Chapter 6

BioShock and the Ghost of Ayn Rand:
Universal Learning and Tacit Knowledge in Contemporary Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the popular 2007 video game BioShock and its relation to the work of Objectivist author Ayn Rand. Using Jacques Rancière’s model of emancipatory learning and Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge, the authors explore how video games can instill transferable skills and knowledge by forming intertextual connections to other media. Including an interview with BioShock creator Ken Levine, the authors discuss how players may learn about works such as Rand’s Atlas Shrugged, forming opinions, criticisms, and applications of her philosophy, without ever receiving explanations of it in the game. They conclude the chapter by demonstrating the potential for such forms of learning to become more prominent in video games, while also acknowledging the inherent limitations of the medium.

A being who does not know automatically what is true or false, cannot know automatically what is right or wrong, what is good for him or evil. Yet he needs that knowledge in order to live. He is not exempt from the laws of reality (Ayn Rand, 1964, p. 18)


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INTRODUCTION

A specter is haunting Rapture—the specter of Ayn Rand. As players move through this horrific underwater city, shooting deranged citizens and saving genetically modified girls from certain death, Rand’s name will never be uttered, her books will never be mentioned, and her theories will never be discussed. Yet, Rand’s ghost floats through every scene of BioShock.

Numerous scholars have considered this lingering ghost in the machine. Packer (2010) argues the game is a forceful critique of Rand because success “depends upon the player universalizing the idea that Objectivists are dangerous” (p. 216). Rose (2015), on the other hand, argues that BioShock “isn’t an anti-Randian statement so much as a cautionary tale about being blinded by one’s ideology” (p. 22). Meanwhile, Lizardi (2014) suggests the game “represents an encouragement of complex historical interpretations as opposed to simplistic accepted histories” (para 2). Tavinor (2009a) explores the artistic nature of the game, suggesting it could be read as “a parody of Ayn Rand’s objectivist novel Atlas Shrugged” (p. 91). Drawing attention to the use of music in the game, Gibbons (2011) argues that the soundtrack creates “both a palpable sense of irony in its atmosphere—one of the game’s most-praised aspects—and a complex web of intertextual references, involving musical ‘puns’ based on song titles and lyrics” (Conclusions, para 2). But one important aspect of this relationship remains unclear: What knowledge can players be said to have of Rand after experiencing BioShock? Is it, in fact, possible to learn about works such as Atlas Shrugged through the allusions that permeate the game?

In this chapter, we begin by outlining the major attributes of both BioShock and Rand’s oeuvre, demonstrating the myriad connections the landmark video game shares with the writer’s work. We then introduce two theories of learning that allow us to negotiate the questions we have posed. We argue that Rancière’s model of intellectual emancipation and Polanyi’s tacit knowing provide valuable conceptual tools through which to form our answers. We include excerpts from our interview with Ken Levine, who wrote the story for BioShock and oversaw the production of the game as its creative director to explore how many of his intentions align with these theories and support our claim that video games can help players develop what Rancière introduces as “universal learning” strategies. Ultimately, we argue that BioShock demonstrates the potential for video games to create intertextual environments that push players to explore and build their tacit knowledge and intellectual positions without resorting to the stultifying learning conditions that perpetuate the dichotomy of master and student. We make no claims that video games ought to replace professors or textbooks. We do, however, embrace the aspects of video games that encourage exploration rather than explanation because of their potential to foster understanding in ways that extend far beyond the immediate content of the game.

BACKGROUND

The Objectivist Dystopia of BioShock

BioShock is a first-person shooter that takes place in the underwater city of Rapture. Set in 1960, the game introduces players to a society composed of artists, businessmen, scientists, and other cultural elites who sought solace from overbearing governmental structures. Now, however, that dream has disintegrated and deranged citizens scavenge buildings looking for ADAM, a currency that allows them to buy genetic modifications. Similarly altered “Little Sisters” wander the decomposing neighborhoods...