball—alluding to the biblical event where Jesus said to a stoning crowd: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (Holy Bible KJV, John 8.7). This creates a parallel from the beginning of the game that issues of race and class are deeply tied to concerns of religion, a parallel that continues through the entire narrative. By inviting the Player to interact with the stoning, *Bioshock: Infinite* forces the Player to participate in the conversation of race in America. You might look away from a film or skim through a novel, or even ignore the plight of others in the real world, but a video game requires your full attention and can prevent the Player from continuing the narrative until they've made a decision (in this case, whether to throw the "stone" at the couple or the announcer). By utilizing the power of interactivity, *Bioshock: Infinite* presents the issue of racism and calls on the empathy of the Player to process the injustices suffered by minorities.

The thematic use of water, which occurred so blatantly in the original game, continues in the third installment of the *Bioshock* series as well. Water may seem unimportant at first, given that the game's city (Columbia) is floating above the clouds and not resting beneath the ocean (as Rapture was in the first game). However, the concept remains, though it exists symbolically. In one of the many instances where the antagonist—a religious leader and architect named Comstock—mentions the city of Columbia, he refers to it as "another ark, for another time" (Bioshock: Infinite). This image offers a metaphorical connection between Columbia (a symbolic ark, therefore surrounded by a symbolic ocean of death) and the city of Rapture (a symbolic ark surrounded by a literal ocean of death).

The narrative and atmosphere of *Bioshock: Infinite* is ripe with religious connotations, so it comes as no surprise that the game's allegorical utilization of water is often in relation to biblical texts. In the Abrahamic religions, water

is represented as the cleanser of sin (during baptisms), the proof of divinity (when transformed into wine and blood, or when walked upon), and punishment (when the world floods, eradicating most of the life on the planet). *Bioshock: Infinite* represents water in similar ways using the acts of baptism and drowning. Upon reaching the floating city of Columbia, the Player wanders through a flooded subterranean cathedral as the main character—an atheist detective named Booker DeWitt. When DeWitt asks another character about the city, DeWitt is only told that the city is "Heaven…or as close as we'll see 'till Judgment Day" (Bioshock: Infinite). Soon after, when attempting to leave the underground chapel, another character prevents the Player's entrance into the main city of Columbia. The character is a preacher who explains that "the only way to Columbia is through rebirth in the sweet waters of baptism" (Bioshock: Infinite). These quotes act as an obvious parallel to the Christian concept of baptism as a means of salvation, further establishing the conceit that the floating city of Columbia is a heavenly utopia. The progression of the game halts until the Player accepts the baptism, an act which nearly drowns DeWitt.

The near-drowning of the game's main character is another example of the *Bioshock* series engaging in meta-discourse and foreshadowing. Long before the game begins, the main character Booker Dewitt was given the same choice: whether or not to accept a baptism. This choice created a series of alternate universes, all dependent upon his decision. In the universes where Dewitt was baptized, it led him to the inevitable creation of Columbia and his rebranding as Zachary Comstock (the game's antagonist). If Dewitt denied the baptism, he was eventually pulled into a different timeline and coerced into travelling to Columbia, where he defeats his alternate self (this is the timeline in which the game takes place, casting Dewitt as the playable main character and Comstock as the villain).

This original choice of baptism—where Dewitt either embraces or abandons his "salvation"—is the sole deciding factor that determines which life DeWitt will live. The choice casts water in the role of creator, since the baptism essentially births both the protagonist and antagonist of the game. Unsurprisingly, following the series' precedent of duality, *Bioshock Infinite* sets water (and baptism specifically) in the role of destroyer as well. The antagonist Comstock is brutally murdered when Dewitt smashes the villain's face upon a baptismal font and drowns Comstock within its waters. At the end of the game, Dewitt himself is murdered ritualistically during baptism. The binary sense of water acting as both the creator and destroyer of the protagonist and antagonist frames the entire game's narrative—surrounding the game, much like the original city of Rapture, by water.

The enemy Songbird is also killed by water, but his story follows closer to the Icarus myth than the Abrahamic religions. The Icarus myth tells of a boy who is given wings, with feathers held together by wax. He is warned not to fly too low or too high. He ignores the warning and flies close to the sun where the sun's rays melt his waxen wings. The boy falls into the ocean and drowns (Thompson). In *Bioshock: Infinite*, the Songbird is a man who is given artificial wings allowing flight (though to be fair, this is quite without his consent) and flies high above Columbia, tasked with guarding the imprisoned Elizabeth—a young woman with strange supernatural powers. After the murder of the antagonist Comstock, the Songbird attempts to kill DeWitt and Elizabeth. However, the young woman opens a portal to the bottom of the ocean where the ocean's pressure crushes his suit and the Songbird is drowned. This reinforces the concept of water as a destructive force, reminds us of the recent drowning of the antagonist, and foreshadows the eventual watery death of the protagonist.

Aside from the thematic use of water, the narrative of the city of Columbia is framed as well by the Christian hymn "Will the Circle be Unbroken." The lyrics concern the cyclical torment of mortal life, and the suggestion that a better life might exist after death (represented by the presence of Heaven). The song plays three times during the course of the game, and each moment is crafted to elicit a particular response from the Player. By listening to "Will the Circle be Unbroken" during these three precise moments—at the beginning, middle, and end of the narrative—*Bioshock: Infinite* forces the Player to reconsider the meaning of these well-known gospel lyrics through three specific emotional lenses, directly after three emotionally-stimulating events have occurred in the game. Since "Will the Circle be Unbroken" is a traditional hymn, the precise lyrics of the song change from version to version, with the alteration or addition of a few key words. The version as it appears in *Bioshock: Infinite* is as follows:

Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, by and by
Is a better home awaiting
In the sky, In the sky
(Double .L)

"Will the Circle be Unbroken" is the first sound the Player encounters once travelling to the city of Columbia at the beginning of *Bioshock: Infinite*. The song plays in a continuous choral loop—a reference to the "unbroken" circle in the hymn—through a sound system as Booker DeWitt explores the subterranean chapel and heads towards the game's first baptism scene. The game offers no direct commentary on this placement, but the concept is clear.

The choral presentation of the music, played in a religious setting, prepares the Player to expect a game with thematic allusions to theology. The Player understands that biblical themes are likely to pervade though the narrative, and that the citizens of Columbia consider their city to exist as either an approximation or representation of Heaven. Given this setting, the lyrics of the hymn are to be taken as they were originally written: Heaven is better than earth, Heaven waits in the sky, and life—while difficult—is temporary. Columbia is salvation.

The second appearance of the hymn occurs near the middle of the game. During this section of the narrative, the lead characters Booker and Elizabeth have seen through the illusion of Columbia. The supposed heavenly city is full of racism and extreme divisions of class, where the non-white working class—including Native Americans, African Americans, and Irish and Oriental immigrants—live in homeless poverty. Rather than playing across a mechanized sound system, the second occurrence of "Will the Circle be Unbroken" is sung by Elizabeth and Booker themselves with an acoustic guitar. The vocals and chords are broken and hesitant, extremely unpolished compared to the original sound system, but far more emotional and natural. The lead characters sing this hymn in order to calm a frightened immigrant child into accepting an apple from Elizabeth. This touching scene reveals the empathetic nature of Elizabeth, and recasts the violent Booker DeWitt in a non-combative, humanizing situation. The emotional intensity and characterization within this scene, as compared to the original presence of the choral version of the song, force the Player to reevaluate the lyrics of the song. Rather than focusing on the grandness of the city of Columbia and its heavenly representation, the humanizing placement of the song offers a new interpretation. The "unbroken" circle—originally intended as a reference to the discomforts of everyday life—might be reimagined as the circle of racism and classism that exist in the world, both in and below the floating city. Given the architectural marvel of Columbia—a city which floats by quantum levitation—shouldn't the society upon the city be free of our cruelty and prejudices? And rather than asking, "Is a better home awaiting in the sky" (meaning, does Heaven or Columbia exist) the Player might ask if that home in the sky—be it Columbia or Heaven—is indeed *better*. What is the purpose of Heaven if it is not a heaven for everyone? How can Heaven truly represent a freedom from the troubles of mortal life if poverty, segregation, and the prejudices of Earth follow us there? In this one scene, *Bioshock: Infinite* manages to subvert the entire illusion of Columbia without saying a word of dialogue. The floating city is no Heaven. It is only an encapsulated state of 1912 American ideas.

Finally, in the end credits for the game, the Player is treated to a video recording of the two principle voice actors practicing the song and receiving notes from the game's Creative Director Ken Levine. This occurs after the game's resolution, where Booker DeWitt—the Player's character—is drowned, and infinite parallel universes have been examined, explained, and possibly prevented. If "Will the Circle be Unbroken" is the narrative's denouement, then the lyrics must be examined one final time through the lens of finality and parallel universes. The game presents the lyrics, which concern the repetition of an unbroken circle, alongside the complex theory of timeloops. The narrative hints that the story the Player experiences—where Booker DeWitt faces off against Zachary Comstock—has occurred 121 times in the past, each ending in failure. The Player might imagine the song as a plea from the game's characters, wondering aloud if the story might ever end in resolution, or simply repeat forever. Taken from a cultural perspective, the plot events of *Bioshock: Infinite* might not be as important to this interpretation as are the cultural and societal considerations which the game raised (for example, race and class). Perhaps this final rendition of "Will the Circle be Unbroken" asks us to examine our own modern society. How do issues of racism and classism exist today, and how might the circle of hatred and prejudice be broken at last? By applying the message of the narrative to the America of 2013, we can begin a national discussion on the traumatic effect of wealth disparity and unjust labor laws on American families of the lower and middle class.

Bioshock: Infinite, and indeed the entire *Bioshock* series, succeeds as a subversive work of interactive literature by allowing us to participate in the downfall of the two greatest cities ever conceived. The narratives of these games force us to take part in the discussion of religion, race and class in America, from 1912 to 1969, and apply their empathetic lessons to our modern society. By revealing the harmful effects that Capitalism and religion have upon the people of our country, the *Bioshock* series asks us to consider why a society's technology can be so great while its basic human compassion is practically nonexistent. If we can create a city below the ocean or above the sky, if we can create an Eiffel tower or a Ferris Wheel, if we can land a man on the moon and build a Large Hadron Collider, then why can't we allow each person to have basic human rights, an education, a living wage, and healthcare? To address these problems, we must first feel compassion toward other humans, despite their race or social class. I believe the *Bioshock* series proves how emotionally-charged interactive literature can provide the insight necessary to help others to empathize with the plight of prejudiced individuals attempting to make a life in a corrupt and unbalanced society.

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