

# A Slave Obeys: Capital Violence and Illusory Agency in *BioShock*

David Prihoda

Ottawa University, Kansas, USA

[david.prihoda@ottawa.edu](mailto:david.prihoda@ottawa.edu)

**Abstract:** The video game *BioShock*, developed by 2K Boston, depicts a world in which a laissez-faire capitalist named Andrew Ryan creates an underwater utopia called Rapture that is devoid of institutionalized oversight and entitles all of its citizens to their own production. Despite this exceptional aspiration, the game opens to a metropolis in disrepair; it showcases the broken endgame of the objectivist paradise it critiques (Yeates, 2015). Kevin Roozen suggests, in his paper “Writing is Linked to Identity,” that finding ways to engage students in a way that promotes selfhood is the key to engaging them as a community (2016). The brand of selfhood with which modern students in western capitalistic societies are familiar is often leveraged via excessive competition, and this suggests *BioShock* has unique insight to offer as a pedagogical locus (Kasser and Lin, 2016). Analyzing the inter-class competition within Rapture that caused the state of dissonance between its utopian ideals and dystopian practice leads to insight into the game’s take on Randian Objectivism and class inequality, an especially salient and relevant context to consider within the context of western economies replete with increasing levels of economic disparity and unrest (“Politics of Poverty”, 2010). In this essay, I approach *BioShock* with a Marxist perspective, aiming to showcase the game’s depictions of the social consequences for Rapture’s proletariat and bourgeoisie as meaningful insight into real-world class warfare. An important distinction I propose the game makes is in its depictions of agency, violence, and capitalism as intrinsically interconnected—they cannot be separated and are dependent on one another, because the sociological ecosystem established by the game’s narrative insists that each element is required; in so doing, my contention is that the game should be considered not only as a pop culture artifact, but as a legitimate piece of academic criticism in the vein of Marx’s *Manifesto*. I conclude that, in the game’s philosophical space, to be a successful capitalist, one requires agency without restriction, and the only way to exact that agency is through violence. Through its articulation of these concepts, *BioShock* functions as a useful vehicle in the search for accessible introductions to various economic, philosophical, and epistemological lessons.

**Keywords:** Video games, Bioshock, Violence, Capitalism, Agency

---

## 1. Background of Violence

In his work on violence in capitalism, philosopher Ricardo Gutierrez, a disciple of political theorist Slavoj Žižek, separates violence into subjective and objective categories. He notes the distinction as important because one propagates the other, stating that every “subjective violence” requires an “objective background;” he goes on to propose that this objective framing “contains a systemic and more perilous violence,” one which “prolongs and generates the very subjective violence that we are fighting and responding against” (2014).

Subjective violence, which is apparent and signals human mediums, contrasts with the objective environment that exists behind the scenes, influencing its actors to perform specific dramas (Gutierrez 2014). Ergo, the settings in which violent agents apply their force, be it physical or figurative, is conducive to those same agents executing and perpetuating violence. In the Rapture colony of *BioShock*, the city itself represents an objectively violent backdrop in which horrifying, genetically-altered denizens called Splicers perpetrate violence. To better understand the objective surroundings in which the interconnected themes play out in *BioShock*, it is best to first identify and describe how the game uses its setting as an organic backdrop for necessary brutality. The game’s philosophical playground is located within Capitalism, a space Wally Gordon, in *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, claims necessarily “means violence” (1997). And, psychologically speaking, one of the game’s primary deliverables is the act and sense of torture both the Splicers and the player must endure and employ, so the connection between their economic plight and the torturous inevitability of their mutually assured destruction is clear. As an underwater haven for the elite shrouded in secrecy, Rapture is a test case in a particular form of torture en masse: isolation.

Andrew Ryan, a flamboyant and idealistic businessman, created Rapture as a deliberately isolated city submerged beneath the Atlantic Ocean. Obsessed with abject agency and freedom, Ryan divorced himself and Rapture from civilized society in an effort to separate the wheat from the chaff, in the most extreme version of sensory deprivation. Over time, the physical isolation from society created conditions tantamount to a psychological experiment conducted in solitary confinement. Such circumstances are traumatic for their subjects. Akil and Lobel wrote about the effects confinement can have on prisoners’ psyches, indicating that the imprisoned are afflicted with “varying degrees of psychological pain,” such as “paranoia ... hallucinations, irrational anger ... and violent fantasies,” among other symptoms. (2018).

The subjects of Rapture are emotionally unstable, and their environment incubates their self-preserving rage into full-blown anarchic cruelty. Of course, such isolation also imposed a hard-cap on resources for these irrationally primed denizens to share; all imports were finite, constrained by a surface-to-sea supply chain. While the city sourced power and resources from volcanic vents, there was ever-present want and need for surface goods (as advertised by fliers in the section of the city called Fort Frolic, which claimed to have on offer the "latest surface fashions!"). Following an arduous inception—Rapture was built over the course of several years, with the process of shipping unprecedented amounts of bulk materials to the ocean floor, levying an extraordinary cost of time and money—competition was required as a means to distribute an insufficient stockpile, however unevenly.

Competition, necessary when dealing with such resource scarcity, heavily influences psychology. Gilbert et al came to the conclusion that it can have a "dark side," noting that "insecure social environments" can foster "hierarchical view[s]" within a population, leading to individuals "with a fear of rejection," and eventually to an "increase[d] vulnerability to depression, anxiety and stress" (2009). Epstein and Harackiewicz's study in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* clarifies this effect, stating that competitive structures can "have both positive and negative effects depending on the personality characteristics of the competing individual" (1992). It is thus established that Rapture was a pressure cooker of isolation, competition, and mental instability. In order to accurately assess the full effects of such circumstances on its population, it becomes necessary, then, to evaluate the psychological profiles of the citizens trapped therein.

### 1.1 Foreground of Violence

Andrew Ryan had hand-picked Rapture's initial population, forming it out of the people he viewed to be the "best examples" of humanity. Dubbed by their pater as the "best and brightest," this exclusive lot had to compete over the aforementioned finite pool of resources. Ryan's philosophy was such that he divided society into two demographics: "men" and "parasites." The surface world, amidst all of its politicking and judiciality, was filled with the "parasites" who took from others what they had not earned themselves, and Ryan "fled" them. Thus, he selected for the "men" who would produce and not leech from their neighbor's ingenuity. Such politics of exclusion are a consistent background for violence, regardless of Ryan's intentions. Andrew Ryan explicitly hand-picked the "best and brightest" from society to live in Rapture, where their ambitions and creativity could be realized, unrestricted by the rules and regulations of government, law, religion, and morality. The "best and brightest," for Ryan, included specific groups who could go unfettered by society in Rapture: "the artist" uncensored, "the scientist" unbound from "petty morality," "the great" unburdened by "the small" (*BioShock*). More specifically, those recruited to Rapture were eyed for their belief in Ryan's "Great Chain" philosophy of solely contending for one's "own interest": Ryan was an avowed devotee of the "Market" and its providence. His ideology is best described in Ayn Rand's manifesto, *Atlas Shrugged*, as spoken by the protagonist John Galt:

*"In proportion to the mental energy he spent, the man who creates a new invention receives but a small percentage of his value in terms of material payment . . . But the man who works as a janitor in the factory producing that invention, receives an enormous payment in proportion to the mental effort that his job requires of him" (2005).*

Ryan extolled the virtues of successful minds, venerating ideas and denigrating physical labor. He was an objectivist, through and through, prioritizing production just as Rand herself, who said "productive achievement" was the "noblest activity" (1992). Residents of Rapture were picked for having bought into this ideology, hooked on the incentives and believing in Ryan like a prophet (one such rube was Peach Wilkins, who fittingly describes in an audio diary found in the game both the initial allure and eventual disenchantment that was surely experientially typical for Rapture's citizenry: "We all come down here, figured we'd all be part of Ryan's Great Chain. Turns out Ryan's chain is made of gold, and ours are the sort with the big iron ball around your ankle"). With this hierarchy of output in mind, Ryan shepherded a flock of the "brightest" sheep, and promised them greatness in Rapture.

#### 1.1.1 Violent characters

Analysis of this recruited lot proves useful in sketching a trajectory of Rapture's course from its concept to its demise; they were the component parts, after all. The psychological profile of these select few presented Ryan with a populace predisposed to certain personality traits. Ryan's crème de la crème headed their froth in individual economic mugs: their personalities and success stories were formed in situations in which they were elite. However, in Rapture, they converged into a new echelon. Amongst other elites, a new pecking order must

be discerned: the market demands the best, and the best demands a relegation of the worst. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rapture's conception did not plan for sustainability and laborers brought on for initial construction had no accommodations waiting for them once the building was complete. A district in the city called "Pauper's Drop" formed out of the temporary housing in which they settled, and this stretch of eyesore was mostly ignored by Ryan, his sensibilities obscured by idealism. Unchecked incentives, gains, and losses without a safety net are rarely a precursor to a healthy society.

The objective background that Ryan erected was suddenly populated by subjects eager to (re)situate themselves on its competitive topography, albeit precariously, as they were situated without any assurances of safety or stability. And, psychologically speaking, the "brightest" were not predisposed to playing nicely together (as Rand would have it, anyway). This is a group composed, after all, of a few specific profiles selected by Ryan: the "previously wealthy," the sort who, according to a study conducted by Leckelt et al, are often more likely to exhibit "narcissism" and a tendency toward "increased risk-taking," notably netting the "lowest possible score" for agreeableness based on the studies' parameters (2022); the artists, who, as Brenda Booker et al note, frequently tally scores that are higher "on the personality dimensions of neuroticism and psychoticism" (2014); and the scientists, who notably self-report heavily prioritizing objectivity (Mahoney, 1979). In sum, a selection of risky and disagreeable narcissists, neurotic psychopaths, and objectivists all converged in an isolated underwater arena to compete in a zero-sum game.

After being granted access to the isolated confines of Ryan's submerged utopia, the citizens of Rapture competed over resources in a race to own supply lines and establish monopolies. At each other's throats from the day the city opened, they necessarily grew increasingly isolated in their deep-sea tank of recycled air. As the situation devolved, deformity and death were spread everywhere, virtually ricocheting back and forth from the fictional space of the game to the player, eventually permeating all involved and seeping into the very steel of the city. The game developer, 2K Boston, uses every cue at its disposal to reflect the depravity to which the population of Rapture is reduced, as the incongruity between the American exceptionalism endemic to the city's architectural design and the destruction and devastation enacted by its citizens, including the player, bears out on the streets (Yeates, 2015).

And the player, too, is grounded on the Zizekian landscape of gamified survival described by Gutierrez. Julian Dibbell, in his book *Play Money*, dubs this concept "ludocapitalism," and both Jack and his controller are thrall to it (2006). Dibbell outlines how systems of economy conscript their consumers into "pointlessness" unless they can "contrive new meanings for [their] daily grind"; fittingly, in *BioShock's* case, its conception obviously services the greater ludocapitalistic imperative of selling a game, but within its own narrative, it capitalizes on players' drive to "win" by baiting them into a violent grind for power. As Dibbell suggests, "the grind must sooner or later become a game," and players play their role as Jack perfectly, every time. Rapture ensures this compliance by reinforcing the Zizekian, objective background of violence.

Rapture is a space in which "luxury apartments are inhabited by corpses and a theatre is used as a torture chamber" (Yeates, 2015). This visual violence, undergirded by the auditory dissonance heard in the music's overtures of 1920s big-band American exceptionalism, fosters an ideological disconnect evident in the chasm separating the trumpeting grandiosity of Rapture's ambience from the glum palpability of violent destruction evident in every scene (Gibbons, 2011). This periphery, the setting of Rapture, demonstrates Gutierrez's objective background of violence, which presupposes competitive force as the only engine for change or influence.

## 2. Capitalism's Capitol

Rapture is the objective setting in which all characters in *BioShock* mete out their individual brands of coercive strength, and there is a subtlety to the formation of this systemic violence. Andrew Ryan's credo, "A man chooses. A slave obeys," begs for agency, and his efforts to build his submarine capitol reflect his desire to prove that only true agents are worth the fruits of their labor. This is the ideal upon which the city was built: "with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well" (2K Boston, 2009). Ryan believes that government and religion are restrictive forces that shackle the captains of industry who own the means of production—the bourgeoisie—and redistribute their earned gains to the mass of "parasites" and "looters" who form the proletariat (Clardy, 2012). Ryan's idealistic focus on capital gains leaves him blind to the extremes of his ethos, however.

Characterizing Rapture's analogous sister city in *Atlas Shrugged*, Dr. Alan Clardy states that "if admission to this utopia is selectively based on creative drive and talent, if not genius (as appears to be the case), it would seem

that people used to working with their hands for a living might be underrepresented here” (2012). Ryan envisions a Randian Objectivist’s ideal space in which ambition and exertion are let loose and encouraged to run rampant. It is an obvious parallel to Galt’s Gulch in *Atlas Shrugged*, and Andrew stands shoulder to shoulder with Ayn (Gibbons, 2011). In this Randian Nirvana, the only moral imperative is to capitalize upon ideation and iteration, and refuse to live “for the sake of another man” (Clardy, 2012). Providence is seized by the most exploitative and opportunistic industrialist. Similarly, Ryan’s dreamscape insists upon autonomy, unscrupulously so, but enforces cutthroat competition that scarcely affords anything resembling choice to the majority of Rapture’s citizenry. Additionally, it disregards the plight of the laborers who must build an ideal space that they will not be allowed to occupy. Thus, while the bourgeoisie vest in self-interest and ideate, they disregard the needs of workers who must create foundational infrastructure. This inherent divide propagates isolation and increasingly severe self-interest steeped in competitive drive. Every citizen in this objective setting is the endgame for herself, and none are to meet the needs or promote the well-being of someone else (Clardy, 2012). For everyone but those few fortunate enough to sit with Ryan at the head of Rapture’s table, there is only one mechanism by which to compete: violence. And the best tool with which to exert violence is a marvelous underwater commodity called ADAM.

### 3. The Currency of Violence

ADAM is effectively the currency of Rapture. It is a genetic reconfiguration serum discovered by Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum, derived from sea slugs found on the ocean floor alongside the foundations of the city. ADAM can be used to alter the human body in innumerable ways: from manipulations pursuant to cosmetic perfection to distillation into “plasmids” which can be used to weaponize bodily energy into electric discharge or incinerating heatwaves. This discovery is a capitalist’s dream, affording limitless possibility for personal indulgence and capital gain. It almost goes without saying that this marvel of science comes with a degenerative cost, as Tenenbaum explains in her in-game audio diary: “[it] acts like a benign cancer, destroying native cells and replacing them with unstable stem versions.” Consequently, it is habit forming, as users attempt to replenish their ravaged bodies with more ADAM. As a pure capitalist, Ryan is unphased by potential side effects, noting them in his office chronicle as “blindness, insanity, [and] death” but insists that “the market is patient, and we must be too.” Importantly, and devastatingly, ADAM can be re-harvested from those who have used it (called “splicers”), and can be “grown” most efficiently by implanting a sea slug into the belly of a female child. This creates a cycle of self-destruction for consumers that can only be temporarily alleviated by obtaining more genetic manipulation, and as more of Rapture’s occupants chase vanity and armament, they each become the closest source of a remedy for each other. An insatiable demand for a necessary product is created on a societal level, and where there is demand in a capitalistic society, there must be supply. Tenenbaum needed a financial backer to get her discovery off the ground. Enter the superlative capitalist and the ostensible posterchild of Ryan’s fantasy: Frank Fontaine.

### 4. Atlas Shrugs

Fontaine, not Ryan, is the true mascot of Randian philosophy for 2K Boston. A businessman and grifter, he sees Tenenbaum’s discovery not as an opportunity to heal or repair, but for profit and power. His only concern is profit, and he will not play by even the loose rules set forth by Ryan and Rand: “fair play and mutual respect” (Rose, 2015). If Objectivism is an economic experiment, Fontaine is the variable that its conductors somehow did not foresee (Clardy, 2012). He bankrolls mass production of ADAM and unleashes it upon the fragile, upstart economy of Rapture under his company, Fontaine Futuristics. In an effort to increase supply, he founds an orphanage for adolescent women and tasks Tenenbaum with discreetly morphing the stray girls into ADAM harvesters dubbed “Little Sisters,” who are each protected by an armored behemoth called a “Big Daddy.” Fontaine is initially not only accepted by Andrew Ryan, but also unequivocally endorsed. Ryan blindly views the eventual bringer of his demise as a champion of opportunity and a role model for all of his less successful subjects. Blinded by his capitalistic ideology, Ryan even seems to admire Fontaine and resent those who wish to see the upstart businessman curtailed in Rapture, noting to a local business owner that he should not complain about “market forces,” explaining that he wouldn’t “punish citizens for showing a little initiative;” rather, as any true Randian would advise, he tells the man to “offer a better product.” Fontaine then takes on the persona of “Atlas”—a mocking nod from the game’s writers to the titular titan bearing the globe in Rand’s opus, *Atlas Shrugged*—a man of the people who galvanizes the proletariat to wrest control of the city from Ryan. As Frank Fontaine, he openly mocks Ryan and the citizens of Rapture: “You don’t have to build a city to make people worship you. Just make the chumps believe they’re worth a nickel.” However, as Atlas, he can use the

commodity of labor for his own gain. As the class warfare begins, the only recourse for the average civilian seeking influence or agency is turning to ADAM, and thus Fontaine, in the guise of the everyman, Atlas.

Within this objectively violent framework, 2K Boston then uses Frank Fontaine as the terminal perpetrator of subjective violence and the wrench in the Randian machine. Every enraptured denizen made her way to the industrial paradise with the idea in mind that she could climb the capitalist ladder and break bread with the elite in the boardroom, with anything less being considered table scraps. This is evidenced in the journal of Rapture's resident botanist, Julie Langford: "the only thing worse than a hypocrite is an unemployed one." However, as Atlas and Ryan wage war over ADAM and authority, they quickly require all cosmopolites to fall into line: either in league with the founder of the city, or with its new revolutionary. Such binaries are required by the very ethos Ryan espouses, per the Randian edict for self-interest. Everyone who is with Ryan is a "hero," and everyone else is a "criminal." Thus, agency is sacrificed at the altar of consumerism: in order to make themselves useful in this escalating conflict, everyone in Rapture begins consuming ADAM, side effects be damned. Fontaine takes advantage of this state of affairs. He is the preeminent foil to both Ryan and Rand and is the extreme representation of their individualistic values. With no rules save for self-interested capitalism, the quintessential gamesman destroys the entire Objectivist superstructure. The fallout of this collapse tumbles upon the player, who must engage in the city as an outlander seeking escape.

#### 4.1 An Agent Without Agency

Jack, the protagonist and player character, arrives via plane crash as an unwelcome invader. From the beginning, he only seeks escape, but in order to pursue this goal, he accepts the aid of a disembodied voice coming from a two-way radio named Atlas (2K Boston). Mutualism sees the two work together, and right from the start, agency is called into question. In order to survive in the nightmare realm that Rapture has become, the player must use ADAM in self-defense. This is framed as a choice, but survival is not optional. Taking aim at the best source of ADAM, Jack can choose to harvest Little Sisters for more ADAM, killing them in the process, or spare them for less (Gibbons, 2011). Dr. Lars Schmeink submits this as a true narrative choice, pointing out the requirement of ADAM by the player for fighting unending hordes of enemies necessitates gathering ADAM from Little Sisters; it is the act of either "harvesting" or sparing the Little Sisters that "determines the outcome of the game," and Schmeink suggests that, "In offering a game structure in which the ending is determined solely by the actions of the player, *BioShock* deviates on a technical level from the most other first-person shooters which prototypically pursue a rather linear plot" (2009).

However, one should consider these divergent outcomes more closely before filing them as evidence of agency. In the end, what determines which of two possible ending cutscenes the player sees is the number of Little Sisters who were harvested or spared throughout the playthrough. If a particularly power-hungry player consumes those innocent children, they'll be greeted with an ending that forecasts their violent escape from Rapture followed by destruction wrought on the surface world. On the other hand, if a beneficent player concludes the story having spared those poor little girls, the cutscene will begin with Jack on the verge of being killed by Fontaine, before being saved at the last moment by all the Little Sisters; as compensation for Jack's kindness, the player watches twenty-one children leap on top of Atlas, repeatedly plunging their ADAM-harvesting syringes into him until he falls to the floor. Upon Fontaine's incapacitation, the Little Sisters do not stop, their simmering resentment on display, as they ceaselessly stab his corpse with needles. While the epilogue goes on to depict these girls as a newfound family for Jack, it is telling that, whoever does the saving, violence is required: either Jack kills Atlas, or the Little Sisters do. Is this really much of a choice?

I contend that, as for every other desperate splicer rampaging across the alleys of Rapture, Jack only really has the illusion of choice. His only choice is violence. If he is to survive, he will need ADAM. Even if he spares a Little Sister by removing her slug, he must kill her protector Big Daddy. This is the selection that the "free market" has enforced upon all of its subjects, and the "free market" is only what its godlike producers determine it to be. These two monoliths, Ryan and Fontaine, the idealistic demagogue and the pragmatic carpetbagger, systematically remove all agency from everyone along their warpath, turning every person into a resource.

The chief resource for both deific mavens is human bodies. Most notable among them is Jack, who, through gameplay and dialogue, discovers he is Fontaine's genetic creation, derived from illegitimate affair Ryan enjoyed in secret, indoctrinated, and shipped to the surface world to be recalled for the purposes of subterfuge amongst the commercial competition quickly devolving into outright war. 2K Boston's least subtle critique of a capitalistic system is the brainwashed trigger phrase that compels Jack to do as he is bidden. As Fontaine blithely explains over the radio, Jack was "genetically conditioned to bark like a cocker spaniel when I said 'Would you kindly.'" The descent from utopia to dystopia accelerates as the player wreaks havoc through the city and furthers the

violence already being wrought by splicers competing for ADAM and the favor of Ryan or Fontaine. Unbeknownst to the player, Jack has become the pawn in a proxy war, and the game has forced “[them] to become participants in the causal processes responsible for producing dystopia” (Nyman, 2014). As Fontaine’s ace in the hole, Jack is gradually moved closer and closer to Ryan, until a final confrontation is imminent. By this point, even Ryan, a champion of free will in the marketplace—of the providence of genius put to work—succumbs to desperate violence and forsakes his own, sacred autonomy. Pushed to the brink by Fontaine’s ruthless business practices, Ryan eventually breaks, suggesting that any inclination to question the precepts that built Rapture are akin to “surrender”: “To question is to surrender. I will not question.” To question, to think critically, is to surrender. A violent end is inevitable, for agency has become a myth to all involved. Ryan, once an advocate of Fontaine’s strategies, by this point has forcibly taken Fontaine Futuristics and “nationalized” it (effectively creating the first social service in Rapture); Ryan thus became an enforcer for the “parasites” he reviles, taking away Fontaine’s agency in a violent business maneuver. Fontaine, of course, is merely the creation of the extreme capitalistic systems in place in Rapture, an inescapable conclusion in a system without safeguards. And, Jack, ever controlled by the player, could have only ever performed as he did.

#### 4.1.1 *And the World Falls*

2K Boston’s thesis lies in the dialogue of this confrontation. With Jack on his doorstep, Andrew Ryan reveals his hand: he knows of Jack’s origins, he knows he’s lost the battle and will soon lose his life, but he will not concede the ideological war. His final speech distills the game’s primary critique to its core:

*A man chooses; a slave obeys. You think you have memories: a farm, a family, an airplane, a crash, and then this place. Was there really a family? Did that airplane crash, or was it hijacked? Forced down by something less than a man, something bred to sleepwalk through life until activated by a simple phrase from their kindly master? Was a man sent to kill, or a slave? A man chooses; a slave obeys. Come in. Stop, would you kindly? Would you kindly? Powerful phrase. Familiar phrase? Stand, would you kindly? Run. Stop! Turn. A man chooses; a slave obeys. Kill! (2K Boston)*

Ryan commands his assailant to attack, effectively committing suicide. In his last desperate act, he attempts to claim agency amongst the debris of violence that has doomed his vision, directing that violence inward. He claims that a man is distinct for his choice, and chooses death; however, this choice is predicated on violence, and borne by a capitalistic system that coerced each of its subjects into escalating force until the only path to agency for anyone, including Ryan, was an act of submission to violence.

As the perpetrator of this violence, the player has no real choice. Jack—whether armed to the teeth with ADAM and plasmids or staggering forward unaided by genetic empowerment with nothing but the civility of guns and righteousness at this point—is compelled by inconspicuous factors, such as competing for the very oxygen he breathes in a closed-circuit system, and conspicuous brainwashing. The player wades through the violent compulsions of every splicer remaining in the city, each bent on interdependent notions of survival and one-upmanship and clamoring for a chance encounter with a Little Sister for harvesting. As the body count rises and Rapture falls deeper and deeper into ruin, its founder dead, the terminal encounter of the subaquatic venture fatefully ensues, with Jack attempting to seize his own willpower and battle back against Fontaine.

In the head of Fontaine rests the ideal world Ayn Rand envisioned taken to extremes. He represents unchecked opportunism, as he radios to Jack in the game’s final act: “I’m gonna miss this place. Rapture was a candy store for a guy like me. Guys who thought they knew it all” (*BioShock*). It is revealed in this inexorable philosophy that neither Rand nor Ryan ground Galt’s Gulch or Rapture in reality: they each forgot to factor in the violence. Unlike Rand and Ryan, however, Fontaine counted on it. He counted on the “endemic social conflict, predominantly among the leading social classes” characterized by Warnecke-Berger in *International Studies* (2020). Fontaine exposes the element of volatility that *BioShock* contends must be taken for granted: that selfishness borne of the competition required by capitalism functions as a religion that will consume everything and everyone it touches, and cannot be the fulcrum of a balanced system. He stacks the deck in his favor, cheats his free-market competition off the playing field, and uses disingenuous idealism to enthrall its believers. Fontaine’s force upends the entire experiment that effectively created him. He is the imminent conclusion of unchecked Objectivism. Andrew Ryan created a system in which absolute self-interest wins, and Fontaine represents the epitome of self-interest. As a bourgeois businessman, he props up and controls the only means of survival, ADAM, thus removing all choice from Rapture’s free-market. By then masquerading as a working-class revolutionary, he raises the consciousness of the proletariat to an awareness of their desperate state of inequality. He then instigates civil war and plays his ace: Jack, the genetic clone who mistakenly believes he

violently fights for his own self-interest, when, in fact, he only serves his bourgeois master's selfish desire for profit and power.

In the end, it is neither Rand nor Ryan who ultimately fail their misguided utopia. Rather, it is an inevitable avatar of distilled, cynical self-interest who privatizes survival and peddles death, pumping the means to make it like poison into the veins of the city. *BioShock's* thesis, then, is not an indictment of Rand's ideals, but rather a thought experiment based in Zizekian philosophy posing a specific question: what is the conclusion to any narrative predicated on fundamental objectivism? The answer? Universal objectification predicated upon necessary, violent seizure. As the ante is upped, self-defense and competition require violence if one is to survive, let alone thrive, in a capitalistic system without regulation. Thus, Rapture was always doomed to fail—not in spite of its ideals but because of them.

This is why *BioShock*, despite being released in 2007, is still an overwhelmingly relevant artifact for study in philosophy, economics, business, or even literature classrooms. Within capitalistic societies, there are increases in economic inequality and structural violence (Smolski, 2021), decreases in social welfare ("Poverty", 2022), perceptions of democratic ineffectiveness (Chiru, 2022), and movement toward technocracy (Cena, 2023) that all bear an eerie resemblance to the sort of status quo Andrew Ryan might endorse. Given the evidence for inevitable violence these trends have yielded and further portend, could we kindly cast a critical eye over 2K Boston's Randian treatise?

## References

- Akil, Huda and Jules Lobel. (2018) "Law & Neuroscience: The Case of Solitary Confinement", *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, no. 147, pp. 61-75.
- Booker, Brenda et al. (2014) "The personality profile of artists", *Irish Journal of Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 277-81.
- Cena, Lorenzo and Michele Roccato. (2023) "Desires of technocracy in pandemic times: A multilevel study", [online], *Social Science Quarterly*, pp. 1-7.
- Chiru, Mihail and Zsolt Enyedi. (2022) "Who wants technocrats? A comparative study of citizen attitudes in nine young and consolidated democracies", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 95-112.
- Clardy, Alan. (2012) "Galt's Gulch: Ayn Rand's Utopian Delusion", *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies*, vol. 23, pp. 238-62.
- Dibbell, Julian. (2006) *PLAY MONEY Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*, Basic Books. Kindle Edition.
- Epstein, Jennifer A. and Judith M. Harackiewicz. (1992) "Winning is Not Enough: The Effects of Competition and Achievement Orientation on Intrinsic Interest", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 128, pp. 128-38.
- Gibbons, William. (2011) "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative, and Dystopia in *BioShock*", *Game Studies: The International Journal of Games Research*, vol. 11, no. 3, [gamestudies.org/1103/articles/gibbons](http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/gibbons)
- Gilbert, Paul et al. (2009) "The dark side of competition: How competitive behaviour and striving to avoid inferiority are linked to depression, anxiety, stress and self-harm", *Psychology and Psychotherapy*, vol. 82, no. 2, pp. 123-36.
- Gordon, Wally. (1997) "Capitalism and Violence", *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 63-66.
- Gutierrez, Ricardo. (2014) "Reinventing the Notion of Ethics: Žižek on the Invisible Violence of Capitalism", *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1-11.
- Kasser, Tim and Susan Linn. (2016) "Growing Up under Corporate Capitalism: The Problem of Marketing to Children, with Suggestions for Policy Solutions", vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 122-50.
- Leckelt, Marius et al. (2022) "The personality traits of self-made and inherited millionaires", *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, vol. 9, no. 94, pp. 1-12.
- Lizardi, Ryan. (2014) "*BioShock*: Complex and Alternate Histories", *Game Studies: The International Journal of Games Research*, vol. 14, no. 1, [gamestudies.org/1401/articles/lizardi](http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/lizardi)
- Mahoney, Michael J. (1979) "Psychology of the Scientist: An Evaluative Review", *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 349-75.
- Nyman, Elizabeth and Ryan Lee Teten. (2014) "Lost and Found and Lost Again: Island Utopias and Dystopias in the *BioShock* Series", *Games and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 4, June 2018, pp. 370-84.
- Rand, Ayn. *Atlas Shrugged*. Signet, 1957 (2005). Kindle Edition.
- Roozen, Kevin. (2016) "Writing is Linked to Identity", *Naming What We Know*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State UP, pp. 50-1.
- Rose, Jason. (2015) "The Value of Art in *BioShock*: Ayn Rand, Emotion, and Choice", Cuddy, Luke and William Irwin, editors. *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Schmeink, Lars. (2009) "Dystopia, Alternate History and the Posthuman in *BioShock*", *COPAS: Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-15.
- Smolski, Andrew R. and Matthew Lorenzen. (2021) "Introduction: Violence, Capital Accumulation, and Resistance in Contemporary Latin America", *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 4-27.

- "The Politics of Poverty: Elites, Citizens and States", (2010) *UK Aid*, The Department of International Development. [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08afbed915d622c000a0f/Politics\\_of\\_Poverty\\_conference\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08afbed915d622c000a0f/Politics_of_Poverty_conference_report.pdf)
- 2K Boston. (2016) *BioShock: The Collection*, PS4.
- Warnecke-Berger, Hannes. (2020) "Capitalism, Rents and the Transformation of Violence", *International Studies*, vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 111-31.
- Yeates, Robert. (2015) "BioShock and the Uncanny: The City of Rapture as Haunted House", *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 120, pp. 66-77.