

Bioshock Infinite and the video game phenomenon

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About a year ago, the first-person-shooter (FPS) video game *Bioshock Infinite* was released to wide acclaim and considerable commercial success. The third in the *Bioshock* series of video games, *Infinite* follows thematically in the footsteps of its predecessors.

Each game in the series involves a protagonist thrown into a city isolated from the rest of the world, run by the adherent of a specific political or philosophical outlook. In each game, the city falls from its governor's grand vision into ruin, if not outright dystopia. The first game for example, takes place in a secret, underwater city named Rapture, which was built and governed by an Ayn Rand-type "objectivist" (i.e., right-wing defender of *laissez-faire* capitalism). As the player travels through Rapture, he or she sees a decaying and decrepit city, peopled in part by what can best be described as drug-addled slaves.

As the player learns the history of Rapture, connections are drawn between the ruling philosophy and the eventual decline of the city. In this manner, the series creators attempt to prove that each philosophy, or at least those they focus on, leads to disaster. The *Bioshock* series thus presents itself as tackling serious political and philosophical matters.

The latest game envisions Columbia, a city floating in the sky run by a theocratic and nationalistic government. Booker DeWitt, a depressive ex-Pinkerton detective agency operative and the player character, seeks to bring a mysterious girl named Elizabeth back to his creditors in New York City to "wipe away his debt."

In his endeavor to escort Elizabeth out of the city, DeWitt is confronted by a brutal police state and witnesses gross inequality, extreme violence and the sort of institutional racism that existed prior to the civil rights movement. In fact, the game takes place in 1912 and attempts to evoke the *zeitgeist* of the period. The bitter labor struggles of the time, the repression carried out by the state and the gulf between the social classes find expression in *Infinite*. The obviously anachronistic elements are fairly limited and covered by poetic license.

There is a decided effort in *Infinite* to create an atmosphere that immerses the player. While navigating the city, he or she stumbles upon audio recordings of everything from the speeches of powerful politicians to the private observations of

ordinary citizens, and each contributes in some way to Columbia's historical or cultural record.

More concretely, there is a concerted attempt, through touring the exhibitions in a museum, through mundane details such as clothing and overheard conversations of people in the streets, through flyers the player sees plastered on walls, to create a picture of Columbian society as an intensely conflicted one.

As DeWitt travels through Columbia, he comes across a factory area known as "Finkton." As the player moves through the latter, he sees a sort of industrial-dystopian scene: workers standing in a row hammer in perfect time, while police patrol them and "soothing" classical music plays just slightly off key. A man looking for work is told that all the jobs in Finkton are taken and that he should come back tomorrow. Everywhere in Finkton, capitalist interests dominate life, and the game's portrayal of this is powerful. Elizabeth, by now Booker's companion, feels hatred for Mr. Fink, and sympathy for the workers. The player feels compelled to do the same.

It must be said, and this speaks to the contradictions of the video game phenomenon as a whole, that *Infinite*'s seriousness is marred by the extreme violence so prevalent in the genre. Although violence has some justification given the society and era the game depicts, at times it seems present only for the sake of adding content to the game as an FPS. Beyond that, it is something of an accommodation to the social confusion and backwardness of portions of the game's audience, who are angry and frustrated with things as they are, but unaware at this point of a socially progressive alternative. While fighting in the game, one almost wants the shooting to end just to get back to the story.

For a time, the game does well in conveying the social and political realities of its world. However, at a certain point, *Infinite* loses its way, under the gravitational pull of contemporary events and confusions rather than in response to the world of 1912.

About halfway through the game, its creators have an anarchist group known as the Vox Populi ["voice of the people" in Latin], who have been fighting the Columbian state, take power. The group's followers promptly turn violent, taking up where the old rulers left off. The workers, previously portrayed in a sympathetic light, turn into murderers and

plunderers, entirely obedient to Daisy Fitzroy, the leader of the anarchists.

As soon as the Vox group takes power, the consistency of *Infinite*'s narrative vanishes. One moment the humble workers are starving and want little more than to survive, and the next they feel an insatiable bloodlust. In an attempt to explain it, DeWitt says in passing, "Once people get their blood up, it ain't easy to settle it again."

It is equally telling that after the Vox takeover the story takes a sharp turn away from any serious interest in social questions. *Infinite*'s focus abruptly shifts to Booker's relationship with Elizabeth and the game's concerns move largely from the social to the individual realm. The game begins to ask questions about fate and free will and relies more and more on a quasi-mysticism to drive the story.

The game also turns its attention to the amusing but vacuous possibilities of time travel, teleportation and such. Even the new themes are treated as entirely personal matters. The end result is incredibly disappointing: *Infinite* has taken a genuinely interesting and worthwhile premise, and essentially junked it.

As is the norm among contemporary popular artists, the game's creators indicate a general nervousness and defensiveness about expressing oppositional social views, or any social views at all. According to Shawn Robertson, the lead artist for the game, the story is "about the player and Elizabeth... We like to keep the 'opera-sized' story, the political turmoil, in the background."

Ken Levine, *Infinite*'s creative director, explains, "I think Bioshock and Bioshock Infinite are more a reflection of my own ambivalence about people's certainties. I don't feel very certain about a lot of things, particularly in the political spectrum. The older I get the less I know and the less certainty I have."

That's all very well, but the game itself, at least for a while, concerns itself almost exclusively with political and social matters. Why the shamefaced comments?

It is notable that a mainstream game from a large studio took on the topics it did. The serious interest in social history, workers' struggles and class divisions speaks to the impact of the present circumstances on *Infinite*'s producers. The malignant concentration of wealth at the top of society and the police-state measures the ruling elite has pursued to protect its riches have not passed unnoticed. Popular films such as *Elysium* and the *Hunger Games* series, among others, speak to the influence of these phenomena.

The approach to these subjects is almost inevitably contradictory and murky given the prevailing level of political and historical understanding. On the one hand, a relatively sophisticated cultural consciousness (not to say extraordinary technological ability) is at work, indicated by the references to the notorious New York City guardian of Victorian morality Anthony Comstock, to Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (whose protagonist in a story about a city divided by rival

gangs is a Pinkerton agent) and so forth.

On the other hand, the artist-technicians bring to their game perhaps inevitable but unfortunate ideological prejudices and errors. First of all, to project a version of contemporary middle-class anarchism (suggestive of the trends active in the leadership of the Occupy Wall Street protests) back into history as a dominant tendency in the American working class is inaccurate and misleading.

If Vox Populi and Daisy Fitzroy obliquely refer to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, matters are not thereby improved. The IWW led major workers' strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 and Paterson, New Jersey in 1913, and at its best represented a revolutionary political party in embryo form. The most advanced elements in the IWW broke from anarcho-syndicalism under the influence of the October Revolution and Bolshevism.

If *Infinite*'s designers are responding to the reactionary antics of anarchist groups, riddled with police provocateurs, in recent global demonstrations, they have a point. But there is a left-wing and a right-wing critique of anarchism. The game's implication that any movement or ideology proposing the revolutionary reorganization of society, when taken to its logical conclusion, results in nothing but barbarism is simply one more expression of garden variety, liberal anticommunism.

Ultimately then, *Bioshock Infinite* attempts—rather unconvincingly—to discredit radical social change, but in the course of doing so the game has been forced to raise the issue, which is otherwise scarcely referred to in contemporary video games. In its own peculiar manner, the game speaks to the growing social tensions and the inevitability of upheavals, whether those are seen as a threat or a reassuring possibility.

There are of course many other questions, technological, aesthetic and social, bound up with the massively popular video games phenomenon. These will need to be examined in future articles.



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