



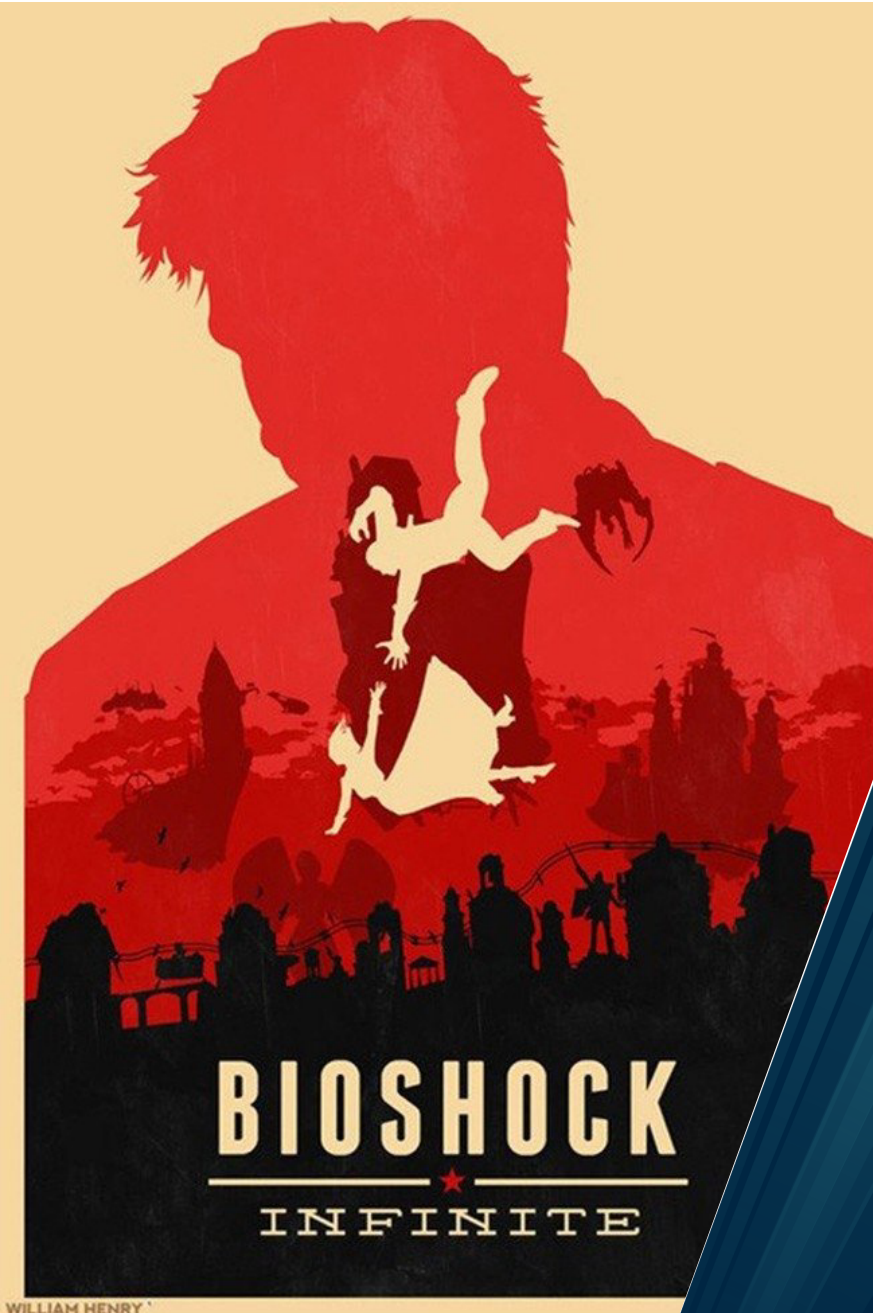
Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

## The Cult of Americanism

An analysis of *BioShock Infinite's* dystopic Columbia as social commentary on American exceptionalism

Marius Moe

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# 1 Abstract

This master's thesis analyses *BioShock Infinite* as a critique of American exceptionalism. As a multi-modal video game, *Infinite* merges aesthetic design, music, and narrative into an egocentric moral experiences that allows for moral deliberation surrounding the self. This thesis aims to provide textual support that , by perversion of American symbols and myths, *BioShock Infinite* offers a critique of American values of populism, individualism, Christianity, and capitalism. Analysis of characters such as Comstock, the religious leader, and Jeremiah Fink, the ruthless businessman, provide support that they function as personifications of American exceptionalism's values. Furthermore, the city of Columbia mirrors American society structurally, critiquing the historic exploitation of the working class and minority groups. Through *BioShock Infinite*'s position as a large-scale production published by an American company, it has the ability to offer social commentary from within the hegemonic culture. Despite *Infinite*'s 2013 release predating the 2016 election, the rhetoric and alternative facts of Zachary Hale Comstock has parallels to Donald Trump's cult of personality, and offers insights into the values that creates populist authoritarian leaders.

## 2 Acknowledgments

Throughout the last five years of my life I've gone through an arduous journey that culminates into this final thesis. This journey has had its fair share of metaphorical blood, sweat, and tears, but more significantly, it has given me an admiration for nuanced reflection. I will leave the University of Tromsø with a newfound respect for both the English language and the Western canon of literature.

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# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b><i>Abstract</i></b> .....	<b><i>iii</i></b>
<b>2</b>	<b><i>Acknowledgments</i></b> .....	<b><i>iv</i></b>
<b>1</b>	<b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b><i>1</i></b>
<b>2</b>	<b><i>Chapter 1 – Characteristics of the medium and BioShock</i></b> .....	<b><i>5</i></b>
2.1	Academic writing concerning video games .....	6
2.2	The importance of interactivity.....	8
2.3	Features of game design; impact on the narrative.....	9
2.4	BioShock and how it fits into academia .....	10
2.5	BioShock Infinite and response .....	13
<b>3</b>	<b><i>Chapter 2 – American exceptionalism in BioShock Infinite</i></b> .....	<b><i>17</i></b>
3.1	American Exceptionalism.....	17
3.2	Aesthetic .....	20
3.3	Comstock and corruption of American myths .....	21
3.4	The Corruption of religion, capitalism, and science .....	25
3.5	<i>BioShock Infinite</i> : class, race, and revolution .....	27
3.6	The dichotomy of Elizabeth’s innocence and Booker’s cynicism .....	29
3.7	Pseudo-choices and Egocentric moral experience.....	31
3.8	Prophecy or Historia Magistra Vitae.....	32
<b>4</b>	<b><i>Discussion</i></b> .....	<b><i>35</i></b>
4.1	<i>BioShock Infinite</i> as social commentary .....	35
4.2	The divide between great video games and great literature.....	36
<b>5</b>	<b><i>Conclusion</i></b> .....	<b><i>38</i></b>
<b>6</b>	<b><i>Citations</i></b> .....	<b><i>42</i></b>

# 1 Introduction

The paradigm shift that the technological era represents brought forth an alteration of society on all levels. Technological advances have caused us to interact differently with the world around us and the global society. Preferred modes of communication have changed from letters and phone calls to text messages and video calls. As the digital world expands, cultural meetings are no longer confined to physical groups and location-based interests but can be accessed from anywhere on the planet through the internet. The digital world has become a meeting ground for dialogue intra- and interculturally about all manners of topics, ranging from niche hobbies to political discourse. Dialogue surrounding video games has become a staple of digital discussion and has grown in tandem with the expansion of the video game industry. This cultural exchange is of significance because of its ubiquity and accessibility allowing people to share their feelings and interpretation of their favorite game with relative ease. While this is mostly reserved to everyday conversations, academic discourse has taken an interest in the nature of the medium.

The stories we read and experience can have profound effects on us. The literary canon is filled with stories that reflect us as humans: our social lives, our religious lives, and our political lives. Video games, a relatively new medium, follows in the footsteps of former forms of storytelling, presenting entertainment and stories through an interactive experience. As a medium, it contains immense variety, from titles such as the mobile game *Candy Crush Saga* to large epics such as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. It is important not to overgeneralize the narrative quality of the medium. However, this thesis focuses on the narrative experiences of the medium, and I will therefore disregard titles that don't have a narrative aspect. Video games with a narrative focus serve the dual function of entertainment experiences and artistic experiences, having the purpose of passing the time *and* providing thoughtful experiences.

My intention with this thesis is to illustrate the ability of video games—or, more aptly, *BioShock Infinite*—to comment on social and political elements of our own society. The three *BioShock* games are all narrative-based video games that are classified as dystopian fiction, presenting how the fallibility of people cause the downfall of ideological extremism. This form, narrative-based games, is one of the newest forms of storytelling. With its massive industry, it also has one of the broadest reaches. The significance of this is that games like

*BioShock* have the ability to present complex and thought-provoking stories to the masses in a form that is approachable.

*BioShock Infinite* and *BioShock* as a series are probably among the most discussed video games in the academic world. There are several books and articles that focus on the ideological aspect of *BioShock* as a series, such as *BioShock and philosophy: irrational games, rational book* by Luke Cuddy (Cuddy). Luke Cuddy presents an overview of the *BioShock* series focusing on the philosophical relevance of the series, and how the series touches upon ideology and philosophy from famous thinkers such as Marx, Dewey, and Ayn Rand. Felan Parker wrote a research article focusing on the cultural value and the canonization of *BioShock*, and within this, a discussion surrounding the large video games studio's capacity of creating thoughtful artistic expressions (Parker). Most discussion surrounding *BioShock 2* and *BioShock Infinite* uses *BioShock 1* as a comparative point, such as Reblin-Renshaw's discussion of the hermeneutic horizons and franchise components of *BioShock 2* (Reblin-Renshaw). The discussion surrounding *BioShock Infinite* focuses on its limitations (Parker) and the religious critique presented by the narrative (Wysocki). It is my intentions with this thesis to engage with the discussion focusing on the grander ideology of American exceptionalism, which is composed of several seminal values such as religion and capitalism.

Clear terminology is important to this discussion of video games and American exceptionalism. Firstly, I make a distinction between *the player* and *the player-character*. The player refers to the person who engages with the medium and is separate from the video game itself. One could argue for applying the term *reader*, but such use would minimize the role of the dynamic expectations that are put on the player. The player is an active participant in the narrative experience, something that is not encompassed in the more passive role of a reader. The player-character is the fictional in-game representation of the player that is controlled by the player's input, which, in the case of *BioShock Infinite*, is Booker DeWitt. While in sections discussing *BioShock Infinite* I use player-character and Booker interchangeably, player-character is also used in discussing the medium as a whole. Further, as this thesis discusses the relationship between *BioShock Infinite* and American exceptionalism, it is important to note that the term America is exclusively used to refer to the United States of America. While I acknowledge the problematic nature of doing so, it is

done in tune with discussion surrounding American exceptionalism and simplifies the conversation.

American exceptionalism is the idea that American society is inherently different from others, first coined by the French diplomat and aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1830s (Lipset 17). The justification of the myth can be traced back to European colonization of America, when the Puritans escaped persecution from the churches of Europe. During this era John Winthrop's famous sermon of a "City upon a Hill" appeared: a sermon that describes his wish for Boston to become a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. In the modern era, this phrase has referred to the United States' supposed role in the global context of being a moral beacon for the rest of the world to follow. This phrase has become a symbol of American exceptionalism, supporting America's special role in a global setting. The American Revolution and following independence is a crucial aspect of the myth of American exceptionalism. Documents such as the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, written by the Founding Fathers, are heralded as supreme doctrine. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American militarism, cultural export, and financial power have only grown, and American exceptionalism was further cemented after the United States' role in the World Wars and Cold War. In this day and age many people would now say their global dominance is declining. However, the United States have played a crucial role in the global dynamic that we have today, as they are one of the largest cultural exporters of entertainment, such as film, music, and games.

*BioShock Infinite's* relationship with American exceptionalism is at a cursory glance an intrinsic part of the experience and is evident from its heavy use of American symbols such as flags, statues, and motorized robots in the image of George Washington. More significantly, *Infinite's* Columbia is a physical representation of a "City Upon a Hill" and symbolizes both the imagined unique responsibility of America and the moral and technological prowess of America. On a structural level, the setting, narrative, and characters offer critique of the societal values of American exceptionalism. Columbia is a city with a corrupted dystopic social structure mirroring America's historic relationship with unskilled workers and minorities. The antagonist Zachary Hale Comstock, the leader of Columbia, represents the populist sentiments of the US, and how a religious or political leader can corrupt the ideals and values of American society. Characters such as Jeremiah Fink and the Lutece twins function as personifications of capitalistic and scientific values respectively.



This thesis focuses on *BioShock Infinite* and how its multi-modality creates an immersive narrative experience that portrays the fallacies of unchecked American exceptionalism.

*BioShock Infinite*'s mainstream critique of American exceptionalism is of importance for its transferability to society in large. The antagonist Comstock serves as a warning of cults of personality, and how ideals of society are pliable and can be corrupted to fit into autocratic ideals. Most importantly, the cult of Comstock has traits that are applicable to contemporary US society with Donald Trump's large social movement with vague sentiments of autocracy and anti-immigrant rhetoric. *BioShock Infinite*'s critique of American Exceptionalism is important because it speaks upon society, exemplifying how the political and religious systems in place are corruptible. Despite a narrative set within a science fiction world, it comments on something much more tangible to humankind: the fallibility of people in encounter with ideology.

The first chapter will focus on how video games use their multi-modality to convey meaning, and how these different aspects interact. A key aspect of the medium is its interactivity and how it creates an experience that both immerses and involves the player in the game world. Interactive game design combined with narrative-driven storytelling creates an egocentric moral experience that gives the player ownership of the pseudo-decisions of the story. Video games are a multi-faceted medium and use multiple modes to produce an interactive experience. This chapter incorporates scholarly discussion surrounding video games and the *BioShock* series. *BioShock Infinite* creates an immersive experience that draws the player in to engage with the in-game world. *BioShock Infinite* critiques American exceptionalism through a dystopian representation of the myth's values of capitalism, theism, and heroization. Through setting and plot, *BioShock Infinite* creates an egocentric moral experience that immerses the player in the corruptibility of American exceptionalism and the folly of blind faith in religious dogma and deification of individuals. The ideological focus of *BioShock* allows it to engage in intelligent discussion while still maintaining the accessibility of the medium.

## 2 Chapter 1 – Characteristics of the medium and *BioShock*

The introduction of video games came in the 1980s, when games like Pacman and Tetris appeared in arcades and became a platform for youth to socialize, be entertained, and share their interests. Arcades became a form of cultural nexus for youth and gaming culture. With technological advancements, the accessibility of video games became greater and the arcades were slowly replaced with a growing market for home consoles. Since the arcades of the 1980s, the video game market has evolved to a multi-billion-dollar industry that reaches us from both our homes and our pockets. Games are now accessible through home consoles, handheld consoles, personal computers, and mobile phones. Video games are a shared interest that has become the dedicated focus of many online platforms, such as forums and video streaming sites like Twitch, where the users share their video game playing experience. Video games have turned from a niche hobby to a cultural nexus, where people meet across national and cultural divides to interact. As there is a low barrier to entry, and children nowadays are introduced to games young, video games are a cultural item that younger generations embrace. The societal stigma has severely lessened, and the archetypal ‘jocks’ and ‘geeks’ are both as likely to interact with the medium. There is no arguing that video games have become an artifact of the modern era, and hold a sturdy foothold in our global culture.

The intention of this chapter is to outline the scholarly and cultural presence of *BioShock Infinite* and to display how video games have the capacity to function as social and political commentary. Firstly, I will present how academics have commented on elements such as American history and morality of video games through other games. It is then my intention to comment on the defining role of interactivity for the medium, and how this transitions into an egocentric moral experience, distinct from the allocentric nature of literary mediums. The combination of interactive immersion and ownership of actions displayed by the player-character allows the player to feel self-revolving emotions such as pride or guilt. This is relevant for my discussion of the *BioShock*-series’ success, as it has been praised for its intelligent portrayal of dystopic presentation of ideology and how consequences of choices within the narrative alters the story structure, albeit in varying capacity between the games. Felan Parker commented on the Prestige of *BioShock* and how it has entered into the mediums canon, being one of the most defining video games of all time (Parker). Reblin-Renshaw adds to the discussion that despite *BioShock 2*’s expansion and improvement on the

formula that made the first entry such a phenomenal hit, it has been, and still is, heavily overlooked because of the impressiveness of its predecessor (Reblin-Renshaw). *BioShock Infinite*, breaking free from the underwater dystopia of the previous entries, created a new setting in the sky that reinvigorates the formula.

## 2.1 Academic writing concerning video games

The appreciation of video games as a medium has not been dismissed by academics. With the variety found in the medium, academic writing has focused on most aspects from narratives to socio-cultural discussion. Similarly to other forms of fiction, video games hold the potential for profound conversations about themes and thoughts that are universally and/or culturally relevant for human life. Video games can be used as a catalyst for discussing political, social, and philosophical experiences. This is evident in academic discourse surrounding *Red Dead Redemption 2*, set in the Progressive Era of US history, which Locke and Mackay argue creates a story that uses the past to discuss the current political landscape of the US. *Life Is Strange*, a multiple-choice game with branching storylines, has been discussed by Luis de Miranda in light of Sartre's philosophy. It is my intent to showcase how academic discussion surrounding game like RDR2 and LIS illustrates the medium's capacity as a vehicle for social commentary and introspection.

*Red Dead Redemption 2*, a game developed by the major publisher Rockstar Games and released in 2018, has received attention for its large and expansive world. The game follows the story of an outlaw named Arthur Morgan as he travels the "American frontier" with his gang. Throughout the game world, the player interacts with a variety of different people and share in their stories. Locke and Mackay point out that RDR2 "places a considerable emphasis upon the issues pertaining to women, African Americans, and Native Americans, and righting small injustices" (Locke & Mackay 175). Further, they argue that RDR2 "offers a fascinating insight into current American politics and how they can be simultaneously interpreted within and projected upon the Progressive Era" (Locke & Mackay 175). In their article they argue that RDR2 "utilizes the Progressive Era as a vehicle to capture and speak to the current political climate", something that has caused a negative reaction from a "part of the game's audience" (Locke & Mackay 174).

*Red Dead Redemption 2* showcases the medium's capacity to be used as a tool to comment on political and social issues. Through openly showcasing Progressive Era stories such as that of the suffragette or the displaced Native American, they openly discuss a problematic part of US history while simultaneously shedding light on contemporary struggles such as racism or misogyny. The interactive and immersive aspect of video games allow for a unique experience of historic settings, allowing players to participate and envision themselves in the story of their own country's development. Video games in the genre of historic fiction are particularly well situated to make their audience experience national myths.

Through their interactive nature, video games provide opportunities for greater immersion than other mediums. Numerous video games such as *BioShock* and *Undertale* employ dynamic narratives based on player choices that creates a feeling of agency for the player. *Life Is Strange* is an episodic narrative adventure game that focuses on the life of Maxine Caulfield and her ability to rewind time and alter events. Throughout its story, *Life Is Strange* deals with heavy subjects such as murder, drugs, and suicide, but also much more 'mundane' topics such as friendship, bullying, loss, and love. Luis de Miranda argues that *Life Is Strange*'s game design and moral dilemmas can be interpreted through the existentialist and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre, and that the game can be used as an existential simulator. De Miranda uses Sartre's *Les Jeux Sont Faits* as an interpretation guide to identify central themes such as "existential autonomy and significance of choice" (de Miranda 828). Exploring *Life Is Strange* with Sartre "as a copilot", de Miranda notes that despite the fact that the player's autonomy in *Life Is Strange* is limited by the game's system, it is a useful tool to help us reflect on our own ethical autonomy. Indulging the existential fantasy of reexamining our choices, *Life Is Strange* allows the player to impose their values upon artificial choices and, by doing so, involves themselves in moral immersion with the game.

Video games are a relatively new medium and is in its infancy in terms of exploring the boundaries of its potential. *Red Dead Redemption 2* uses its large platform and reach to reflect on how the societal issue of the Progressive Era is still a part of the modern US. It is important to note that RDR2's rendition of the past is not unproblematic, and *Life Is Strange*'s exploration of taboo subjects is not flawless. However, they are important because of their use of the medium to state something about the human experience, a commonality with video games' predecessors; literature and film. Both Locke & Mackay and de Miranda touch upon important aspects of video games that apply to my analysis of *BioShock Infinite*.

Video games have the unique basis in interactivity that allows for ownership and immersion in the message that the author(s) want to convey.

## 2.2 The importance of interactivity

In determining the role of interactivity and how it affects the experience of the medium, it is crucial to define interactivity. There are factors of interactivity in games that separate it from other forms of mediums. Tavinor summarizes the discussion of other scholars who have argued for the role of interactivity and how it is problematic to find a working definition that encompasses the medium. This stems from the fact that “all artworks are interactive in at least some sense” and that merely flipping the pages of a book can be considered interactivity (Tavinor 626). Tavinor explains further that a definition based solely on the physical or cognitive forms of interaction are not sufficient to distinguish videogames from “non-interactive forms of art” (Tavinor 626). Tavinor points to how Lopes’ theory of ‘modifiable structure’ is a good step in the right direction. Lopes claims “that for an artwork to be ‘strongly interactive’, the choices of an interactor must have some impact on the artistic structure of the work” (Tavinor 626). Smuts, another scholar, criticized this idea and that rearranging the chapters of a book would fit under Lopes’ definition. In reflection of Smuts’ criticism, Tavinor states that “interactive works must *prescribe* that users are able to change the work structure” (Tavinor 627). Smuts claims that “something is interactive, if and only if it (1) is responsive, and (2) does not completely control, (3) is not completely controlled, and (4) does not respond in a completely random fashion.” Tavinor reflects that this definition allows interactivity to be determined “relative to the interactor’s knowledge” of the game, as the more the player knows of the game systems the more they can manipulated the game (Tavinor 627).

While video games have a naturally present interactivity, the level of interactivity varies greatly between different games and genres. Tavinor uses *Fallout 3* as an example of a video game that is *interactive fiction*, allowing the player “to make a contribution to the fictive scenario” (Tavinor 627-628). In explaining interactivity in the medium, Tavinor points to Kendall Walton’s theory “of *prop-based* make-believe” which analyses the relationship between “fictive props and the imaginings they warrant” (Tavinor 628). Tavinor argues that “it is the responsive nature of [Video games’] computational programs that grounds the

interactivity of the medium” (Tavinor 628). The fictive props of a video game are the relationship between the input and the output, as the tactile interactions of a controller produce “graphical, auditory, and tactile representations” of the player’s actions (Tavinor 628). While Tavinor does not produce a concluding definition of interactivity, examining interactivity in terms of the relationship between tactile input and the output of the computer program allows us to examine video games such as *BioShock Infinite* in terms of how well the game represents user input.

## 2.3 Features of game design; impact on the narrative

The immersion of a video game is also related to the game design and style that the game creator has chosen. As mentioned, video games take many different shapes and forms, and these change how the player both interacts with and perceives the video game. *BioShock Infinite* is a first-person shooter with a linear narrative experience, and as such, the in-game proxy of the player is hidden behind the screen and experiences the story through the eyes of the character. Tavinor argues that “player-characters are an epistemic vantage point on the gameworld, providing the player with a number of fictional senses” (Tavinor 629). From this vantage point, the player experiences the game visually through a controllable first-person camera, auditorily through sounds and music designed to enhance the experience, and also through tactile sensations such as “rumble and force-feedback controllers” (Tavinor 630). Tavinor also notes that video games “employ various means of making information available to players” through menus, status bars, or loading screens (Tavinor 630). These are features that allow the player to interact and learn about the game world through low-impact features, and to aid the player moving forward.

The interaction between player and game world creates a narrative experience that is distinctly different from that of other mediums. A key aspect of video games and their effect is their egocentric approach, a “player-focused moral experience” that is distinct from the “other-focused moral experience that characterizes literature and film (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 88). Video games allow a moral experience that is distinct from other forms of narrative experiences, as the player-focused perspective provides a greater sense of immersion and “ownership” of the experience. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen examines ethics in video game from a Deweyan perspective, arguing that the egocentric experience found in

video games allows the player to experience morality on a more personal level than the allocentric allows. As pointed to earlier, de Miranda argues that games can function as existential simulators. However, de Miranda examines *Life Is Strange* through Sartre and argues that video games can serve as reflection on our own autonomy (de Miranda 838). Kjeldgaard-Christiansen uses the Deweyan perspective in a similar way, arguing that video games can serve as a form of “moral self-discovery and self-determination” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 96). It is important to note that there is a large chasm between the egocentric and moral properties of games such as *Doom*, a game almost entirely dedicated to mindlessly slaughtering demons, and *Life Is Strange* that features meaningful and difficult choices requiring moral and emotional investments. *BioShock Infinite* is a linear narrative that features ‘pseudo-choices’ that allows for a perceived feeling of agency despite no consequential reaction to your choices. The world and character building of *BioShock Infinite* allows the player to be immersed and feel connected to the choices both presented and made by the playable-character.

## 2.4 BioShock and how it fits into academia

*BioShock Infinite's* critique of American exceptionalism is strengthened by the medium’s capacity for immersion and eliciting egocentric emotions such as pride by the actions of the playable-character. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen argues that video games “present self-involving interactive fictions that, as digital props, allow players to imagine *themselves* involved in varied scenarios” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 89), and that this self-insertion allows the player “to scaffold [their] moral imagination, animating it with a sense of arresting immediacy and meaningful consequence” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 89). Kjeldgaard-Christiansen claims that the “pervasive egocentricity is what makes the medium special” from an ethical perspective, and that further focus on the ethics of video games “may contribute to the medium’s artistic enfranchisement” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 104). The term self-involving interactive fiction (SIIF) is derivative of “players’ discourse about their in-game actions” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 90), as the players immerse themselves in the role of the player-character, *the player* is the one performing the action. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen asserts that this self-involvement produces a novel effect of video games, and he refers to Naomi Alderman’s claim that “while all art forms can elicit powerful emotions, only games can make their

audience feel the emotion of agency” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 90). Kjeldgaard-Christiansen’s argument is that the egocentric moral experience of video games allows the player to feel self-focused emotions such as pride or guilt about the actions of player-character, relating to the character as a moral agent. As the player immerses themselves in the narrative and game-world of *BioShock*, character choices such as saving bioengineered little girls or killing them to make yourself stronger elicit emotional responses such as guilt for harvesting them.

*BioShock* as a series first took form as the critically acclaimed 2007 first-person shooter with the same name. *BioShock* became not only a fiscal and popular hit, but also a subject for academic discussion surrounding narrative experiences through video games. The first and second installment in the series is set in the supposed underwater utopia named Rapture. The city was created by Andrew Ryan, a pure individualist and capitalist, with the intent of creating a society made free from governmental and religious interference. The events of the story turn dire, the supposed utopia becomes dystopic in nature, and the player character must navigate and escape the sunken city while battling security systems, drug altered humans, bio-mechanical creatures called “Big Daddies” and their protectee the “Little Sisters”. The dystopia serves as visual and narrative experience that demonstrates the potential folly of Ayn Rand’s Objectivism. Ken Levine, the lead developer of the first *BioShock* stated in an interview that in his approach to the story he was inspired by Ayn Rand. He was “taking a utopian ideal and seeing where that philosophy went and seeing where it might bump up against reality” (Hipschman).

*BioShock 2*, a sequel written and directed by Jordan Thomas, is set in the same world roughly a decade after the events of the first game. Thematically it opposes the original game’s Objectivism and individualism with the new antagonist, Sofia Lamb, and her collectivist ideals. Dr. Lamb, a psychiatrist, creates what is known as “The Family”, a cult with her daughter as the center of it all. In her hopes of creating a collectivist utopia, Lamb brainwashes the drug altered humans to join her cult, and cold-heartedly uses them to murder and hinder resistance. The story follows the player-character, a former Big Daddy, as he travels through the dystopian Rapture to free Eleanor Lamb, the antagonist’s daughter, and escape the submerged city. A novel part of *BioShock 2* is that the relationship between the player-character and Eleanor Lamb varies depending on the choices made in the game. This



can be viewed as an expansion on the formula of the first game where choices impact the ending, with the addition of altering the narrative journey.

The *BioShock* games received critical acclaim for their “choice-driven” story structure and have been praised for their innovative experience and immersive world-building. Both *BioShock* and *BioShock 2* are narrative experiences that use ideology as backdrop to the surrounding story, and with the gameplay element of choice driven narrative, present the player with moral decisions that alter the ending the player experiences. The interactivity of the gameplay and the perceived impact of actions combined with the dystopian world building, invokes investment in the narrative and the world of *BioShock*.

Academic discussion surrounding the series has been enourmously focused on the ideological aspects of the *BioShock* series and its legitimacy as both a game and a work of art. Felan Parker wrote on the cultural value and of the “prestige game”, arguing that *BioShock*’s critical and commercial success has given the game canonical status. Parker claims that “*BioShock* is an archetypal *prestige game*: a special class of AAA games that is expected to excel commercially but has distinction from other popular favorites and best sellers by grace of its supposed artistic quality and canonical status” (Parker 740). Parker’s article focuses on the critical discussion surrounding *BioShock* and presents how it has often been portrayed as a game “that matters and thus a game “worth talking about” (Parker 746). *BioShock* has been amply discussed because it is seen as more than “teenage power-gaming and simplistic propaganda”, offering commentary on “difficult questions and encourages players to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions” (Parker 746). The subject matter of *BioShock* being ideological, Parker also notes that its “neutrality” is one of its strengths (Parker 747), pointing to Ken Levine attempt to “distance his work from more explicitly political games, which are implied to be overbearing and pretentious” (Parker 748). Though some critics argue that *BioShock* isn’t as neutral as Levine claims, the game’s unclear or obscured message allows for moral interpretation from the player. Countless online forums have discussed ad nauseam how they interpret the message of *BioShock* and their impression of the story. Parker notes that even the “few writers who dissent from *BioShock*’s overwhelmingly positive reception [...] still affirm its artistic and historical importance” for the medium and industry (Parker 753). Parker concludes by saying that *BioShock* has become one of the most influential video games of the industry and has placed itself “in the gaming canon as enduring

popular ‘proof’ that important works of art can be achieved in the confines of the industry” (Parker 755).

The success of the first *BioShock* has cast a large and impressive shadow which has caused it to become an item of focus and a reference point in discussion surrounding video games. *BioShock 2* and *BioShock Infinite* are unquestionably always compared to their predecessor, both to their detriment and benefit. *BioShock 2* was created by a sister studio of Ken Levine’s team and “faced an uphill battle from the start in regard to gaining acceptance from fans of the original” (Reblin-Renshaw 51). Reblin-Renshaw states that “*BioShock 2* is what *BioShock* should have been” arguing that it had refined the aspect of impactful choices, creating a dynamic plot that felt more sincere in its delivery (Reblin-Renshaw 51). The lukewarm reception of *BioShock 2*, despite its financial success (Reblin-Renshaw 39), stems from the great expectations set by *BioShock*. Reblin-Renshaw argues that *BioShock 2* is a well-executed narrative experience that expands and perfects many of the features loved from the first game but *BioShock 2* “was placed in the dubious position where good wouldn’t be good enough”, and that the “horizons of expectations set by the player of the original” demanded a revolutionary game, and not simply an improvement of the formula (Reblin-Renshaw 51-52). Similarly, *BioShock Infinite* was also somewhat harmed by the shadow of *BioShock*, creating immense hype for its release in 2013 and return to the hands of Ken Levine as main writer.

## 2.5 BioShock Infinite and response

*BioShock Infinite* differs in its execution from *BioShock 1* and *2* and does not have a variation in ending. The plot of *Infinite* is less-linear than its predecessors and uses themes such as determinism, multiverse theory, and cyclical events. The story of *BioShock Infinite* follows Booker DeWitt, the playable character, as he explores the city of Columbia, a flying city created by the antagonist Zachary Hale Comstock. The events of *Infinite* are set in 1912 and the playable character is tasked with finding and rescuing a woman named Elizabeth from captivity. After Booker rescues Elizabeth, they work as a duo to fight both the Founders and the Vox Populi, the elite and the working-class respectively, as they journey through the city to escape. Throughout the journey it is slowly revealed that Elizabeth possesses the ability to create portals called Tears that lead to alternative universes.

The big revelation in the game is that Booker DeWitt and Zachary Hale Comstock are the same person but from two different universes. The two versions of Booker diverged after he participated in the Wounded Knee massacre. In Comstock's universe, he was baptized after the massacre and was born again as Comstock and reinvented himself as a religious leader after funding research that discovered advanced technology and Tears. After the Tears caused Comstock to be infertile, he used the Tears to acquire Booker's daughter Anna and make her his heir. As revealed at the end of the game, this is a cyclical struggle that keeps repeating until something breaks the cycle. As long as there is a Booker who refuses the Wounded Knee massacre baptism, there will also be a Booker who reinvents himself into Comstock and invents Columbia, the flying city, and steals the other Booker's daughter. At its core, *BioShock Infinite* is a story about a man rescuing his daughter from a megalomaniacal alter-ego. However, its wider structure comes across as denouncement of systems and ideologies that foster authorial rule.

With its release, *BioShock Infinite* was critiqued for removing the aspect of player-choices determining which ending is given to the player. However, based on the cyclical and repeating events of the story, one is led to believe this is a thematic and plot-related choice. Booker's attempts to rescue Elizabeth happen simultaneously in numerous universes and repeat. At the end of the game, many different versions of Elizabeth appear and state that the only way to stop the dystopia that is Columbia is to end it before it begins. Booker himself, and in turn, the player character, is constrained by constants in the universes. As such, Anna being taken and renamed Elizabeth is a constant that must happen. Similarly, the player-choices throughout the game don't matter because the story itself is a constant. The small variations such as whether you throw the ball at the interracial couple or not do not matter, as those choices don't affect anything. Similarly to Booker, the player can't change the results of the story. During the ending sequence, Elizabeth states that the lighthouses are "a million million worlds. All different and all similar. Constants and variables. [...] There's always a lighthouse. There's always a man, there's always a city" (*BioShock Infinite*, ending). The lighthouses are a common element in all three *BioShock* games, and every entry in the series starts with the protagonist entering a lighthouse. Elizabeth's line is a comment on the overall structure of *BioShock* as a series. This is to say that no matter the choices made, there will always be a dystopian city ruled by an ideological man. As Booker and Elizabeth walk through the inter-universal space, they are led to the baptism that started it all. It is then revealed that the only way to break the cycle is for Booker to die.

*BioShock Infinite* conveys the inevitability of the corrupting aspect of ideological extremism. In the first entry of the series, Andrew Ryan was a steadfast objectivist and the city of Rapture was built in his image. Contrary to Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Rapture was not filled with paragons of moral character, but rather fallible ordinary humans. The system failed because of people's propensity to abuse or manipulate the system in place. The same applies to *BioShock 2*, in which collectivist ideals were subverted into a cult-like devotion to Sofia Lamb's daughter. *BioShock Infinite* applies the same premise to American Exceptionalism and show how unchecked belief in leaders creates a system doomed to collapse. While *BioShock 1* and *2* both are set in the aftermath of the collapse, *BioShock Infinite* invites the player to explore the world as its collapsing around them. As the player character enters the city of Columbia, they are presented with a beautiful city teeming with seeming joy and structure. This, however, is soon dismantled as the cracks show. Throughout the story, the player character learns of the power struggle between the Founders and the Vox Populi, the treatment of minorities and the working class, and the embellished narrative that the antagonist Comstock has created around himself.

*BioShock Infinite* is a linear-narrative within the dystopic-fiction genre that uses religious motif. Scholarship surrounding *BioShock Infinite* has focused on the cultural and religious aspects of its dystopian narrative. Jan Wysocki notes in their paper that *BioShock Infinite* almost always portrays religion as "something dangerous and inhumane or at least unusual and strange" (Wysocki 9). Wysocki states that Comstock's values "stand anathema to the cultural ideals of the context in which Infinite has been developed (i.e., western, liberal)", and as the player fights against the antagonists, "the player implicitly fights the kind of religious movement and ideology the followers of Comstock represent" (Wysocki 9). However, Wysocki points out that despite being a critique of "evangelical Christianity" (Wysocki 9), *Infinite* lacks any direct references to the Bible, the cross, or Christ, (Wysocki 10) and as a result seems to refrain "from taking a critical stance on mainstream religion" (Wysocki 11). Wysocki argues that *BioShock Infinite*'s position within a multi-billion dollar industry limits its potential for true critique, citing the large budget of the game as the reason. "The higher the production costs, the bigger the target audience must be" (Wysocki 11). Wysocki claims that "religion is simply another cultural dimension which is openly depicted in the game but with an attitude that seeks to avoid any conflict with a possible audience" (Wysocki 12), similarly to how the game "depicts the workers' revolt against racist oppression as negatively as racist oppression itself", refraining from making "a political statement that could estrange

either side of the argument” (Wysocki 11). While Wysocki’s questioning of the industry’s capacity for true artistic integrity with so many limiting factors is warranted, I argue that *BioShock Infinite*’s presentation of both sides as corrupt is entirely within the vision and message of the game.

Felan Parker, reference earlier in the context of the canonization of *BioShock*, also remarked on *BioShock Infinite*’s failure to achieve the same artistic weight as its predecessor. Parker notes that a number of critics and scholars expressed “ambivalence and disappointment in the game’s attempt to address serious issues like racism and violence from within the confines of the mainstream commercial FPS” (Parker 753) Both Wysocki and Parker allude to the economic aspect of creating a large-scale video game, and how the industry itself creates limitations of what can be said and which manner it can say it. Parker argues that further canonization of AAA video games is doubtful, as a “vocal sector of the gaming public” feels the limitations of the industry and that it “can no longer support the production of culturally or aesthetically valuable games” (Parker 755). Despite the doubt Parker presents, *BioShock Infinite* remains a continuation of the spirit of the first *BioShock* and remains a title that engages with difficult themes in a large scale production.

*BioShock Infinite* uses themes relevant to both politics and society in the United States, and uses its large platform to engage in commentary of potentially harmful ideology. *BioShock* as a series in one of the most referenced games in terms of academic discussion surrounding the medium, and as Parker mentions, its impressive use of ideology and game design has canonized *BioShock*. The immersion and ownership of the gameplay experience allows the player to engage with topics such as dystopic variations of Ayn Rand’s ideology in a setting that is accessible and familiar to a large segment of the population. Further, I will discuss how *BioShock Infinite* uses its narrative and setting to comment on American exceptionalism and how corruption of America’s values of religion, individualism, and capitalism can create a dystopic autocratic state. The importance of *BioShock Infinite* comes from how it creates reflection in its players, reexamining the values upheld by society and reflect on the composition of one’s own values.

### 3 Chapter 2 – American exceptionalism in *BioShock Infinite*

Society itself is a narrative that we all participate in telling. American exceptionalism is a key aspect of the American narrative, regarding societal, political, and ideological elements.

*BioShock Infinite*, a game produced and written by an American company, bases itself on this myth and attempts to showcase the potential dangers of extreme Americanism. In the effort of presenting *Infinite*'s critique, I intend to discuss the elements of American exceptionalism. This chapter will provide a definition of the term American exceptionalism and the values that are deeply associated with it. This allows for comparison between the narrative of *BioShock Infinite* and how it uses the different aspects of American exceptionalism such as religion and capitalism to present a dystopic vision of the related values. This is displayed at the surface-level through visual style, musical style, and iconography. The combination of neoclassical architecture, orchestral classical soundtrack, and abundance of American flags and patriotic symbols create an atmosphere of patriotism, which is then showed to be corrupted through cultism and fanaticism by Comstock, turning cherished American symbols such as George Washington to a deity and Abraham Lincoln to a traitor. Furthermore, *BioShock Infinite* uses its character to exemplify the different values of American exceptionalism, each as a personification on the fallibility of each element. It is also my intention to show how *BioShock Infinite* critiques American society's historic relationship with classism and racism. *BioShock Infinite* presents a dystopian result of the values of American exceptionalism to provoke moral deliberation of the player and make them reflect on unchecked adherence to leader figures.

#### 3.1 American Exceptionalism

*BioShock Infinite* critiques American exceptionalism through a dystopian representation of the myth's values of capitalism, theism, and heroization. *BioShock Infinite*'s intent is to display how the exceptional nature of American society has the potential for moral corruption. American exceptionalism is one of the most profound and pervasive myths of American society. Undeniably linked to the American dream and idealization of individualism, American exceptionalism remains an umbrella term that is colloquially easily recognized. The French diplomat and aristocrat Alexi de Tocqueville travelled the US during

the 1830s and was the “first to refer to the United States as exceptional” arguing in his work *Democracy in America* that it is “qualitatively different from all other countries” (Lipset 18). Lipset remarks that Tocqueville and other social scientists did not mean *exceptional* to convey “that America is better than other countries or has a superior culture”, but rather that America “is qualitatively different, that it is an outlier.” Lipset counters this by saying that “exceptionalism is a double-edged concept,” and that exceptionality, for better or worse, is a reference to its uniqueness (Lipset 18). Lipset argues that the American values that its exceptionalism is built upon is those of complexity and almost paradoxical antithetical nature, and that these values foster “a high sense of personal responsibility, independent initiative, and voluntarism” while they also encourage “self-serving behavior, atomism, and a disregard for communal good” (Lipset 268). Lipset reformulates it to that the American Creed’s “emphasis on individualism threatens traditional forms of community morality, and thus has historically promoted a particularly virulent strain of greedy behavior” (Lipset 268).

Lipset also notes the “special religious character” of America (Lipset 60). Despite the United States being a secular state, the US has been historically one of the largest Christian nations, and compared to Western Europe, “Americans place a higher importance on the role of religion in their lives” (Lipset 62). Lipset argues that the political ideology of Americanism “has led to a utopian orientation among American liberals and conservatives”, and within this, a belief in good and evil, “viewing social and political dramas as morality plays, as battles between God and the Devil, so that compromise is virtually unthinkable” (Lipset 63). This morality is displayed in America’s militarism, where both anti-war and pro-war sentiments appear patriotic. Lipset states that America “has insisted on the ‘unconditional surrender’” of its enemies, both in war and in ideology, and argues that the United States, “as a principled nation, must go to war for moral reasons” and when fighting ‘evil’, “[evil] must not be allowed to survive” (Lipset 65). Lipset’s book was written before the infamous war on terror, and I’d argue that anti-war sentiments have lessened, while pro-war sentiments have increased, especially the moral character of fighting “evil”.

It is important to note that American exceptionalism is itself an ideology. Lipset argues that American exceptionalism has replaced other ideologies, referencing Hofstadter saying “it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one” (Lipset 18). In his view, the US has a “political religion” and that “becoming American was a religious, that is, ideological act” (Lipset 18). Where European nations’ sense of self came from a shared

history, “Americanness” is determined by “an ideological commitment” and “those who reject American values are un-American” (Lipset 31). Lipset defines Americanism as dogmatic adherence to five words: “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire” (Lipset 31). Baked into these words are distrust of statism, belief in meritocracy and the individual, and a religious moral absolutism. American exceptionalism is an ideology that fosters focus on individual responsibility and ability, while simultaneously adhering to religious moral absolutism. Within this meritocratic view, success and failure is attributed to personal capacity to produce capital, and in extension, successful people are admired and idolized. The religious intensity of the United States is characterized by its sectarianism, where branches such as the Methodist church, the Baptist church, and “hundreds” smaller Protestant based movements have found a larger following in America compared to Europe (Lipset 23). Most significantly, sects “are predominantly congregational” and “each local unit adheres voluntarily” (Lipset 23) to its church. *BioShock Infinite* uses the values of American exceptionalism through its antagonist, Zachary Hale Comstock, who has created his own religious sect based on Christian symbolism, and reinforces his status as ‘the Prophet’ through his personal success in war, science, and capitalism.

The United States of America’s nationalism, inherently linked to the belief in American exceptionalism, was strengthened in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, and has subsequently been a larger part of political discourse and rhetorical debate. In Anatol Lieven’s outline of American nationalism, he quotes Max Lerner assessment that “the cult of the nation as social myth has run as a thread through the whole of American history” (Lieven 18) This nationalism is characterized by not only values and ideals as outlined above, but a set “imagined communal mythology” that is a compound of narrative such as “Columbus, Pocahontas, the Pilgrims and Puritans, and the Founding Fathers” (Paul 12). Paul argues that these American myths “play a crucial role in the symbolization and affirmation of the US nation” playing the role of “internal coherence” as well as projecting “American hegemony outside the US” (Paul 17). The ‘New World’ aspect of Columbus’ discovery of America, the religious narrative surrounding the Pilgrims and the Puritans ‘conquering’ of America, and the political ideals of the Founding Fathers play a large role in the narrative presented in *BioShock Infinite* as the game attempts to create a distinctly atmospherically ‘American’ story.



In discussing American exceptionalism, it is hard to avoid the dichotomy between the Anglo-American experience of the American Creed and the African-American experience of the same. Firstly, it is important to state the historic disenfranchisement of Black Americans; as the Anglo-Americans celebrated their democratic republic and individualism, Black Americans were stripped of autonomy and agency. The emancipation of slaves didn't end their discrimination, nor did the end of segregation do so as evident by the large social movement surrounding *Black Lives Matter*. Secondly, Lipset argues that this has resulted in “two Americas, two value systems” (Lipset 113). Within Lipset's account of the ‘double-edged sword’ that is American exceptionalism, he argues with the use of survey data that, compared to Europe, the United States was “for its large white majority [...] much more egalitarian, individualistic and populist” while the black minority “was much more hierarchical and particularistic, group-defined, less free, and undemocratic” (Lipset 116). A group of people relegated to subalternity for the majority of history would have a different relationship with the ideals of its subjugator, and within this, a value-system that is distinctly opposed to the hegemony. The distinction is then to be made that American exceptionalism is mostly an Anglo-American concept, or rather, a non-African-American concept. While merely speculations, it is safe to assume that this dichotomy also reflects on the Native-American experience of American exceptionalism.

### 3.2 Aesthetic

While this thesis focuses on the narrative of *BioShock Infinite*, it is of significance to point out the audio-visual style of the game and how it aids the narrative in its message. The aesthetic style of *BioShock Infinite* is reminiscent of a mix of *steampunk* and *neoclassical* and implements them in an alternative history. Steampunk, a retro-futuristic style often associated with science fiction, can be identified in the clothing style and weaponry of the game, inspired heavily from Victorian era designs that are modified, exaggerated with more flair. The architectural designs of Columbia draw inspiration from the neoclassical, fitting into the theme of American exceptionalism. The neoclassical was a style that was favored by the Founding Fathers, as the style can be identified in the most quintessentially American building of all, the White House. The buildings of *BioShock Infinite* seem to replicate the style of the World's Columbian Exposition, a fair held in Chicago in 1893 that featured

revolutionizing technology and impressive engineering. This is mirrored in *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative that states that the floating city of Columbia was created to showcase American supremacy and was revealed at this world's fair.

The soundtrack of *BioShock Infinite* supports this aesthetic, applying orchestral classical-esque music to further create an atmosphere reminiscent of American turn-of-the-century era. While the music is closest to American chamber music in style, the composer Garry Schyman has added frantic slightly off-key string instruments to the otherwise calm and melodic soundtrack. This is not evident in every sound, but most apparent in "Lighter Than Air" that plays a calm melody that hides an eerie string instrument in the background. The atmospheric addition of the soundtrack, especially when combined with showcasing of brilliant set-pieces, creates a feeling of looming danger. The music represents both the superficial calm and impressiveness of Columbia and the teeming bloody civil war hiding below the surface. The aesthetic and music of *BioShock Infinite* creates an atmosphere faithful to the turn-of-the-century era it basis itself on, featuring both architecture and music from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *BioShock Infinite*'s aesthetic presentation is in tune with both the city of Columbia and American exceptionalism itself: an impressive myth.

### 3.3 Comstock and corruption of American myths

Zachary Hale Comstock serves as the primary antagonist of *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative and represents the corruptibility of belief in American exceptionalism. Comstock's cult of personality has been created on political, religious, scientific, and military power. Throughout the games various levels, Comstock's rise to power is revealed through dialogue and Voxophones, in-game audio devices that function as exposition. In the aftermath of the Baptism that separated the timelines, Booker DeWitt was born-again as Zachary Hale Comstock and became a religious preacher. As a preacher, he gained a larger and larger following, slowly turning himself into an influential politician as well. After meeting Rosalind Lutece, he used his new-found influence to provide financial support for her research which led to the development of quantum levitation, the flying technology of Columbia, and Tear technology, allowing him almost prophetic information about the future. With the ability of predicting future events, his following grew even more, adopting the moniker of *the Prophet*. Presenting Columbia as a great American invention at the World's

Columbian Exposition, a physical manifestation of the supremacy of American technology and science. While the floating city was the US's government's property, Comstock was its de facto leader. During a world tour with the city, Columbia attacked the Chinese during the Boxer Rebellion without orders or permission from the US government which caused a rift between congress and Comstock. After Columbia's secession from the Union, Comstock had both the political, religious, and military authority to be in control of both the city and the narrative around it. Comstock's recreation of history featured the Founding Fathers as deities with George Washington as the supreme saint, and portrayed Columbia as the new Eden.

Comstock's religious recreation of history is shown in the in-game area named Hall of Heroes, illustrating how he has used symbols and icons from American exceptionalism and turned them into religious motifs. The building itself is created as propaganda to both reinvent history and to glorify Comstock himself. The Hall of Heroes features exhibits that show an altered version of the historic events of the Boxer Rebellion and the Wounded Knee Massacre. These exhibits present Comstock as a lone hero that 'saved' Columbia from "foreign hordes". The imagery of "foreign hordes" appears often throughout the story, firstly presented during the player-characters meeting with the Order of the Ravens in a mural featuring George Washington as he stands heroically surrounded by stereotypical depictions of Irish, Asian, Mexican and even Native American people. The writing on the mural states: "For God and Country / It is our Holy Duty to Guard Against the Foreign Hordes".

The anti-immigration sentiment is something that mirrors both American history (e.g. anti-Chinese immigration of the Chinese Exclusion Act) and the current climate of anti-immigration sentiments towards Mexico. Within the Wounded Knee Massacre exhibit, after a wandering hall of stereotypical depictions of Native Americans as savages, a robotic statue in the image of George Washington proclaims: "With hue and cry, with hatchet red, they danced among our noble dead. / But when our soldiers took the field, the savage horde could only yield" with a banner that states "Our Prophet: the Hero of Wounded Knee" underneath. While this fits into the white supremacy narrative that Comstock reinforces, it also plays into American exceptionalism's Manifest Destiny and the Frontier myth. *BioShock Infinite* is heavy handed with its use of racist imagery and it is not a particularly subtle element of the story. However, racism, while simultaneously performing a narrative function, comes across as a condemnation of America's history and ideals. In a dystopian anti-mimesis, *BioShock*

*Infinite*'s 2013 anti-immigration satire, despite its hyperbolic nature, mimics the attitudes of the 2016 Make America Great Again movement with US-centric rhetoric.

Columbia itself is Comstock's manifestation of Eden and in turn, the United States is referenced as "Sodom below". *BioShock Infinite* uses this comparison two-folds: firstly as a biblical allegory to the book of Exodus, and secondly mirroring Puritan mythologization of the colonization of America. Wysocki, through the analysis of the player's first entry into Columbia, identifies the biblical allusions of the phrase found on a banner which reads: "And the Prophet shall lead the people to the New Eden" (Wysocki 4). Wysocki states that *BioShock Infinite*'s use of Comstock as a 'shepherd to a New Eden' alludes to an "intellectual movement associated with early colonial Puritanism and Congregationalist settlers during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries" (Wysocki 4). This relates to their view of the first settlers as "quasi-mythological", ascribing their migration from Great Britain as comparable to "the book of exodus, in which the Israelites fled from Egypt for a land promised to them by God" (Wysocki 4). Wysocki argues that *BioShock Infinite*'s 'New Eden' "conjures associations with popular conceptions of the mythical American past of the first colonies" (Wysocki 4). Throughout the story, Comstock makes many references to Sodom, a biblical city that God destroyed because of its wickedness. In one of the Voxophones titled "Another Ark for Another Time" Comstock presents his view of Columbia as an allegory for Noah's Ark, further cementing biblical allegories:

'And the Lord saw the wickedness of Man was great, And He repented He had made Man on the Earth.' Rain! Forty days and forty nights of the stuff. And He left not a thing that walked alive. You see, my friends, even God is entitled to a do-over. And what is Columbia if not another Ark, for another time? (Another Ark for Another Time, Voxophone)

The excerpt is not merely a biblical allusion, but it mirrors American exceptionalism's sentiment of being wholly distinct from the rest of the world, and within that belief, morally superior. Similarly to how the United States was first settled by people who sought to make it a 'Shining City Upon a Hill', Comstock's goal was to create a city that resembled his utopia.

The deification of 'American Heroes' such as the Founding Fathers, and the subsequent corruption of Abraham Lincoln, functions as both a narrative explanation for Columbia's descent into cultism, and as a representation of American exceptionalism's myth surrounding the Founding Fathers. In *BioShock Infinite*, the deification of George Washington, and the

others Founding Fathers, is evident through iconography, dialogue, and characters. After the forced baptism during the first section of the game, the player-character awakens in front of three statues inscribed with the names 'Father Franklin', 'Father Washington', and 'Father Jefferson'. These statues are clad in robes resembling the Greek togas of ancient philosophers, each statue holding a specific item. The 'Pilgrims' in front of the statue state: "To Father Washington, she granted a sword of gold, so that Eden would have strength that set her above all other nations", "To Father Franklin: a key of gold, so that Eden might have industry that set her above all other nations", and "To Father Jefferson: a scroll, so that Eden might have laws that set her above all other nations". Within this is an alteration of the myth of the Founding Fathers. American exceptionalism's heroization of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson idealizes them based on values of military leadership, industriousness, and legal egalitarianism respectively. This is both corrupted and deified within *BioShock Infinite*, as the statues and Pilgrims surrounding them creates an aura of religious dedication to these men, imagining them as 'flawless paragons' of values. This is further amplified by the dialogue of the Pilgrims found within this "Garden of New Eden", that states "He who crossed the Delaware with flaming sword and the wings of angels / Watch over me and lend me strength". This dogmatic recital of prayer shows early on in the game's narrative how the Founding Fathers are not merely ideals but rather worshipped as Gods.

This narrative descent into cultism is also evident in the demonization of Abraham Lincoln, as he is portrayed as a traitor to the American Creed. The anti-Lincoln propaganda is found within the Fraternal Order of the Raven, a location found relatively early in the game. The Order is a white-supremacy group of zealots dressed in blue cloaks and hats, resembling the Ku Klux Klan in attire, who worship John Wilkes Booth as a saint, evident from the grand statue of him the player-character encounters as they first enter the location. The second room the character enters has a painting on the wall depicting John Wilkes Booth with a glowing halo as he is pointing a gun at Abraham Lincoln with devil horns and red eyes. Within the narrative, Abraham Lincoln is a traitor for emancipation the slaves, and therefore, Booth becomes a saint for 'punishing' a traitor. Comstock states:

What exactly was the "Great Emancipator" emancipating the Negro from? From his daily bread. From the nobility of honest work. From wealthy patrons who sponsored them from cradle to Grave. From clothing and shelter. And what have they done with their freedom? Why, go to Finkton, and you shall find out. No animal is born free,

except the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation. (The Lie of the Emancipator, Voxophone)

Comstock's statement has the obvious sentiment of white supremacist belief of racial hierarchy, but as it villainizes Abraham Lincoln, it also incorporates capitalistic doctrines of industriousness. Comstock corrupts the work culture of America that encourages a "hustler lifestyle" and makes it a "point of pride to work themselves to exhaustion" (European Business Review), and contorts it to a perspective where the African-Americans' wish for emancipation is a result of laziness. *BioShock Infinite* creates within its narrative a pantheon of Gods and saints on the backdrop of racial supremacy compiled by American exceptionalism's heroes. Both the deification of the Founding Fathers and the demonization of Abraham Lincoln represents a dystopic alteration of the current foundational myths of American exceptionalism, creating potential for reflection on the player's own heroization myths and how these myths are used as rhetorical devices within the American political discourse.

### 3.4 The Corruption of religion, capitalism, and science

While Wysocki argues that *BioShock Infinite*'s lack of the quintessential icons of the Bible, the cross, and Christ are related to the "economic risk factor" in openly critiquing a majority religion (Wysocki 9), I argue that this is related to Comstock's in-narrative corruption of American ideals and values. As explored earlier, Comstock presents Columbia as 'the New Eden', borrowing from the Book of Exodus, and within this presents himself as 'the Prophet'. Comstock's religion bases itself on Christian evangelism, a part of the sum that marks American exceptionalism, and within this, Comstock creates a narrative that replaces the Christ figure with himself. This is comparable to Mormonism, a Christian denomination that Ankerberg and Weldon argue, despite its claim to biblical truth, is far from the "historic, biblical Christianity" (Ankerberg & Weldon 10) and is a cult that misuses Christian imagery. Joseph Smith was the founder of Mormonism, and according to Ankerberg and Weldon, he and his successors claimed that Joseph Smith was to be worshipped as Christ (Ankerberg & Weldon 11), and that his name was equal to Christ (Ankerberg & Weldon 12). A cult is defined by Lifton through three criteria:

First, a shift in worship from broad spiritual ideas to the person of a charismatic guru; second, the active pursuit of a thorough reform-like process that frequently stresses

some kind of merger with the guru; and third, extensive exploitation from above (by the guru and leading disciples)--- whether economic, sexual, or psychological--- of the idealism of ordinary followers from below. (Lifton 3).

While the intention of this thesis is not to argue Mormonism's supposed cult-hood, the supposition that it is a cult, allows us to compare how Comstock's cultism resembles modern-day Christian cults. Similarly to the father of Mormonism, Comstock creates a cult with himself as the supreme leader, demanding worship and allegiance to him and his family. The lack of Christian symbols within *BioShock Infinite* is related to Comstock replacing the Bible with his prophetic word, Christ with himself, and the Cross with the Founding Fathers. While Wysocki's interpretation of the economic factor might be relevant, it does not remove the narrative function of the missing symbols as *BioShock Infinite* uses their vacancy to warn of demagogues who use religious or ideological rhetoric to convert people to extremism.

Jeremiah Fink is a character that manifests the dark side of the capitalistic values of American exceptionalism. Fink, a rich and powerful capitalist, runs the Fink Manufacturing company and employs the large majority of the lower-classes. It is revealed through the in-game public announcement system as the player fights their way across Fink's factories that the workers are "paid in tokens that are only good at the company store", revealing that the workers are not paid in universal currency. The PA system also reveals that the worker are working "16 hours a day" and that wishes for "paid vacation, 8-hour days, workers" compensation [...] are anarchist words." Fink's indoctrination of his workers also employs the hierarchical structure and company loyalty as a good thing, and that the most important aspect of working is related to being proud of ones' craft. Fink's propaganda is reminiscent of the industriousness of Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard who said "If we are industrious we shall never starve; for, as Poor Richard says, *At the working Man's House Hunger looks in, but dares not enter* (Poor Richard Improved, 1758). This same industriousness and belief in hard work is still evident in American society, an artefact of American exceptionalism. Statistics presented by 20 Something Finance show that U.S. workers "work an average of 1,767 hours per year versus an OECD country average of 1,687", working significantly more than German or UK workers. The same article points out the lack of worker protection laws, such as not having a set "maximum length of the work week", nor "national paid parental leave benefits", nor "paid sick days" or "legally mandated annual leave" (Miller). Fink represents the features of American exceptionalism that are present to exploit the lower-

classes labor, while admittedly exaggerated, his values represent the corruptible aspect of capitalism and its economic structure.

Rosalind and Robert Lutece represent the scientific prowess and ideals often associated with American exceptionalism. Comstock's misuse of their technology represents the fallacy of believing technological progress to be inherently good, and how authority can corrupt it. They, being alternative versions of themselves, were the ones to create the technology that allowed the creation of Columbia and gave Comstock the ability to 'prophesize' the future. Within the game, the Lutece twins play the role of explaining the concepts of alternate timelines and dimensions to the player, serving the role of meta-explanations of the rules of the game-world. In the narrative presented, the Lutece twins have already been betrayed by Comstock, leaving them "scattered amongst the possibility space" ("A Theory on Our 'Death'", Voxophone) and able to teleport and travel across the timelines as they please. American exceptionalism has historically had a deep relationship with science, although current trends in the US suggest a descent into anti-intellectual attitudes (Motta). Dupree argues that "science is a thread woven into the very fabric of American civilization" (Dupree 863), evident from Benjamin Franklin's scientific exploration (Britannica, "Benjamin Franklin"), the World's Columbian Exposition that showcased both American technology and wealth (Britannica, "World's Columbian Exposition"), and the ideological battle during the Cold War that was 'fought' with technology created by science (Oreskes & Krige). *BioShock Infinite* uses the corruption of scientific values for authoritarian use to present the fallibility of its application. The Lutece twin's technology is used maliciously by Comstock, showcasing that benefactors and politicians are the ones who determine technological use, reminding the player of both the power and danger of technology in the wrong hands.

### 3.5 *BioShock Infinite*: class, race, and revolution

The apparent class and race divide of Columbia serves as a critique of the historical classism and racism of American history. American exceptionalism is built upon a historical myth that omits details of the US's history of slavery and mistreatment of the working class. The social structures of *BioShock Infinite* also portray the follies of a system based on capitalism and religion, such as the lower classes consisting of minorities, focus on material wealth, and extreme faith in industrialization and science. The Vox Populi of *BioShock Infinite* is led by



Daisy Fitzroy, a Black female revolutionary, who is determined to upheave the class and race structure imposed by the Founders. The societal structure of Columbia leaves minorities and working-class people at the bottom of the hierarchal structure, upheld by a combination of racist ideology and capitalistic labor exploitation. This is showcased both through Daisy Fitzroy's dialogue and actions:

The one thing people need to learn is that fear is the antidote to fear. I don't want to be a part of their world. I don't want to be a part of their culture, their politics, their people. The sun is setting on their world, and soon enough, all they gon' see... is the dark. ("Their Sun is Setting", Voxophone)

Daisy Fitzroy's revolutionary elements are displayed through her opposition to partaking in the cultural hegemony of the Founders, not that she has the ability to partake based on the racial supremacy inherent to Comstock's ideology. Within this statement, her brutality is also displayed, as she argues for a violent expulsion of the Founders and their ruling structure. Within *BioShock Infinite*'s critique of American exceptionalism, Daisy Fitzroy figureheads two elements of contention. As a member of a minority group, she mimics the anti-establishment movement of Malcolm X, and as a worker, the socialist movements of the Great Depression. While Daisy Fitzroy's rebellion doesn't inhabit the same traits of Black nationalism and Black separatism, Malcom X's condemnation of the power-structure and call for weaponized defense against oppression (Britannica, "Malcolm X"). American exceptionalism can be characterized by "the absence of strong socialist or class-conscious movements" (Lipset 77), something that *BioShock Infinite* mimics. However, during the Great Depression, many socialist and union movements gained followers as a result of the growing discontent of the working-class towards unemployment and exploitative working conditions (Britannica, "Great Depression"). Similarly to the workers of the Great Depression and civil rights activists such as Malcolm X, Daisy Fitzroy represents a revolt against the systemic powers that American exceptionalism constitute.

The Vox Populi are motivated by the injustices done towards minorities and the lower-classes, but *BioShock Infinite* displays through Daisy Fitzroy how great ideals can still have corrupting effect. Critics such as Wysocki and Parker note the troubling aspect of presenting the "antiracist resistance" as "'just as bad' as oppression itself" (Parker 754), and suggest that the game appears to refrain from making a "political statement that could estrange either side of the argument" (Wysocki 11). However, *BioShock Infinite* is not attempting to tell a story of a 'fight against racism' nor one about 'good versus evil'. The *BioShock* narrative bases

itself on the clash between of ideology and fallible humans. Daisy Fitzroy fights for equality, and along the way adopts a philosophy that ‘the end justifies the means’. This is evident from her final dialogue while she’s holding a child at gunpoint, as she says “This is what needs to be done.” This sequence is set in an alternate universe where the Vox Populi has launched an attack on Finkton and the government. Fitzroy’s descent into brutality is marked by her words: “You see, the Founders ain’t nothin’ but weeds / Cut ‘em down and they just grow back! / If you wanna get rid of the weed, you got to pull it up from the root / It is the only way to be sure.” Fitzroy seems to believe that the only way to stop the injustice is to kill all the Founders. While the game doesn’t explicitly state that her actions are wrong, Elizabeth and Booker’s reaction to Daisy threatening a child suggests that the player should view Daisy in an unfavorable light. Determining whether Daisy Fitzroy was right in her belief that the Founders must be ‘pulled up from the root’ is not the objective of *BioShock Infinite*. The game attempts to provoke the player to reflect on if the end truly justifies the means. Daisy’s ideals are what modern thinking would describe as righteous, however, *BioShock Infinite* makes the player reflect on whether you can take an ideal too far. Ken Levine stated in an interview of representation of social or political issues that “whenever somebody’s certain I get very, very nervous” (Lejacq). Ken Levine’s comment on certainty, ideologues who are unequivocally convinced of their world-view, lays weight to the claim that *BioShock Infinite* showcases the fallibility of ideologies, and not merely a critique of religion. Similarly to how Comstock represents the corruptibility of American exceptionalism, Daisy Fitzroy represents the corruptibility of righteousness.

### 3.6 The dichotomy of Elizabeth’s innocence and Booker’s cynicism

The relationship between Elizabeth and Booker is characterized by her innocence and his cynicism, playing the role of narrative immersion and reflection, as Elizabeth’s reaction to the violence and corruption that takes place contrasts with Booker / the player’s apathy towards violence. In the section after first finding Elizabeth and escaping the tower, Elizabeth is shown dancing joyfully on the pier and her dialogue “what could be better than this?”, in addition to the confined state the player finds her in, makes the player believe in her innocence. Conversely, Booker responds to her request to dance negatively, responding with “I don’t dance” in a serious and firm tone. The dichotomy between Elizabeth and Booker is further underlined in the following battle sequence in the ticketing section as Booker defends

her and himself from armed guards. As Booker catches up to Elizabeth as she boards the gondola she says: “You killed those people. I can’t believe you did that ... they’re all dead... You killed those people!” When Booker tries to protest, Elizabeth interrupts him and calls him a monster, innocently unaware of Booker’s reality of “if you don’t draw first, you don’t get to draw at all.” Elizabeth represents a reminder to both the player and the player-character that the hyper-violence they are used to is not the norm. Later on during the section in the Hall of Heroes, as Booker is confronted by Slate on the radio about his ‘glory days’ during the Wounded Knee massacre, Elizabeth questions him about what happened in the aftermath. Booker responds to Elizabeth that “now that you’re out of yours, you might realize cages have their advantages.” Elizabeth responds that “a choice is better than none, Mr. DeWitt. No matter what the outcome” to which Booker retorts: “Yeah? What if you woke up one day and realized you didn’t like what you chose?”, referring to his past of alcoholism, gambling, and mercenary work. This exchange marks Booker as the apathetic cynic with a deterministic view of the violent nature of the world and society, and marks Elizabeth as the hopeful idealist who believes in choice and agency to create a better world. As the player experiences the story, they are drawn to Elizabeth’s innocence, viewing her as a hopeful companion, imploring the player to want to protect her. The dynamic dichotomy between Elizabeth and Booker creates immersion, making them seem like three-dimensional characters with thoughts and world-views, rather than the artificial 3D renderings they actually are.

The relationship between Elizabeth and Booker also marks a more significant ideological dichotomy. Elizabeth and Booker’s idealism and violent determinism, respectively, can be interpreted as a motivation of the double-edged sword of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism represents simultaneously an idealist view of the greatness of America’s potential as a republic and society, while also representing the militaristic interventionism and internal racism disguised behind a strong demeanor. J. William Fulbright, a United States senator, argued about the arrogance of American power and how “only a nation at peace with itself, with its transgressions as well as its achievements, is capable of generous understanding of others” (Caldwell 129). In order for America to be at peace with itself, it must collectively, both as a state and a nation, accept the ‘transgressions of the past’ such as war crimes, slavery and the genocide of indigenous people. This mimics Booker’s arc, as he must confront what he did at the Wounded Knee massacre and his abandonment of his daughter Anna. Similarly to how the nationalist myths of the Founding Fathers and Manifest Destiny ‘forget’ the treatment Black people and Native people, Booker

too has forgotten, or rather compartmentalized away, his memories of what happened in his past. Despite Elizabeth, or rather America's idealism, being complicit in the other's violent trajectory, they represent a hopeful message that one day everything will be better. The ending of the game can then be interpreted, with the death of *all* Bookers, to suggest that American exceptionalism's escape from its metaphorical double-edged-ness is to confront its past and rectify its past. After Booker drowns himself at the end, he wakes up back in his office, rushing to the door to Anna's room to see if she's there. The ending cuts off before Booker gets the chance to look in the crib and it is left ambiguous whether the child is in there, and the player is left to wonder if the confrontation of one's sins will reset everything. As America wakes up from its confrontation with itself, perhaps it will find idealism in the crib next door.

### 3.7 Pseudo-choices and Egocentric moral experience

Throughout the story of *BioShock Infinite* you are presented with 5 different choices with varying perceived importance. As the player enters Columbia for the first time, they are presented with the choice of throwing a ball at an interracial couple or the presenter. However, no matter your choice, the presenter stops you and the action sequence starts. Further along when Elizabeth and Booker have escaped her tower, the player can choose between a bird or a cage pendant which results in Elizabeth wearing the chosen one for the rest of the game, bearing no consequence other than visual. Later, as the player approaches the ticket clerk, they have the choice of either holding up or waiting, resulting in the player outright killing him or being stabbed in the hand first, before still killing the clerk. The fourth choice is whether to kill or spare Slate, one of the game's antagonists, which results in either his death right there or finding him imprisoned and in a vegetable state later, neither choice altering the story structure. The final choice of the game appears at the end, as the player can choose between going right or left on the bridges between universes, however; they all end up at the same place.

While the player's choices do not directly affect the overall narrative structure, they are impactful because of their ability to immerse the players and provide ownership of the experience. The in-world explanation for the choices lacking effect is tied to the deterministic aspect of the timeline. The constants in the story are unable to change, and the small choices

you are provided are not meaningful because they *can't* be meaningful. However, as the player of the story, these decisions are not intended to shape your destination but rather shape the person that arrives. Whether you choose the bird pendant or cage pendant, you are reminded of this choice every time you see Elizabeth wear it. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen argues that video games have the capacity to stage interactive fictions such that they “may support imaginative ‘playings out’ of different courses of intentional action” and that the “inherent egocentricity” of the medium allows the player to take position as “a deliberative moral actor rather than as a contemplative observer” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 95). Kjeldgaard-Christiansen’s argument bases itself on games like *Life Is Strange* where player choices determine the narrative structure, and while this is not directly applicable to *BioShock Infinite*, the choices in *BioShock Infinite* provoke moral deliberation about how the player wants the player-character to act. Despite the choices’ insignificance for story structure, a first-time player is not aware of this, and will therefore consider how these choices impact the experience. Actions such as throwing the ball at the interracial couple or the presenter allows the player to impose their own morals upon the story, imagining their actions are mirrored by the player-character. The player responds to agency, and as such, the revelation that Booker abandoned his daughter makes the player remorseful, both in the sense of Booker’s action and Booker’s action as their own. Similarly, the revelation that Booker and Comstock are the same affect the player personally because of the shared identity of the player and the player-character. As Tavinor points out, the interactive structure of video games, and with the player-character as a “fictional proxy”, allows the player “to have emotions that depend on his interaction with the situations depicted in the game” (Tavinor 630). As Booker realizes that he is the same as the man who created the dystopic Columbia, the player also shares in this. The player realizes the corrupting effect of the ideological American exceptionalism, because Booker realizes the same.

### 3.8 Prophecy or Historia Magistra Vitae

The underlying narrative of social and political revolt in *BioShock Infinite* implores the player to self-reflect on the structures of their own society, and how deification of leaders both political and religious can be dangerous. *BioShock Infinite* can be read as a warning to beware cults of personality and how they can use Americanism to manipulate the people. While there

is an argument to be made that the game's narrative warns of the United States' potential future, it is more aptly a reflection of America's past. The social hierarchy of *BioShock Infinite* places the Founders, a group of geriatric white men, as the elite of the society. The lower strata of Columbia is populated by the working poor and minorities of society. Irish, Black, and Asian citizens are regarded as less-than, with overt racism in the form of posters or statues covering the buildings and structures of the city. The racist sentiments of *BioShock Infinite* mimics the United States' history with minorities, where Irish, Black, and Asian immigrants faced discrimination because of ethnicity and creed. Both Comstock and American exceptionalism highlight the words of the Declaration of Independence, despite the irony that fills the gap between the proclamation "that all men are created equal" and the treatment of Black Americans and non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants.

*BioShock Infinite* narrative urges the player to examine the social and historical structures that Comstock uses to establish himself as the leader of Columbia and to exploit the citizenry. While not a prophetic literary text, it implores the player to learn from history and the historic use of religious and capitalistic ideals to justify slavery and exploitation. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, white Southern Christians used the Bible to defend slavery as a positive good, drawing on biblical views of the father or master as "a benevolent and paternalistic overseer of all family (and property) members" (Wills) This patriarchal hierarchy is mirrored by Comstock's Columbia, as he claims "no animal is born free, except the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation." *Infinite* draws parallels to the racial justifications of slavery, not only as an explanation to justify the internal game-world's societal structure, but to point to the external structures still held in high regard. Proslavery ideology was built upon a hierarchy based upon biblical patriarchy, which allowed for the exploitation of Black slaves for economic profits. Comstock uses the same arguments to establish his societal structure. The racist ideology of Comstock argues that as the only "free animal", the white man is destined to be at the top of the hierarchal structure, and uses this to determine that minorities should only work in the factories of Jeremiah Fink, belonging at the bottom of the societal structure. While these arguments are far from what contemporary society's views on morality, they are derived from the same idealization of capitalism and Christianity. *BioShock Infinite* uses a perversion of American exceptionalism values, both to illustrate how they've historically been used to condone exploitation and oppression, but also to cause reflection in the player on the social values of their own society.



## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 *BioShock Infinite* as social commentary

*BioShock Infinite* presents a critique of the values of American exceptionalism, and by doing so it participates in social commentary. As referenced earlier, the cult of personality that surrounds Comstock has certain similarities to the personality cult of former president Donald Trump. One could argue on the premise of Comstock's autocratic leadership that comparison to dictatorial leaders such as Mao Zedong or Joseph Stalin is more apt; however, the foundation built upon Americanisms lends it to a more poignant comparison to the former American president. The infamous rhetoric and policies of Donald Trump evoke strong sentiments of populism, racism, authoritarianism, and capitalist meritocracy. Scholars and political commentators have discussed Trump ad nauseum since the start of his presidential run, commenting on the narcissistic authoritarian populism of his persona (Kellner,) or his proliferating racism displayed towards the 'Other', oscillating between Black, Muslim or Asian depending on the context (Lopez). Chris Hedges, author and columnist, claimed that Donald Trump is "the quintessential American." Hedges draws comparison to Herman Melville's "confidence men" who "are an inevitable product of the amorality of capitalism and the insatiable lust for wealth, power and empire that infects American society" (Hedges). American society has an ingrained assumption "that free markets are ruled by a metaphysical mechanism that rewards moral behavior" (Thierbach-McLean 29), confusing meritocracy with financial success.

*BioShock Infinite*'s Comstock is not a direct critique of political leaders in the US, but rather a manifestation of the values of American exceptionalism—the same values that 'created' Donald Trump. As *BioShock Infinite* was released three years prior to the social movement of Trump supporters, it is not intentionally a critique of Donald Trump. However, Comstock's rise to power was a result of religious morality and financial success. Within the narrative of *BioShock Infinite*, Comstock presents himself as 'the Prophet' who will lead the American people to 'the New Eden', a city much greater than 'the Sodom below'. While the religious imagery surrounding Donald Trump isn't as 'biblical', supporters of the former president have compared him to Jesus Christ (Beresford). The heavy-handed use of racism and anti-immigration rhetoric in *BioShock Infinite*, though comparatively exaggerated, is mirrored in



the ‘Make America Great Again’ movement whose supporters tend to have racist and nativist attitudes (Blum & Parker).

The polarization and volatile social divide following the 2016 election shows the validity of denouncing ideological extremism. *BioShock Infinite* presents the values of American exceptionalism hyperbolically. However, the hyperbole shows the corruptibility of American ideals. The hyperbole in *BioShock Infinite* has the same foundational elements as the reality of the Trump movement: individualism, capitalism-based meritocracy, and religious moral absolutism. However, it is important to note that *BioShock Infinite* falls short by not displaying how the citizenry became complicit in Comstock’s autocratic rule. The game presents him as a megalomaniac who has complete control of the city, and though his rise to power happened before the events of the game, *Infinite* fails to illustrate the descent into cultism. While the game features American patriotic and nationalistic imagery, the leap to cultism is not explicitly clear. *BioShock Infinite* critiques ideological extremism and presents the result of corruption of American myths, but it does not present the nuances between nationalism and cultism.

## 4.2 The divide between great video games and great literature

In Parker’s discussion of the original *BioShock* and its canonization, they note growing skepticism of the mainstream game industry’s capacity to produce “culturally or aesthetically valuable games” (Parker 755). The mainstream video game industry is financially motivated to create games that are not divisive or controversial, and in the aftermath of *BioShock Infinite*’s release, the publishers “closed Irrational Games and fired most of its employees, amidst numerous reports that in spite of *Infinite*’s resounding popular success, its commercial performance could not justify its astronomical budget and lengthy production time” (Parker 755). The medium is primarily regarded as a consumer product within the mainstream game industry, and artistic integrity must give leeway to inspire as many consumers as possible to buy the product. There’s an inherently problematic relationship between the creation of art and the financial viability of the product. The production of a large-scale video game such as *BioShock Infinite* must adhere to press releases, demands from publishers, and a fixed release date, which can restrain the artistic process and reduce the original vision of the author(s). The medium’s role as both entertainment and narrative experience complicates it further.

With ambitious games such as *BioShock Infinite*, the creators must be mindful of creating both a great video game and great literature—stories that move people and matter in the world. There is a balance between these two, and the presence of one doesn't necessitate the other. A game might function as a great literary experience, telling a story through text, but fall flat on the video-game aspects such as gameplay, immersion, or aesthetic presentation.

## 5 Conclusion

The intention of this thesis is to highlight *BioShock Infinite*'s critique of American exceptionalism and how the medium's properties allow the game to create a dystopic narrative that makes players experience social and political elements of American society. *Bioshock Infinite* presents a grand and beautiful city with stunning visuals and an atmosphere that appears quintessentially American; however, it is revealed throughout the narrative that Columbia is an autocratic white supremacist city state on the verge of civil war. Video games' position as a medium for both entertainment and narrative experience allows it to partake in the dominant and mainstream culture. *BioShock Infinite*'s presentation of Columbia as a dystopic result of American values permits it to critique the hegemonic culture from within. Through its presentation of capitalistic and religious authoritarianism, it has engaged in social commentary, and inadvertently created similarities between Comstock's populism and Donald Trump's social movement.

Through an interactive multi-modal experience, the player is invited to reflect on the structures and values that Comstock has employed to maintain the social structures of Columbia. These structures perpetuate a system that is designed to keep minority and working class people at the bottom of the hierarchal structure, mirroring the United States' historic exploitation of African Americans, Chinese immigrants, and the general working poor. The religious populism of Comstock and the capitalist monopoly of Jeremiah Fink use the Lutece Twins' science to create a society designed for the rich, *white*, and powerful. *BioShock Infinite*'s critique of American exceptionalism is aided by its medium. It draws the player into its game-world through a first-person-perspective in-game proxy, creating further immersion through the perceived agency of pseudo-choices. *BioShock Infinite* holds a mirror to American society, urging the player to both step into the mirror and reflect on the values and myths belonging to American exceptionalism.

*Infinite*'s game-world is created as a dystopic representation of populism, religious moral absolutism, individualism, capitalism and meritocracy. It uses its setting, plot, and characters to offer a critique of American society. Comstock's perversion of American exceptionalism's religiosity critiques the United States' adherence to religious moral absolutism. This is done through Comstock's propagandized re-representation of history; based on American myths, he creates a narrative of a 'New Eden' and mimics the Puritans vision of America as a

‘shining city upon a hill.’ *BioShock Infinite* presents an antagonist that has proclaimed himself a prophet, and with the terrifying rhetoric and perversion of fond icons, it urges the player to pay attention to demagogues who attempt to capitalize on the ideals and values of American exceptionalism.

Columbia comments on the social structures of both the historic and contemporary America. The populist religious rise of Comstock showcases how the ideals of society can be used to create an autocratic state. Further, Jeremiah Fink, whose propaganda and labor laws perpetuate a system designed to exploit minorities and the working class, mirrors both the historic and present-day America with a system that glorifies working hard with long hours. Within this construction, *BioShock Infinite* comments on America’s history of segregation and racial hierarchies. While the white-supremacist propaganda of Comstock stands opposed to current values of equality, it mirrors sentiments long upheld by slavery and Jim Crow laws. This conversation is also remarkably current, as racial tension in the United States has increased in recent years with the Black Lives Matter movement creating awareness for oppression and discrimination. By engaging with the topic of race, *BioShock Infinite* sheds light on the historic and societal values that enable racism.

In *BioShock Infinite*, Columbia has become a cultist Utopia, using American patriotic and nationalistic symbols to create a society with Comstock as the sole authority on truth. Comstock’s cult of personality resembles the Make America Great Again movement, with a populist anti-immigrant rhetoric and authoritarian adherence to leadership. Comstock’s re-writing of historic events mirrors Donald Trump’s “alternative facts” and claims that his opponents deal in “fake news”—both situations where the leader is the arbiter of truth and everyone else becomes “false prophets.” The white supremacy of Comstock is also mirrored by supporters of the MAGA movement, who tend towards racist and nativist views. *BioShock Infinite*’s critique of American exceptionalism, despite its heavy-handedness, engages in social commentary because it highlights the fundamental problems of religious and capitalistic populism. The values that created Comstock are the cause of the polarization and social divide that plagues society today.

Despite its dystopic portrayal of American exceptionalism, *BioShock Infinite* still portrays the hopeful element of idealism. The characters Elizabeth and Booker represent a dichotomy of American exceptionalism, with Elizabeth being the hopeful idealist who believes in a better

world and Booker the apathetic cynic whose actions are permeated by violence. American Exceptionalism's role as a double-edged sword, as Lipset argued, comes from the tension between its progressive ideals of a better future and the regressive conservatism that plagues its past. Booker and Elizabeth come across as a metaphor for America's internal struggle between moral absolutism and its history of racism and military aggression. How can a country that defines itself as a 'Shining City Upon a Hill' justify its past transgressions? Fulbright argued that only a nation that is at peace with both its transgressions and achievements can play the role of moral beacon for the world (Caldwell 129). *BioShock Infinite* suggests that this peace can only come through a confrontation with the past, an acknowledgment and atonement for past sins, and a new beginning.

This thesis is an attempt to continue the tradition of treating video games as literary works and to illustrate the particulars unique to the medium. By close reading *BioShock Infinite*, I display how video games can be vehicles for social and political commentary, while still maintaining their mainstream entertainment value. As *Infinite* is a critique of American exceptionalism within the cultural hegemony, it can create discussion surrounding perceived social values and their role in society. At its core, *BioShock* as a series discusses ideologic extremism and the fallibility of humankind. It urges the player to examine the social and political systems around them, encouraging reflection on the nuanced relationships between ideology and society. As a both digital and fictional story, *BioShock Infinite* uses its medium to create an egocentric moral experiences that provides the player with perceived agency and ownership of the actions of the player-character. The close relationship between the player and Booker allows for a very personal moral deliberation on the corruption of the ideals of American exceptionalism.

The scope of this thesis remains fixed on American exceptionalism and how *BioShock Infinite* applies to American society. *BioShock Infinite* has great potential for future research, as many of the game's elements fall outside the scope of this thesis. Further research might wish to examine gender representation in *Infinite*, as while Elizabeth serves as a great companion, the depiction of her as an 'innocent maiden trapped in a tower' is not unproblematic. This is further problematic with Booker's role as her protector and her as a 'maternally' supportive character, providing Booker with health items and ammo. While this dynamic is subverted at the end, the majority of the game has this dynamic. Further research may also focus more on the gameplay aspects of *BioShock Infinite*, as they have largely been

simplified for the purpose of this thesis. This can be done, for instance, by examining how the expected gun violence aids or hinders immersion in the story. Video games are a rather new medium that holds the capacity of telling stories in ways they've never been told before. Because of their unique position as both works of art and cultural artifacts, video games have the capacity to make a statement on both, allowing scholars to comment on the impact of the medium. As they become more and more a part of the culture, scholarly research can help reframe video games as works of art, both for consumer and producers, and aid the medium in reaching its untold potential.

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