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The Governmentality of Rapture:

An Investigation of Power, Knowledge, and Surveillance in *Bioshock*

Much of the critical discourse that surrounds Irrational Games's 2007 release, *Bioshock*, has been preoccupied with issues such as the text's potential for study (Lizardi), its gameplay genealogy (Weise), its theme of choice (Ruch), its gender dynamics (Weimin), or the narrative significance of its score and soundtrack (Gibbons), but little has Rapture, the story's underwater setting, been discussed. Though when critics do mention Rapture, they give cursory attention to it as a “personification of Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism” or its “analogs to the real-life capitalistic pursuits of the 1950s,” and yet, strangely, most scholarship ignores how power/knowledge operates and organizes itself in Rapture and how such a society and its institutional instruments of control relate to the overall meaning of the text (Gibbons; Lizardi). In this paper, from both a ludic and narratological perspective, I will investigate the function of power/knowledge as a part of Rapture and *Bioshock's* design, through its surveillance and stealth elements, audio diary narrative device, and “boss” structure, which demonstrate the unstable privileging of the state/citizen binary.

One of the first things players may notice upon booting up *Bioshock* is the constant surveillance of Jack, the player avatar and protagonist, and the citizens of Rapture, who are monitored and controlled through the use of CCTVs, drones, short-wave radios, behavioral conditioning, pheromones, and advertising, and though the layout of the underwater metropolis seems more labyrinth than Bentham-inspired, it still operates under many of the principles of

panopticism. Players and NPCs are victims of a process of normalization, both citizens of the state and the agents of it, surveilled by others and themselves in “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). In other words: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power...he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (202-203). The player and the citizens of Rapture are “carefully fabricated in [the social order], according to a whole technique of forces and bodies” (217). They are part of a “disciplinary society,” one which “assures an infinitesimal distribution of the power relations” (216). They exist as objects of scrutiny, of examination, bodies to be disciplined and controlled, but also, at the same time, they are the scrutinizing subjects, the examiners themselves. For example, many of the game's forms of surveillance are designed to curb or prevent certain behaviors, such as trespassing. If the player is spotted performing such deviance, he or she is subject to gunfire and punishment, and worse still, the citizens of Rapture enforce this discipline as much as the technology of the city/state, which makes stealth a minor facet of the gameplay as the player attempts to avoid this consequence. Other forms of surveillance, however, are unquestioningly accepted and automatic, making subversion impossible. For much of the game, the player receives messages from Atlas/Fontaine, Ryan, and others via a short-wave radio—many of which are orders or instructions that the player blindly follows. Jack never bothers to ask why he should do Atlas/Fontaine's bidding, even when the request is to commit cold-blooded murder. The instruments of institutional power (medicine, industry, art, government, et cetera) are able to undermine Jack's individuation with

one simple phrase, “Would you kindly,” which, from prior psychological conditioning, triggers Jack's (and the player's) instant obedience (Irrational Games). As Andrew Ryan explains during his only face-to-face interaction with the protagonist before his death at the hands of the mind-controlled player, “[Jack is] something less than a man, something bred to sleepwalk through life” or, to put it more succinctly, “A man chooses. A slave obeys” (Irrational Games). Through Jack's and the splicers's, the deformed and deranged citizens who remain in the city, pheromone-induced control, conditioning, the chaos of Rapture is carefully orchestrated, for they all serve as pawns and players in an institutional power struggle. Even advertising serves as a vehicle for social control. When Jack first arrives in Rapture, on his ride in the bathysphere to his eventual exploration of the city, he is inundated with ads for Ryan Industries's and Fontaine Furturistic's plasmid products, potentially dangerous genetic enhancements, which makes his eventual injection of the product inevitable: He does not pause and consider the possible side effects or consequences—even with such ominous ads that invite consumers to “Come bite the Apple!”—but, instead, conforms to the disciplinary standards of Rapture in an attempt to normalize his behavior (Irrational Games). Nevertheless, Jack is not only the object of city/state surveillance but a servant of it as well. Early on, he is given a camera to monitor the activities of splicers, which grants the player addition perks like increased damage to certain enemies or an analysis of enemy weaknesses. These rewards, this positive reinforcement, only encourages the player to engage in this behavior. Here the surveilled becomes the surveillant, as much a citizen of the state as he is an agent of the state. However, this is all a part of the plan. As Foucault writes: “The Panopticon, subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different

individuals, also enables everyone to...observe any of the observers” (*Discipline and Punish* 207). Likewise, Jack's attention often turns to the observer as much as it does to the observed.

Another important aspect of the game is one of its main story-telling devices: the audio diary. Along his quest for escape, Jack discovers these items in bars and bathrooms, in apartments and Arcadia, which document the corruption and backstory of Rapture's inner-circle, its bourgeois elite. For example, Dr. Tennanbaum laments that she “did not find tormentors in the [German] Prison Camp, but kindred spirits,” as she recounts how she had “brutalized” children both during World War II and her time with Fontaine Futuristics (*Irrational Games*). Andrew Ryan dispassionately discusses the “side effects” of the unregulated plasmid market: “blindness, insanity, death” (*Irrational Games*). Sander Cohen details his growing discontent in “this soggy bucket” as he pines for the unrealized possibilities of Hollywood and Broadway (*Irrational Games*). These audio diaries serve as confessions, as a power relations ritual where “one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession...a ritual in which the expression alone...produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it” (*History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* 61-62). It is through these items that a twofold process occurs: The bourgeoisie relinquishes further control to the citizens of Rapture while Jack increases power of the city/state. This proves especially true by the end of the game. As the player collects more of the audio diaries and obtains greater and greater strength through the instructions of Atlas/Fontaine, Ryan, and Tennabaum, the use of Plasmids, the upgrades of his weapons, and further knowledge of the operations of Rapture's bourgeois elite, Jack's (and, therefore, the city/state's) power/knowledge increases nearly to the

level of benevolent dictator, which is only stunted by the power/knowledge of Tennabaum, who serves as Jack's guide later in the game, and the Little Sisters, whose power is greatly diminished by the loss of their ADAM and Big Daddy protectors. However, Jack's power/knowledge will never be absolute. Foucault explains that “[power does not have] the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity...it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point.... Power is everywhere” (93). With that said, it is important to consider just how diffuse power/knowledge is in Rapture.

Like most games, *Bioshock* is designed to give the player more and more challenge as he or she progresses. Each level or section typically ends in a fight with a more difficult enemy or “boss,” one who can tolerate more damage as well as being able to inflict more damage. This boss structure, however, demonstrates the complex and diffuse distribution of power/knowledge in the underwater city/state. As Rose notes in *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, “Government has fostered and depended upon the vocation of 'experts of truth' and the functioning of their concepts of normality and pathology, danger and risk, social order and social control, and the judgements and devices which such concepts have inhabited,” and though the splicers may wield a degree of authority on behalf of the city/state, it is Rapture's bosses, its “experts of truth”—such as Steinman, Cohen, and Atlas/Fontaine—who demonstrate the myriad divisions of institutional power/knowledge (30). Steinman, the player's first boss-like obstacle, a deranged doctor who hears the voice of Aphrodite, helps to normalize the use of plastic surgery in Rapture, as many of its inhabitants go under the knife to attain physical perfection and reverse the horrific mutilation caused by ADAM. When these citizens discover Jack, they even shout that

he is “ugly” (Irrational Games). Those who partake in these “experiments” become the agents of an ideology, which Steinman has scrawled in blood in the medical pavilion, that “Aesthetics are a moral imperative” (Irrational Games). The doctor even questions why human beings have only two eyes and wonders, “Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could do with a knife what [Picasso] did with a brush” (Irrational Games). He has become so entrenched in his profession that he sees the entire world through the “clinical gaze.... [A] gaze of the concrete sensibility...that travels from body to body, and whose trajectory is situated in the space of sensible manifestation” (*Birth of the Clinic* 120). Steinman is so divorced from humanity that he sees all people as patients, diseased not by pathogens and germs, which ADAM has made all but extinct, but plagued by plainness.

Similarly, Sander Cohen, the city/state's poet, composer, sculptor, and playwright laureate, who presides over Fort Forlic, approaches Rapture through a similarly skewed artistic gaze. Throughout his domain, Cohen has turned the citizens of Rapture into statues and other pieces of art, typically after some means of torture. He even encourages Jack to help him with his art, and the player/protagonist, again serving as surveilled and the servant of surveillance, acting as both a victim of the state and an agent of it, sets out to document series of murders, which the player commits, for Cohen's “masterpiece” (Irrational Games). Cohen believes that art requires more than just emotional sacrifice but a physical one as well. As he explains in one of the game's many audio diaries: “[T]here's blood in the streets.... [And] people sometimes disappear. And those awful little girls... [T]he Doubters think you can paint a picture without soiling your smock” (Irrational Games). Of course, his expertise does not exist without challenge, either from

his disciples across Fort Frolic or the singer Anna Culpepper; however, by eradicating his competition Cohen consolidates his power. Yet I would argue still that while Cohen uses art as a form of social control, like the other bosses in the game, he is a victim of it as well. In *Simulations*, Baudrillard writes that “[A]rt is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality.... Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality. It no longer even surpasses fiction: it captures every dream even before it takes on the appearance of a dream” (151-152). Cohen is a victim of his own hyperreality, lost in the very art he both consumes and creates, and his artistic gaze only further divorces him from humanity as he becomes a instrument of institutional power/knowledge.

The game's final boss, Atlas/Fontaine is a twin pillar of institutional control and expertise. In his identity of Atlas, Fontaine is able the shape Rapture through chaos and disorder. Atlas is, at his core, a revolutionary—or maybe more harshly—a terrorist. Through his manipulation of the player, Atlas appears to be creating serious institutional change and overthrowing the established hierarchy of Rapture, but the truth is that he has no interest in restructuring the society and instead wishes to insert himself into a position of power. His acts of “terrorism mak[e] real, palpable violence surface in opposition to the invisible violence of security” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 58). In other words, Fontaine's identity as Atlas is a symbiotic one. While Atlas's power/knowledge base concerns chaos, Fontaine can exploit the citizens. It would seem purposeful that these two figures are two sides of the same man, a pure personification of the necessity of chaos for there to be such a thing as order: After all, if there is are no norms, there is no order. By the time the player has his final showdown with the tycoon, Fontaine owns most of

Rapture's businesses and seized control of the city's supply of ADAM, which he injects into himself until he is completely unrecognizable. This is the ultimate demonstration of his power/knowledge, and it is through these actions, both Fontaine's business interests and Atlas's terrorism, that we see that “[e]xpertise comes to be accorded a particular role in the formulation of programs of government and in the technologies that seek to give them effect” (Rose 156). It is through these different institutional realms of power/knowledge, working together, whether they be art or medicine or business, that the social order is maintained.

To bring this essay to a close, I want to focus on *Bioshock's* rhetoric concerning power itself. It would be easy to think that the game is overly cautious about the use of power, that its message is simply one of absolute power corrupts absolutely; however, I think such an interpretation fails to give the text the credit it deserves. Since the game has multiple endings, we must take each in account in order to decide what the text's rhetoric is trying to express about these power relations of self and governance. Should the player save all of the Little Sisters throughout the adventure, Jack returns to the mainland and lives a happy, fulfilling life as father to the Little Sisters, and should the player harvest the Little Sisters, Jack becomes the new power mad dictator of Rapture, launching vessels into international waters to capture nuclear submarines and, presumably, set in motion a plan for world domination. While the “bad” ending is clearly one that fears power, the “good” ending suggests, through its theme of fatherhood, that power is not in itself evil: It is “games of strategy.... [And] must be framed in terms of rules of law, rational techniques of government and ethos, practices of self and of freedom” (*The Essential Foucault* 40). As the dual identities of Atlas/Fontaine demonstrate, there must be one

for there to be the other. Yet what I think *Bioshock* tries to teach us is to find that line between authority and abuse.

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