

## **Rapture is Falling: *Bioshock* and Existential Philosophy**

By Charles Marvel

“We all make choices but in the end it’s our choices that make us.”



Have you ever looked at your life and wondered how you got where you are currently? It’s a level of introspection that most humans experience. When we stop and look at our lives in retrospect we can take a moment to observe and explore the series of choices we have made through our lives. The ideas of “choice” and “free will” are at the center of 2007’s *Bioshock*. This first person shooter truly demonstrates how video games can truly be art.

I remember when I first played the game. It was December of 2015. The game had been out for eight years at this point and its impact on the gaming industry had been felt. *Bioshock* accolades were well known and the internet was scattered with countless reviews singing its praises. Its critically maligned sequel, *Bioshock 2*, had been released as had the critically acclaimed third game in the series: *Bioshock Infinite*. I had played other games before, I considered myself an avid gamer but I had yet to play any of the *Bioshock* games for myself. Thus far only knowing of them from numerous reviews and essay written about the game

franchise. All this made me desperate to experience the first game for myself. I wanted to see if the first *Bioshock* game and its subsequent sequels lived up to countless outstanding reviews it had received online. Was this game truly worth the hype, or was it overrated ?

My parents asked me several times what I wanted for Christmas amongst other video games and various comics I had put in *Bioshock*. So in the days leading up to Christmas my dad gave me an early present. A previously owned copy of the game for Xbox 360 that he had bought at GameStop. I popped the game into the system and started the game, and I was instantly drawn into the game's morbid yet beautiful world.

The game starts in 1960 when the player character of the game, Jack, survives a plane crash in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. He swims to a nearby lighthouse only to discover it is a passageway to the underwater city of Rapture, a failed utopia built on the philosophy of objectivism. Rapture has fallen apart (in some cases literally) and is patrolled by its former denizens who have transformed into mutated versions of themselves thanks to a drug known as ADAM. The drug has the ability to rewrite genetic material and give people superhuman powers such as pyrokinesis, telekinesis, and many other abilities. ADAM is also extremely addictive and can lead to various bodily deformations. The player has to escape this watery hell using a wrench, various guns, and some ADAM of their own. Throughout the game Jack is guided by a voice over his radio named Atlas, who leads Jack through Rapture as well as helps him escape the city.



(The city of Rapture, glowing in the murky depths of the Atlantic Ocean)

Despite the horrifying nature of the city Rapture is beautifully designed. The art direction of the game is impeccable with the city being laden with Art Deco motifs. The steampunk-esque design creeps its way into not only the weapons but also the technology of the city. Rapture is a visual treat for the eyes despite its crumbling appearance. The underwater environment serves the game's isolated atmosphere as the only ally you have is distance, a mere voice over your radio. Tension grows as you are surrounded by enemies. While I would hesitate to put this game in the horror genre, the isolation and scarcity of in-game resources, such as ammo for your guns, can give the player various frights.

A major theme of the game is choice. The player learns, from in-game logs and audio recordings made before the fall of Rapture, that the city was founded by a businessman by the name of Andrew Ryan. Ryan founded the city to be free of the government and institutions that he felt oppressed man's inherent desire for freedom. He envisioned a city where every citizen was free to pursue any venture they pleased free from the rules and regulations that stifled their "genius", a place where, according to Andrew Ryan, the "strong" can rule as nature intended.

The end result however was a city full of cutthroat capitalists willing to cross any ethical line possible in pursuit of success.

Based on the player's experience with Rapture and its denizens it becomes obvious that the city has become a cesspit of brutal exploitation and amoral scientific experiments. These grotesque experiments resulted in not only the discovery of ADAM but also the creation of the Big Daddies and Little Sisters. The Little Sisters are genetically modified children grown to produce ADAM biologically, so it can be harvested later. The player is repeatedly given a choice. Harvest the ADAM and kill the Little Sisters or Save the Little Sisters by curing them. Being the idealist I, of course, saved the Little Sister. This resulted in me having less ADAM in my playthrough and not being able to use the superpowers the game gave me as much but I wanted to be a hero. There is no in-game benefit to rescuing the Little Sisters. The only reward the player receives is a clear conscience, and the knowledge they did not sink to the depravity that led the city to ruin. This theme of choice is not only addressed mechanically in a frankly easy moral choice but also in the game's infamous twist.

### **Spoilers Ahead !!!**

Towards the end of the game the Atlas guides the player to Andrew Ryan's office. Atlas asks over the in-game radio "Now, would you kindly KILL that son of a bitch". As Jack, the player character, enters the office Ryan is standing behind a sheet of glass. As most would probably try I shot at Ryan through the glass only to discover it was impenetrable. Protected from the player, Andrew Ryan then proceeds to go on an insane rant about his philosophy, his founding of Rapture, and explaining how it all went wrong, deflecting the blame on the others.

It is during the rant that he reveals that the player character Jack did not randomly survive the plane crash that brought him here. He is, in fact, Andrew Ryan's son who has been brainwashed to follow any order that begins with the trigger phrase "Would you kindly". The story then flashes to various points of the game when Atlas used the phrase while guiding Jack through his objectives. Ryan also reveals that Atlas is in fact Ryan's business rival Fontaine who sought to take the city of Rapture from him. Ryan then hands Jack a golf club and asks "Would you kindly kill me?". The player is then prompted to swing the club at Andrew Ryan. As he is bludgeoned to death he continuously commands Jack to obey. After Ryan's death Fontaine attempts to kill Jack and leaves him for dead. The game continues with Fontaine as the true villain.

Mechanically speaking, whenever Atlas gave his commands the game didn't force the players to do them. The players of the game choose to lead Jack down the path of servitude

without even realizing it. Ryan's death is an inevitability of the story. If the player does not wish to kill Ryan the only choice they have is to stop playing the game. That is the brilliance of this twist. It calls into question the game's very theme of choice and the player's own



(A first-person perspective of the player battling a Big Daddy)

complacency.

*Bioshock* is one of my favorite games of all time. The game's beautiful world, its fun first-person action, and intriguing story and concepts cause me to come back to it all the time.

The game is considered a “modern classic” and is often hoisted as an example of why games should be considered art. All of these claims and more I full heartedly believe.

Game Title	Bioshock
Genre	First-Person Shooter
Developers	Irrational Games 2K Australia 2K Marin
Publisher	2K Games
Creator	Ken Levine
Platforms	Microsoft Windows Xbox 360 Xbox One PlayStation 3 PlayStation 4 OS X iOS Linux Shield Portable Shield Tablet Shield Android TV Nintendo Switch
First release	August 21st 2007

About the Author: Charles Marvel is an Honors Student at East Tennessee State University. He is currently in his senior year and is working on his undergraduate thesis. Born in 2000 and raised in Northeast Tennessee. He has been in the Honor-In-Discipline program at ETSU since 2019. He is set to graduate in the Spring Semester of 2022.