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Everyman, All at Once

Baptism and the Liberal Subject in *BioShock Infinite*

> Even as liberalism has penetrated nearly every nation on earth, its vision of human liberty seems increasingly to be a taunt rather than a promise.
>
> —Patrick J. Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed

Abstract

The 2013 video game *BioShock Infinite* stages baptism as a way to place the player within a liminal space where he or she is ostensibly a free subject, able to choose from an array of political options, but who will inevitably choose liberalism. In order to get the player to the point where they make—or rather confirm—their choice, the game must also force the player to arrive there. This conundrum mirrors the paradox of liberalism, following theorists like Patrick J. Deneen: that we supposedly choose among a realm of infinite possibly and yet those possibilities are forced upon us. This paradox is also the mode within which *BioShock Infinite* operates. The game uses self-referential and metatextual techniques to call attention to its gameness, and yet, it still asks the player to accept its liberal ideology. Althusser argues that the role of "Ideological State Apparatuses" (or ISAs) is to convince us that we are subjects who freely choose the dominant ideology, as opposed to any other system. ISAs do this through confirming us as subjects through rituals of ideological recognition enacted through, among other things, theatre, film, and video games. *BioShock Infinite* places the player in a position where they confirm that they are, indeed, a liberal subject, and then asks that liberal subject to choose the very order from which their (mis)recognition occurs.

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Introduction

BioShock Infinite, a first-person shooter video game directed by Ken Levine and developed by Irrational Games, was released in 2013 to widespread critical acclaim and commercial success, with its PC version garnering a very high score of 94 (out of 100) on the aggregate website *Metacritic* (which is considered the benchmark site for video game review aggregation). It is the third game in Ken Levine's *BioShock* series, with each game featuring a maniacal ruler and a fantastical city. *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* are set in the 1960s in Rapture, a city built at the bottom of the ocean based on an Ayn Randian vision of a pure, objectivist utopia, which very quickly becomes a dystopian nightmare. *BioShock Infinite* takes place in the year 1912, according to an alternate history, in a city in the clouds called Columbia, made to float using atoms suspended in "quantum superposition." A story add-on to *BioShock Infinite* called *Burial at Sea* brings the player back to Rapture to tie the stories of the two cities together. In *BioShock Infinite*, the player takes on the role of Booker DeWitt, a deeply-in-debt former Pinkerton agent (a private security force which, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were often hired for strike- and union-busting operations) who has accepted a mysterious job from a mysterious source: "Bring us the girl and wipe away the debt." Soon after Booker's arrival in the city, he is recognized as the "false shepherd," prophesized to lead the "lamb" astray. The idealism of the city quickly dissipates as Booker realizes that Columbia is a brutal, racist, segregationist state led by an authoritarian dictator. The player has to then fight his or her way through the city to rescue the girl, a young woman named Elizabeth, and attempt to escape Columbia.

Unlike the atheistic city of Rapture, Columbia is depicted as a deeply religious community, with a backstory detailing how it was founded by a dictatorial, self-proclaimed prophet named Zachary Hale Comstock. Columbia's moral attitudes are based on white supremacy and the worship of America's Founding Fathers. The religious zeal of Columbia is evident from the beginning of the game, when the player is forced to undergo the ritual of baptism in order to enter the city. The game culminates in a final scene when the player is forced to play through a final baptism where Booker is left submerged as the game ends.

In this article, I will discuss *BioShock Infinite*'s use of baptism as both a thematic and a narrative device. I argue that the game stages baptism, in its final sequence, as a liminal space where the player is supposed to imagine themselves as a being whose identity is mutable and who then, with what appears to be every possibility before them, must necessarily choose liberalism . The liminal space of baptism is, for the player, a site of ideological (mis)recognition and is also a tacit acknowledgement of the paradox of liberalism: that a person is free so long as they choose capitalism. The game manages this *mise-en-scène* by using metatextual techniques to interrogate the medium of video games themselves. However, the game also reveals tensions between its themes and its medium; that is to say, in attempting to stage choice as the ultimate liberal state, the game can only get the player there through force. This ambivalent space—found in the tensions between medium and message—is also at work within the narrative of the game: the racist state run by Comstock is portrayed as equally troubling as a post-revolutionary state run by a woman of color named Daisy Fitzroy. In other words, the game wants to place the player within a space where they can imagine new outcomes or possibilities after emerging from

baptism, but cannot, within its own narrative, represent any kind of radical change. This then confirms for the player what they, as a liberal subject, already know: that liberalism is the only available option since all other options are a variation of authoritarian compulsion or violence.

Before discussing *BioShock Infinite* proper, it will be helpful to begin by defining some key terms. What, exactly, is liberalism and how does its paradox operate? Using the term "liberal" to mean the "center-left" is a particularly American usage of the term. Classically (and this is usually referred to as "classical liberalism"), thinkers like Adam Smith, proponents of *laissez-faire* economics, used the term to mean the view that "people are isolated individuals whose actions reflect mostly their material self-interests" (Steger 2010, 2-3). Classical liberals were (and are) "dedicated to the protection of private property" and the "legal enforcement of contracts," believing that the "'invisible hand' of the market ensured the most efficient and effective allocation of resources" (Steger 2010, 3). After the 1929 stock market collapse and the beginning of the Great Depression, economist John Maynard Keynes argued that increased government spending could act as a salve during times of crisis. His highly influential theories would help inspire the New Deal, and a new age of liberalism in the US that Steger calls "controlled capitalism" (Steger 2010, 7) or "egalitarian liberalism" (Steger 2010, 8). By the 1970s and 1980s, a new group of thinkers, whose public faces would include politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, believed that classical liberalism was a more effective means of ensuring economic prosperity than egalitarian liberalism. These "neoliberals" also believed that breaking the "barriers" to international trade would lead to the international prosperity promised by classical liberals (Steger 2010, 10).

In American politics, we often imagine that "classical liberalism" represented by the right, and "egalitarian liberalism" represented by the left (or what Patrick J. Deneen calls "conservative liberals" and "progressive liberals") are the two competing poles of political thought. However, these two types of liberalism are ultimately the same kind of liberalism: the belief that the primary political relationship is between the individual and the state. Deneen sums this up in an interview promoting his book, *Why Liberalism Failed*. He argues that if one considers the ways in which the American political left has been successful (marriage equality, abortion rights, transgender rights, etc.) and if one considers the ways in which the American political right has been successful (economic policy, global capitalism, gun rights, labor policy, etc.) then what one see is a kind of "default setting" in the United States toward liberalism (Hoak 2018). What we imagine as the two binary political poles are, in fact, different types of celebration of individual freedom. When I use the term liberal, I use it to mean the underlying order that sustains both neoliberal discourse *and* the apparent difference between classical and egalitarian liberalism as represented by the American political right and left, respectively.

But why, exactly, is celebration of individualism problematic? In his book, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen argues that this apparent freedom is maintained through a paradoxically illiberal relationship to a state that enforces liberalism as "tacit consent" (Deneen 2018, 90) upon its subjects. He writes, "Liberalism…culminates in two ontological points: the liberated individual and the controlling state" (Deneen 2018, 38). What this means is that "the state does not merely serve as a referee between contesting individuals; in securing

our capacity to engage in productive activities, especially commerce, it establishes a condition in reality that existed in theory only in the state of nature: the ever-increasing achievement of the autonomous individual" (Deneen 2018, 49). What he means here is that the conditions at work in the "natural" world, as imagined by liberalism—meaning a free, independent individual—is in fact a condition created by the state, rather than the reflection of a seemingly natural process. This paradox is illustrated succinctly in Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum, "There is no alternative" (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 1980), meaning that liberalism, a political philosophy based on the "natural" existence of individual liberty, is the only available option. A person is free, in other words, in a liberal order, to choose anything, so long as that person chooses liberalism. This liberal order is naturalized and reproduced through rituals of ideological recognition, as argued by Louis Althusser.

Althusser famously argued that we might imagine that capitalism enforces its dictates solely through "repressive state apparatuses" (RSAs) like the police, who serve to protect the material interests of the bourgeoises. However, capitalism also manages to reinforce—and then reproduce—its dictates through "ideological state apparatuses" (ISAs) like schools, churches, cinema, or the theatre. These ISAs not only overtly teach bourgeois values, they also serve to reproduce capitalist subjects through what he calls "rituals of ideological recognition." In these rituals, a person confirms the truth of their existence as an independent subject, and thus the truth of the existence of their sense of self which appears to emerge "naturally" through what seem to be their own thoughts. That person then imagines that they choose capitalism as if it springs from their own worldview rather than as a system that has been imposed from without (Althusser 2014). One of these rituals of ideological recognition is theatre, wherein a spectator identifies with a protagonist, which confirms for the spectator that they, like the characters on the stage, are also a being whose core selfhood exists in their own internal psychological thoughts (Althusser 1969). A spectator must, after all, read the subtext (understand the internal state of the characters) to make sense of the play. Like theatre, baptism as staged in *BioShock Infinite* is also a ritual of ideological recognition.

It is worth pointing out that the theology of *BioShock Infinite* does not adhere to any specific religious denomination or tradition. It is also only marginally Christian (although it is obviously meant to be read as Christian), since the citizens of Columbia worship Jesus, but also the Prophet Comstock and the Founding Fathers of the United States, specifically George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. The player first enters the city during the celebration of Founder's Day, a mixture between a religious celebration and the Fourth of July. Of course, even in the United States, nationalism and religion are often conflated in the minds of many practitioners and critics, so much so that in popular discourse, Americans tend to consider the term "Christian" to refer primarily to the religious right, as argued by Mathew Bowman in his recent *Christian: The Politics of a Word in America*, which discusses the ways in which the word Christian is not, nor has ever been, a monolithic notion within the United States. *BioShock Infinite*, however, is not engaged with this kind of religious nuance. Instead, the religion of Columbia is representative of the very kinds of attitudes that Bowman critiques in his book. That is to say, the religion of Columbia is an amalgamation of vague notions of the Christian right in America—

nationalist, conservative, traditionalist, jingoistic, authoritarian—rather than any specific denomination, tradition, or practice.

The same could be said of the practice of baptism as represented in the game. Certainly, baptism means something different, and is practiced differently, among a wide range of Christian sects. *BioShock Infinite*, however, while it utilizes baptism as a thematic element, is not representative of any specific denomination or practice. In the first of three baptisms in the game (or at least, the first three crucial narrative moments where the symbolism of baptism is used for thematic effect), the player character, Booker DeWitt, must accept baptism in order to gain entrance to Columbia. This baptism is done by immersion. In the second baptism, Booker kills Comstock by smashing his head over a small baptismal font (literalizing the death metaphor in the baptismal ritual) that might be used for sprinkling. In the third and final baptism, Booker is killed by Elizabeth, a non-player character whom Booker was initially sent to Columbia to rescue, when she immerses him—holding him underwater until he is dead, again literalizing the death metaphor in the baptismal ritual. This inconsistency of religious practice, rather than revealing a set of coherent beliefs worth interrogating, shows a certain discursive moment where the symbolism of baptism is co-opted—deracinated from any specific religious context—for a cultural, rather than a religious purpose. By culture, I mean what Deneen calls an "anticulture" where "the language of culture is advanced as a means of rendering liberal humanity's detachment from specific cultures" (Deneen 2018, 89). It is this discursive moment—represented by baptism as a rite of passage into a shared, liberal mono-culture, rather than a specific, religious culture—that I am interested in, rather than the game's theology (or lack thereof). To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek (who was referring to the Wachowskis and their 1999 film, *The Matrix*): I think that there is something absurd in trying to extricate a coherent theology from *BioShock Infinite*, or attempting to use the game in an ecumenical debate. Ken Levine is not a theologian. Rather, what is interesting, in all of its narrative and theological difficulties, is that the game contains, in its "very inconsistencies, the antagonisms of our ideological and social predicament" (Žižek 2005, 198-199).

These antagonisms are also found in what Victor Turner calls the "social drama," which is "the empirical unit of social process from which has been derived, and is constantly being derived, the various genres of cultural performance" (Turner 1986, 92-93). Through social drama, "we are enabled to observe the crucial principles of the social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance at successive points in time." In these performances, we see the "values and anti-values" of a society because they are "revealed in the often passionate action of the social drama, and thus becomes part of a community's reflexive store, its knowledge of itself" (Turner 1986, 92). These "social dramas" are manifest in all kinds of social performances: the literary, the communal, and the religious.

The key operating principle of these dramas is what Turner calls "liminality"—a "threshold" space where "latent conflicts become manifest" (Turner 1986, 92). Describing liminality within ritual performance, Turner writes, "Rituals *separated* specified members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in limbo* that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then *returned* them, changed in some way,

to mundane life" (Turner 1986, 25, emphasis in original). The liminality of the limbo space serves to "dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and 'play' with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception" (Turner 1986, 25). The social dramas enacted through rites of passage and other rituals are "the scene and time for the emergence of society's deepest values in the form of sacred dramas" (Turner 1986, 102). However, the liminal is not relegated wholly to religious ritual. "Society's deepest values" can also be its shared, liberal mono-culture and its manifestations in secular ritual and art. "Religion, like art, *lives* insofar as it is performed" (Turner 1986, 48, emphasis in original). Much like in a religious ritual, an artist, "in his presentations on the stage, in the book, on canvas, in marble, in music, or in towers and houses, reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all other cultures build crooked" (Turner 1986, 122). In other words, ritual performance, whether the religious or the non-religious, reveals what Žižek would call the "antagonisms" of our particular ideological moment. What makes *BioShock Infinite*'s baptism sequence interesting is its use of a particular religious ritual to suggest a supposed universal truth about the liberal subject, but at the same time reveal the antagonistic relationship between liberal ideology and actual freedom of choice.

As I have mentioned before, while baptism in *BioShock Infinite* does not adhere to any specific theological framework, it still functions in the game *as* a ritual or social drama, which transitions the player from pre-baptism to post-baptism, and reveals, in the paradoxes of its staging, the antagonisms that are work within contemporary liberal discourse. What does the game itself tells us about the symbolism of baptism in contemporary culture, as co-opted by Levine, and its function within the internal logic of the text? Baptism's significance is introduced to the player fairly early in the game during the opening Founder's Day sequence via an "audio log."

A common narrative device in many story-driven video games is the audio log—a brief snippet of world-building information, handily provided to the player via some kind of recording conveniently placed somewhere for the player to find. These audio logs help provide information to the player that is relevant to understanding the world of the game, but that may not make sense had it been inserted directly into the plot structure of the game. In *BioShock Infinite*, one such audio log (referred to as a voxophone in the game), titled "Everyman, All at Once," was recorded within the world of the game by Comstock. He says, "One man goes into the waters of baptism. A different man comes out, born again. But who is that man who lies submerged? Perhaps that swimmer is both sinner and saint, until he is revealed unto the eyes of man." Quantum physics (or at least, popular, science-fiction understandings of quantum physics) plays a major role in the world of the game, making Comstock's analogy particularly apt: a person undergoing baptism is essentially an unobserved particle, existing as two people at once—sinner and saint—until "he is revealed unto the eyes of man." Baptism in *BioShock Infinite* is not so much about any specific theological meaning, but is, rather, about the possibilities that could emerge from such a ritual. If the old self dies during the ritual of baptism, and a new self is reborn when that person emerges, then who is the self that lies submerged?

While Booker is baptized twice within the game, the first baptism is a requirement for an entrant into Columbia to become "clean" from the "Sodom below." The second

baptism is the focus of this paper. In this baptism, the game ends as Booker lies submerged in the water—"everyman, all at once"—while it is the player (rather than the player-character), after the game is over, who has now come through the liminal space and emerged on the other side of the ritual. Ostensibly, during the liminal space of immersion, the player's choices for who they might become and what kind of world they might create upon surfacing are limitless. However, this freedom to choose acts as a ritual of ideological recognition, confirming for the player that they are, in fact, a coherent, pre-existent subject who will now choose capitalism because any non-liberal alternative is portrayed within *BioShock Infinite* as a kind of authoritarianism from which a liberal state is seen as emancipation.

Despite choice being an important thematic component of the game, critics like Betsy Brey have noted the ways in which *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative about choice and its consequences clashes with the lack of choice offered to its player. Essentially, the only real "choice" offered to the player is to quit the game entirely. As Brey writes, there is a "tension" at work within *BioShock Infinite*, which is that "[a] story about the ethics of choice and the value of freedom to make choices is at odds with a digital representative model which directly limits the player's ability to perform those same actions" (Brey 2017, 106). However, in the same way that a submerged person is both sinner and saint, the notion that *BioShock Infinite* removes choice is both true and false. The game attempts to place the player in the position of being able to imagine what might happen after emerging from the liminal space of baptism. However, the game itself fails to imagine any kind of viable alternative to the world as it is currently constituted. Within its own narrative, the game is unable to see any difference between white supremacy and a revolution against that hegemony because both appear to be a type of oppression. While the game seems to be encouraging the player to make choices outside of the game, the game also seems to be discouraging the player from questioning the liberal order. This is not only because baptism in the game acts as a ritual of ideological recognition that confirms for the player the truth of their pre-existent identity and, by extension, their supposed naturalness as a liberal subject. It is also because the game's narrative stages an antagonism between Zachary Comstock and Daisy Fitzroy (theocratic white supremacy vs. violent overthrow of said theocracy), thus confirming for the liberal subject the truth that all kinds of different political positions that some might consider extreme are of equal political weight or impact upon liberal individuals. The player then sees exactly what Booker sees: that Comstock and Fitzroy are simply different shades of the same kind of illiberal authoritarianism.

Daisy Fitzroy and *BioShock Infinite*'s Race Problem

One of the most common criticisms of *BioShock Infinite* from both the popular (Smith 2016) and the academic (Mafe 2015) spheres is its comparisons between Comstock, the leader of a nationalist, racist, city-state; and Daisy Fitzroy, a black woman, and leader of the *Vox Populi*—a revolutionary group seeking the overthrow of Columbia. After seeing the destruction wrought on Columbia by the *Vox* (the in-game shorthand that the inhabitants of Columbia use to refer to the *Vox Populi*), Booker comments, "The only difference between Comstock and Fitzroy is how you spell the name." In a 2016 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Ken Levine was asked, "I know there are people…who are bothered by what happens to

Daisy Fitzroy…They basically think, if I can use a 2016 metaphor, that you created a game in which Donald Trump founded a xenophobic colony in the sky, only to learn that the Mexicans really are rapists." Rather than using this moment as a way to add nuance or depth to the interpretation of Fitzroy, Levine responded, "Oppression turns them into oppressors. And that's the cruelest aspect of oppression" (Suellentrop 2016). Levine here is arguing that all kinds of oppression are equal, rather than as manifestations of hegemonic power relations. This can be seen in such discussions online comparing the use of the n-word to the use of the word "cracker," or in liberal celebrations of the freedom of speech that would see someone like far right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones have an equal voice in public life to anyone else. Of course, a liberal, like Bill Maher (host of the HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher*), would, and did, say that Jones is repugnant, but his right to speak—representative of "every side"—is what sustains the liberal order (Thomsen 2018).

In the world of the game, Columbia exists as a white supremacist, segregationist state where people of color are rendered invisible to the player at the outset of their journey into the city, meaning that no persons of color are initially present during the game's opening Founder's Day sequence (although this changes during the raffle sequence, discussed below, which serves as the inciting incident of the game). Later, as the player progresses does it become even more apparent (in things like Columbia's segregated bathrooms, and the racist, revisionist history in the game's museum, the Hall of Heroes) that this city is a white supremacist state with a deep and near-bursting revolutionary energy. The leader of the revolution is a woman named Daisy Fitzroy. Fitzroy was blamed for the death of Comstock's wife, accused of murdering her in cold blood. In reality, Comstock murdered his wife after she discovered the truth that his gift of "prophecy" was really more of a charlatan's trick, involving quantum projection, rather than some kind of metaphysical power. Falsely accused of murder, Fitzroy soon became the leader of the *Vox*. A major plotline of the game is that Booker is asked by Fitzroy to retrieve weapons from a gunsmith named Chen Lin. In exchange, Fitzroy will give Booker an airship so that he can escape Columbia. Unable to find the weapons, Booker and Elizabeth enter an alternate dimension where Fitzroy has won the revolution and razed most of Columbia. At this point, the *Vox* replace the city guards as the primary enemies of the game, leading Booker to suggest that Comstock and Fitzroy are basically the same. Not all scholars agree that the representation of Fitzroy is without its redeeming qualities, however. Writing about Fitzroy, Diana Adesola Mafe argues that while the game may have "complicity" in "racial stereotyping," its racist images may also have, quoting Jennifer González, "potential to be 'redeployed for counterhegemonic purpose[s]'" (Mafe 2015, 98). For Mafe, the game's biggest accomplishment is its recognition of black bodies as significant. The first hour or so of the game features a stroll through idyllic, Norman Rockwell-esque Americana. The citizens of Columbia are celebrating their independence day (the day they seceded from the US). Music is playing, the colors are vibrant and beautiful, the storefronts are inviting. Well-dressed people are outside with their families, singing, dancing, and participating in various fairground games. What may be apparent to the player—and apparent because of its absence—is that there are no black bodies in Columbia. Mafe suggests that "[t]he apparent perfection of the city is an early test for the

player, who must filter through the reasons why Columbia seems ominous … *BioShock Infinite* carefully hints at underlying ideologies of racism early on as it builds up to more overt pedagogical commentaries" (Mafe 2015, 99). One major accomplishment in the game's representation of race, according to Mafe, quoting Toni Morrison, is that "if 'the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a grateful, even generous, liberal gesture,' then *BioShock Infinite* puts the player in the habit of *seeing* race and thus makes evasion more difficult" (Mafe 2015, 108, emphasis in original). In other words, the game successfully makes race a key aspect of its narrative, through both its absence in the beginning and its presence throughout the rest of the game. However, Mafe argues that the representation of Daisy Fitzroy is ultimately disappointing, writing, "In its summation of Daisy's story and the silencing of her emblematic voice through death, the game arguably falls short in its otherwise commendable ability to challenge and complicate hegemonic models" (Mafe 2015, 117).

While I agree that having a woman of color as a major character in a blockbuster video game is a positive step by itself, the major problem, to echo Mafe, is that the game fails to "challenge and complicate hegemonic models" by offering any kind of alternative. The world of the game is either a violent, white supremacist dystopia, or a violent, anarchist uprising. In order to mitigate this antagonism, the game simply refuses to make a choice; or rather, it suggests that the only "correct" path is individualism since all alternative ways of imaging society are seen as equally destructive. As Maureen Ramsay writes, under liberalism, "individuals are more real or fundamental than collective entities" because those entities are seen as "just hypothetical constructs," therefore, "any political value that appeals to the social whole is…either at best nonsensical, or at worst a totalitarian threat to the interests of the individual" (Ramsay 1997, 9). The game most effectively presents this celebration of individualism through its staging of baptism. It also stages this failure to offer meaningful choice in its most controversial and talked-about moment: the raffle scene.

Near the beginning of the game, as the player is exploring Columbia, Booker receives a note that reads "Whatever you do, DON'T PICK NUMBER 77!" As the player continues to explore, he or she encounters signs pointing towards a raffle. The level is designed to corral the player to that destination. When Booker arrives, there is a group singing popular American folk song "Goodnight, Irene" in chorus near a stage where a young, beautiful woman with a basket of baseballs offers one to Booker. The number on the baseball that Booker "chooses" is "77." Soon, the curtain on the stage is removed and what is revealed is an interracial couple, surrounded by blackface images. It soon becomes apparent that this is a kind of lynch mob, with the baseballs being used to stone the couple. The winning raffle number is 77, meaning that Booker "wins" the prize of being the first person allowed to throw the ball. The player is given a choice: throw the baseball at the couple, or throw it at the announcer. Since this particular choice is timed, the player has only a limited amount of time to make a decision. Should they not make a choice, Booker then puts the ball down, saying that he will not participate. (There is also, as Betsy Brey has pointed out, the "never-stated option to stop playing the game" (Brey 2017, 109)). Regardless of the player's decision, before the ball is thrown, a police officer recognizes Booker as the "false shepherd," which leads to a violent confrontation that continues until

the end of the game. Brey writes, regarding this choice, that “it does not matter. The player’s choice does not matter. It does not make a single difference to the entire story whether or not Booker fights this atrocity or if he actually attempts to stone them” (Brey 2017, 109).

[Q] THROW AT COUPLE [E] THROW AT ANNOUNCER
JEREMIAH FINK: Oh, looks like we got a shy one here! Ha ha ha…We’ve gotta do something about that!

The raffle sequence serves as the primary inciting incident of the game, and also as an introduction into the racist state of Columbia. Before this moment, the player saw Columbia as a (mostly) idyllic, utopian space—a kind of imagined Americana that Martin T. Buinicki describes as the game’s staging of nostalgia. And then, suddenly, in the raffle scene, the violence that maintains the nostalgia, or what Žižek would call “dictatorship in democracy…the invisible order which sustains us” (Fiennes 2013), reveals itself in contrast to the beauty of the world we have just borne witness to. This clash between the idyllic nature of the city as first encountered and the reality of its racist, violent nature (the Columbia police’s slogan is “Protecting Our Race”) is an essential part of the game. It also reveals one of the game’s other main themes: the illusion of choice. As a meditation on the nature of choice, the key moment in the raffle sequence is not the choice to either stone the couple or the announcer, but rather, the key moment is when the player receives the note saying, “DON’T PICK NUMBER 77!” This suggests that the player’s path is pre-determined, rather than a product of choice. During the raffle sequence, neither Booker nor the player truly have any control. This is not the only moment in the game that calls attention to both the player and the player character’s lack of meaningful agency. *BioShock Infinite* uses other moments of metatextuality to comment on its own themes of choice and force.

Choice, Metatextuality, and Baptism

The game begins with Booker on a rowboat, brought to a lighthouse by two mysterious persons, and then subsequently left on a dock to stand in the rain. With only a few instructions, Booker makes his way to the top of the lighthouse, where he uses bells in a particular order (as marked by a scroll, a key, and a sword) to send himself up in the sky toward Columbia. This moment is meant to be awe-inspiring—a vision of what heaven might look like. The city greets newcomers by telling them that they are in a "new Eden" with "a last chance for redemption." One non-player character describes this scene as "Heaven…or as close as we'll see till Judgment Day." Booker is soon greeted by robed individuals singing the popular Christian hymn "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" and making their way toward a preacher. In order to progress through the game, the player must accept baptism at the hands of the preacher.

PREACHER WITTING: Is it someone new? Newly come to Columbia to be washed clean before our Prophet, our Founders, and our Lord?

In experiencing this particular moment, a player named Breem Malmberg went public with a demand that Valve, the owners of the digital storefront Steam which sold him the game, refund his money. Malmberg was concerned that this particular, unavoidable baptism scene, occurring within the first thirty minutes of the game, would be akin to committing "blasphemy." In his open letter to Valve, he writes, "The player is forced to make a choice which amounts to extreme blasphemy in my religion (Christianity) in order to proceed any further - and am therefor [*sic*] forced (in good conscience) to quit playing and not able to experience approx. 99% of the content in the game" (Hernandez 2013). Ken Levine noted in an interview that he was surprised that there had not been more people like Malmberg (Crecente 2013). Even a non-religious player, Tina Amini, experienced a similar resistance to this particular moment, saying, "That was one of the

few scenes in *Infinite* that I didn't necessarily enjoy. I'm not a religious person, so I didn't like being forced to think that baptism is a significant event. I filed it away as a storytelling mechanism and moved on" (Hernandez 2013). Both Amini and Malmberg use the term "force"—suggesting that what made them uncomfortable was the way in which the illusion of choice was stripped from them. What could explain this aversion? What does it mean when we say that a game forces us to do something, and why is it different from a film or theatrical production forcing the spectator to watch the narrative play out in a pre-determined way?

One answer is, as Grant Tavinor writes, that "[c]haracter motivations have always been a crucial aspect of stories, and understanding [how] narrative works is usually if not always partly a case of understanding the motivations of the characters." However, "the interpretation of a game…partly depends on the understanding of the explicit and implied mental states of *player-characters*" (Tavinor 2017, 24, emphasis in original). This means that unlike the passive role of the spectator in traditional theatre or film, the video game player is not a "spectator" at all. Rather, they are an active part in the narrative process, where the meaning of the text is partially dependent on the internal mechanisms that make up what we normally read in dramatic characters as an audience member, and also dependent on the player assigning meaning to the actions of the player character by assessing his or her own internal motivations for making those decisions. Unlike a dramatic play where the audience makes meaning through understanding the internal states of the characters, the internal state of the player and the internal state of the player character *are the same state*. When Booker chooses to either throw the baseball at the interracial couple or not, Booker's reasoning for making either choice is the same reasoning that the player has for making the choice. Thus, for Malmberg and Amini, being forced to make what is ultimately a very personal choice, whether or not to participate in a virtual baptism, struck both of them as problematic, regardless of the differences in their religious views. What players expect when they play a game is freedom. However, this imagined freedom is only an illusion, as the player is limited by the options offered only within the parameters of the game itself.

The self-referential 2013 video game *The Stanley Parable*, for instance, plays very adeptly with this concept of agency. In this game, the player takes on the role of Stanley, a nondescript white-collar employee at a nondescript desk job, whose daily duty consists of pushing a series of buttons when a prompt appears on his computer screen to do so. One day, all of Stanley's coworkers have disappeared, prompting the player to search the office for the missing coworkers. The missing coworkers turn out to be a red herring—the player never finds them. What emerges instead is a game about the nature of choice in both games and late capitalism: what you do in a game (obey "orders" from on-screen prompts, pressing the required buttons at the required time) is exactly what you do at your job (obey orders from a boss, pushing the required buttons at the required time). As Stanley, the player explores the office, experiencing a series of "endings" while a narrator provides commentary on the experience. After each "ending," the player is looped back to the beginning ("the end is never the end is never the end" loops the on-screen text), with the option of exploring the game in a radically different way, experiencing a new ending each time. During one such ending, the player is told, "Push escape and press quit. There's no

other way to beat this game. As long as you keep moving forward, you'll be walking someone else's path. Stop now and it will be the only true choice" (Wreden and Pugh 2013). Arriving at a similar conclusion to the narrator in *The Stanley Parable*, Martin T. Buinicki writes, "The only real choice *BioShock Infinite* offers, then, the only escape from its anti-utopian nightmare, is not to play at all" (Buinicki 2016, 734). Similar to *Stanley Parable*, though not as explicitly, *BioShock Infinite* also deals with the nature of choice in video games in metatextual ways. Also like *The Stanley Parable*, it accomplishes this metatextuality through both narrative and gameplay elements.

At the end of *BioShock Infinite*, it is revealed that Booker and Comstock are the same person from alternate realities. Before the events of the game, Booker participated in significant atrocities, such as the massacres at Wounded Knee, the Boxer Rebellion, and the killing of striking workers as a Pinkerton agent. In search of redemption, Booker sought out baptism as a way to cleanse him from his sins. In one reality, he accepted the baptism and emerged as Zachary Comstock, going on to found the city of Columbia. In this reality, Comstock employed the services of a brilliant scientist named Rosalind Lutece, who discovered that she could make Columbia float in the air by suspending atoms in space-time indefinitely. She also discovered that the world contained "tears"—or windows into other realities—including a reality where she was a man named Robert Lutece. Through these tears, Comstock saw that in the future, his daughter, the "lamb," would destroy the "Sodom below." After discovering that he was unable to father children, Comstock sought the services of Lutece to bring him a child. Lutece contacted her "twin" Robert, who had the perfect candidate to bring.

Robert found Booker DeWitt, a man who, in another reality, chose not to accept the baptism, and who was working as deeply-in-debt private detective. This man had a daughter named Anna. Robert agreed to pay off Booker's debts ("bring us the girl and wipe away the debt") in exchange for Anna. Booker agreed and Robert took Anna (whose name was later changed by Comstock to Elizabeth) through a tear, giving her to Rosalind and Comstock. Years later, wracked by regret for what they had done, Robert and Rosalind decide to bring Booker—who was unaware that Elizabeth is his daughter—to Columbia to rescue Elizabeth ("bring us the girl and wipe away the debt.")

Elizabeth, it turns out, was a woman of extraordinary ability. She had the power not just to see tears, but to open them. When she was younger, Elizabeth had the ability to even create tears and thus to visit any reality she wanted. The Luteces built a device known as the Siphon to dampen her abilities. At the end of the game, Booker and Elizabeth destroy the Siphon, allowing Elizabeth to see and travel to all possible worlds. Elizabeth then guides Booker to "where it started"—the river in which he refused the baptism. At this place, he learns the truth about Elizabeth's identity and about his own past. When multiple versions of Elizabeth reveal to Booker at the very end that he is Booker and he is also Comstock, he says, "No…I'm both." The Elizabeths then "baptize" him, holding him underwater until he drowns, preventing the emergence of both Booker and Comstock. He is neither a sinner nor a saint, but "everyman, all at once," an unobserved particle whose nature is never made manifest within the game and so remains perpetually in limbo.

The metatextuality of the game begins with the game's reliance on repetition, a key feature of what it means to play a video game. Kiri Miller writes, "Playing games, playing music, and playing a role onstage are all forms of collaborative performance, framed by rules and repertoires, structured through repetition" (Miller 2012, 5). This "repetition" can take on multiple forms in a video game. It can be the repetition of arcade-style games, where the purpose of the game is not to reach a defined end, but rather to repeat for the sake of achieving a new high score. It can also be a return to a particular video game in order to play it again. But it can also be the repetition of a skill acquired in a particular game, like shooting in a first-person video game, or looking for resources or loot in the environment of a role-playing game, both actions that the player will perform hundreds if not thousands of times as they work to reach the end goal. In all of these senses, repetition is not just an incidental feature of video games; repetition is built into their structure. Aware of this architectural feature of video games, *BioShock Infinite* cleverly uses repetition in a metatextual way.

Accomplishing the game's goals necessitates a series of repetitious actions: searching rooms for useful items and voxophones, engaging in combat, pressing the same keys to move through the environment, and so on. The repetition in the case of the narrative structure is less immediately clear. The attempt to rescue Elizabeth is repetitious in the structure of the plot because this series of actions has been enacted before. When Booker first arrives in Columbia, he is confronted by Robert and Rosalind who offer him a coin to flip. After flipping the coin, it lands on heads. When doing so, Robert Lutece is wearing a slate signboard with "heads" and "tails" written on it. Tally marks have been placed on the board, with twelve visible marks on the front, all tallied under "heads." After the flipping the coin, it reveals heads, and the Luteces walk away, revealing the back of the signboard with 110 more tally marks on the back, all indicating heads. The suggestion is that Booker (or a version of him from another reality) has been to Columbia in an attempt to rescue Elizabeth 122 times before and failed each time (although, this does not become apparent until the end of the game). At the beginning of the game, as the Luteces are rowing Booker towards the lighthouse that he will use to enter Columbia, Rosalind laments that "one does not undertake an experiment knowing one HAS failed." The emphasis suggests that the entire exercise of sending Booker always has and always will end in failure.

[F] FLIP COIN

Ken Levine also uses metatextual game design elements to highlight the lack of choice as a major theme in *BioShock Infinite*; after all, the game is about a character whose inevitable end *has already happened*. For instance, in the coin flip sequence, rather than simply making that moment an animation sequence without any input from the player, the player is instead forced into a situation where they are unable to progress unless they press a button to participate (on the PC, a player must press "F" to flip the coin); otherwise, there is no other way to continue. The idea that the player has to press a button to progress the narrative is a common feature in a lot of video games. Usually, when utilized, the player will be in some kind of space that they are free to explore. When the player is ready, the pressing of a specific button will trigger the next sequence in the game. *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* has an infamous moment, for instance, at a funeral for a fallen solider, where the player must "Press F to Pay Respects," but only after he or she has finished exploring the funeral environment (Schofield and Condrey 2014). *BioShock Infinite*, however, uses this device at a moment precisely where it is irrelevant. There is no space to explore. The player simply must press a button. As a device, it is used in this instance to intentionally call attention to a player's lack of agency in the narrative. As another example, the baptism sequence near the beginning—a requirement for both the player and the narrative to progress—makes the player press F to "accept baptism." Why include the button press at all if the baptism sequence is predetermined, unless the act of pressing the button is part of the game's metatextual meditation on choice?

The moment that makes this most clear is the final sequence, after the Siphon is destroyed, when Elizabeth reveals to Booker (and the player) the truth about their relationship. Elizabeth takes Booker to the moment when, in another timeline, he accepted the baptism and became Comstock. After rejecting it (for the second time), Booker tells Elizabeth, "You think a dunk in the river's gonna change the things I've done? Let's get out

of here." Elizabeth then takes Booker to the moment that he gave Anna to Robert. Booker enters the room with Anna's crib, saying that he won't give Anna to him. Elizabeth responds, "Booker…you don't leave this room until you do. You can wait as long as you want. Eventually, you'll give him what he wants." That particular line "you can wait as long as you want" seems to be speaking to both the Booker and the player. It is alerting the player that they are free to wait, or walk around the room, but no amount of waiting will create another option. No matter what the player does, Booker will give the baby to Robert. When Booker finally hands the baby over, he exclaims, "What choice do I have?" The answer to this rhetorical question is that he has none. *BioShock Infinite* presents the illusion of choice as a feature of its design, rather than as a flaw.

To return briefly to *The Stanley Parable*: during the game, a narrator describes the player's actions. In one ending of the game, Stanley runs around a room, confused, wondering who this voice is in his head that keeps telling him to do things. He assumes that he must be dreaming, so he tries various methods to force himself to wake up. Unfortunately for Stanley, he realizes that he is not dreaming. He dies, and is found the next day by a young lady on her way to work, who sees what she believes to be an obviously insane dead person. The narrator says, "In that moment, she thought how lucky she was to be normal. 'I am sane. I am in control of my mind. I know what is real and what isn't.' It was comforting to think this, and, in a certain way, seeing this man made her feel better." The woman then remembers her very important business meeting, where she would have to impress very important people, whose impressions of her would affect her entire career, and by extension, her entire life (Wreden and Pugh 2013). The irony is obvious: Stanley, a man who pushes buttons all day, is no crazier than the woman who also works on a routine schedule.

Like *The Stanley Parable*, *BioShock Infinite* places both the player and the player character in a situation where their agency is limited—and the game is aware of it. No matter what the player or Booker does, they *will* give the baby to Robert. No matter what Malmberg or Amini would prefer, Booker *must* be baptized. The irony here is two-fold. The first irony is that video games often work to recreate the very kind of purposefulness that religion creates. However, *BioShock Infinite* stages its own antagonism as it calls attention to its constructedness. As Christopher Douglas writes,

> We look for something that might assure us of design and intention, which is what religion does, but it's also what games do. Games therefore do not threaten film's status so much as they threaten religion, because they perform the same existentially soothing task as religion. They proffer a world of meaning, in which we not only have a task to perform, but a world that is made with us in mind (Douglas 2002).

In other words, in a world that is a fundamentally meaningless place, religion (and video games) create meaning by offering "a world that is made with us in mind." Events in the real world happen by chance. A person may find a lost key in an office building and never discover its owner or the door that it opens. A person may find a loose hairpin on the floor and never use it to pick a lock. Unlike the real world however, the world of *BioShock Infinite* is filled with moments of intentionality. Early in the game, the player finds (or may find, depending on the player) a locked chest. Nearby the chest is a voxophone telling the

player that the key is in a nearby building. Sure enough, the player can find the key and open the chest. The world of the game is littered with loose hairpins, conveniently allowing Elizabeth, a skilled lockpick, to open many doors throughout the world. Or consider the many voxophones littered throughout the world, conveniently there to provide information to the player. *BioShock Infinite* is not trying to hide its constructedness. Instead, it makes it clear to the player, through in-game devices (press F), that the kinds of choices being offered within the game are an illusion.

The second irony, which is related to the first, is that despite calling attention to its constructedness via its metatextuality, the game asks the player to accept its worldview anyway. It does this through its second baptism. Baptism for *BioShock Infinite* is ostensibly about choice—passing the player through a liminal space where they become an unobserved particle, who can emerge from the ritual with any choice available to them. However, regardless of its metatextual meditations, the game *does* force its player into its liminal, ritual space. What the game stages then, is not choice, but rather, the very tensions that are at work within the liberal order: that we supposedly choose our political order, but there is also no alternative since any non-liberal society is untenable. The game's two main political orders, the racist state of Columbia and the anarchist, violent chaos of the *Vox Populi*, are seen as two kinds of political extremes, with "freedom" situated within the middle. This freedom is not staged within the world of the game itself. It is placed, instead, within the mind of the player, thus recapitulating within the player's mental space the same antagonisms at work within the game: choice and force.
These multiple ambivalences, or antagonisms, throughout the game (the game is simultaneously about choice and force; the player becomes "everyman, all at once"; the game oscillates between two, equally troubling authoritarianisms) are a crucial part of the functioning of the liberal order. As Natasha Lushetich writes,

> [A]mbivalence between the world of play and reality… simultaneously cultivates an aura of undecidability which goes hand in hand with diminished responsibility, since the subject cannot be pinned down to a clear position. Not only are the subjects positions undecidable; they are further de-stabilised [*sic*] by the projected need to be mercurial and to adopt a variety of performative selves with poise and speed (Lushetich 2014, 103).

In other words, the ambivalences of *BioShock Infinite* are emblematic the desire of the liberal subject to be "everyman, all at once," or to adopt, in Lushetich's words, "a variety of performative selves." This is because performative selves are the flourishing of the pure liberal subject—a person for whom "choice" as an idea is more important than any outcome that choice might express. In the words of *BioShock Infinite*'s Elizabeth, "A choice is better than none, Mr. DeWitt. No matter what the outcome."

Let us return, briefly, to Grant Tavinor's argument that I discussed earlier in this article. Tavinor argues that in a traditional literary work, or even in watching a play, the reader or spectator makes sense of the work by understanding the psychological motivations of the characters. Sometimes those motivations are made explicit. In a realist drama, those motivations are hidden, requiring the audience to make sense of someone else's psychology. In a video game, however, the spectator *is* the performer. The player and the player character share psychological motivations. As Tavinor writes, "given that

what is depicted in interactive works stems partly from the decisions of the player, interpreting the characters within a game narrative may draw not only on the features actually represented by the game, but also on the player-character's merely imagined reasons for acting in the gameworld" (Tavinor 2017, 29). For *BioShock Infinite*, the lack of a resolution—or rather, its use of ambiguity in its staging of baptism—allows the player to confirm his or herself as a proper liberal subject as the player identifies not only with the stated goals of the game's protagonist, but with his or her own "imagined reasons for acting" out those goals. As a ritual of ideological recognition, *BioShock Infinite* confirms the player as a person who has limitless choice—"everyman, all at once." Additionally, in its plot, the game suggests that all kinds of extremism are equally illiberal and therefore undesirable, thus encouraging the player to not only (mis)recognize him or herself as a liberal subject, but to choose the very liberal order from which that (mis)recognition arises. In calling attention to its own illusory choices through metatextual techniques, the game's final, unresolved tension is its tacit acknowledgement that its choice is only an illusion, but one in which it asks the player to (mis)recognize him or herself anyway.

Victor Turner argues that drama in its more traditional sense, and not just in the sense of the broader "social drama," uses what he calls "metalanguage" to comment on both itself as a work of art and on the social drama from which it is derived. "[T]he regressive machinery of spontaneous social drama, judicial and ritual," he writes, "attains only a limited degree of reflexivity, lying, as it does, on the same plane as the agonistic events being described" (Turner 1986, 107). In order for a social drama to become reflexive, it needs a "metalanguage for talking about the system in terms not derived from it" (Turner 1986, 106). This metalanguage is found in art which can not only "recapitulate the sequence of agonistic events," but can also "scrutinize and evaluate them." This "reenactment is framed as a performance, but it is a metaperformance, a performance about a performance" (Turner 1986, 106). *BioShock Infinite* is a metaperformance in that in that it comments on its own existence as a game, using metalanguage to call attention to its gameness. It is also a metaperformance in that it can "scrutinize and evaluate" the system from which it is derived. That scrutiny reveals that not only is liberalism seen as the only viable political option, but the act of choosing it is endowed with a quasi-religious, ritual significance *vis-à-vis* the game's staging of its final baptism sequence.

Conclusion

Regardless of any specific theological meaning of baptism, *BioShock Infinite*'s own internal use of the ritual is that a submerged person is "everyman, all at once" meaning that they are both "sinner and saint" until they are "revealed unto the eyes of man." The person who "goes into the waters of baptism" is both the player and the player character, Booker DeWitt. By leaving the player submerged at the end, *BioShock Infinite* stages a baptism that ostensibly brings the player into a liminal space from which any possibility might emerge. This is imagined as an act that follows the almost mystical logic of popular understandings of quantum mechanics—that it is multiple things at once, until observed. Up until this point, alternative, non-liberal possibilities for organizing the world have been represented as just another kind of totalitarianism.

Ironically, the game's liminal space—which imagines for and with the player that anything is possible—exists in tension with the notion that traditional narrative video games, as a medium, force the player down pre-determined paths, rather than offer what might be deemed "play" in a more radical sense. *BioShock Infinite* uses metatextual cues to create a meditation on the nature of choice in video games, concluding that games do compel their players along predetermined paths, in much the same way that the protagonist of *BioShock Infinite* is forced down a path that has been foreseen. Thus, the game stages its own antagonisms; it tacitly acknowledges the force that maintains the liberal order, and yet still sees it as the only available alternative.

Finally, the person who "comes out, born again," is now the player, not the player character. In other words, the ritual of baptism for the game is that the player and the player character are baptized together. During the liminal phase of the ritual, any possibility can, ostensibly, be imagined. Since the game ends at this point, the person who "emerges" is no longer the player and the player character, but just the player. In what way is the player now "born again"? Having now experienced two alternatives to liberalism, the player can now comfortably choose the liberal order, safe in the knowledge that this is the only choice that guarantees the very freedom to choose that allowed the choice in the first place. Like many traditional narrative mediums, video games are a ritual of ideological recognition. What the player (mis)recognizes in *BioShock* is the so-called freedom to choose a political order that upholds freedom—meaning, choice for its sake—over any kind of alternative.

All of this raises a key question: would this game still function as a ritual of ideological recognition even without the baptism? In some sense, yes. A player would still experience identification with a protagonist. The end of the game would still be a type of death that ends the performance, returning the player to the community. However, what makes *BioShock Infinite* different is that baptism endows the ritual of ideological recognition with a metaphysical significance. Baptism in the game is not only a religious rite, it works the same way as quantum mechanics (popularly understood)—that is to say, that, like Schrödinger's Cat, it is "everyman, all at once" until observed. In its lack of coherent theology, it is an empty signifier, devoid of any specific meaning *and* open to any possible interpretation the player might give it. Without a specific religious community to endow the ritual with meaning, the player endows the ritual with meaning as an individual. This ensures that the liberal order is not only naturalized through a ritual of ideological recognition; liberalism is also the answer to metaphysical questions regarding the nature of the universe.

While the game stages Thatcher's "no alternative," the question arises: *is* there any alternative? In the words of Frederic Jameson,

> To adapt Mrs Thatcher's famous dictum, there is no alternative to Utopia, and late capitalism seems to have no natural enemies …. What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historical alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available (Jameson 2005, xii).

BioShock Infinite thus stages not only the paradoxes, antagonisms, and ambivalences of its plot, but also the grand liberal paradox that for all of our freedoms, our horizons remain limited. This will remain true so long as the individual is the center of our social, historical, narrative, cultural, and cosmological framework.

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