

A Developer Chooses, a Player Obeys:  
A Study of the Enactment of Objectivism in *BioShock*

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I would also like to thank Ayn Rand for writing *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* to serve as literary enactments of objectivism, but her books are so ridiculously long I'm thankful she eventually stopped writing.

### Dedication

To all developers who believed that video games would one day be accepted as a form of art.

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This MRP is rated



For Blood and Gore  
Intense Violence  
Strong Language  
Sexual Content  
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco

## Introduction

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In 2003, Espen Aarseth proposed a framework for analyzing computer and video games, saying current methodologies borrowed too much from literature and film criticism, writing that video games exist in a “virtual environment” and that “this label fits games from *Tetris* to *Drug Wars* to *EverQuest*” (Aarseth, 2003, p.2). While it is fair to say that both *Tetris* and *EverQuest* are video games, this is all they have in common: *Tetris* is a game where a single player sorts falling geometric shapes while *EverQuest* is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game with millions of players and a fantasy world similar to J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

A better definition of a game played in a virtual environment is “any computerized game world inhabited by in-game agents and the player’s (or players’) avatar(s).” “Agent” is defined as “anything that has the power or authority to act” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition) while “Avatar” is defined by Microsoft’s Computer and Internet Dictionary as “a graphical representation of a user...in a virtual reality environment.”

Aarseth’s proposed framework breaks down every game into three different components:

- Game play (the player’s actions, strategies and motives)
- Game structure (the rules of the game, including the simulation rules)
- Game world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.)

Due to the increasing complexity and verisimilitude of video games, one can often mistake them for the real world. Though faster processors and greater amounts of memory give players increasingly realistic worlds in which to live, games have done nothing to instruct players on *how to live*. Could philosophical issues be enacted in video games? And if so, how? But what philosophy and what game?

Enter Ken Levine and the developers at 2K Games (now known as Irrational Games). In 2006, Levine and his development team created a first-person shooter known as *BioShock*. But rather than just have players run around endlessly killing creatures, Levine proposed to give *BioShock* the philosophical background of objectivism, a way of living proposed by fiction writer Ayn Rand in the 1950s. Rand enacted her philosophy in two novels: *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. Both were best-sellers, and both changed what people understood a novel to be.

But what is objectivism? Loosely put, it is this:

Man—every man—is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life...In a system of full capitalism, there should be a complete separation of state and economics, in the same way and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church.

– Ayn Rand, *Introducing Objectivism* (1962).

Could a video game enact a philosophy as well as a novel? Applying Aarseth's framework led to my research questions: "How does *BioShock's* game world (including fictional content, level design, narrative, and backstory) enact and depict objectivism?" And "How is *BioShock's* game world affected by the enacting of a philosophy?"

Finding the solutions to such questions would require me to lose myself in *BioShock*. I would have to fuse my very identity with the role the player takes in the game. I would no longer be a communications student in the twenty-first century, but a common man from an era of jazz, liquor, and limitless potential caught up in an adventure of a lifetime...

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*January 12, 1960*

*Dear Diary:*

I sit in the coach section of a de Havilland passenger air craft as it crosses the Atlantic Ocean. My left hand holds a pen, a burning cigarette and my right holds my brown leather wallet, flipped open to a picture of myself as a young man flanked by my parents. I remember them telling me, "Son, you're special. You were born to do great things."

I look down at the box wrapped in blue gift wrap and the note affixed to it that reads:

*To Jack,*

*With Love,*

*Mom and Dad*

*Would You Kindly Not Open Until*

The rest is covered by a red bow.

That's my parents for you. Always telling me I was destined for greatness. Not to impose limits on myself, not to listen to what other people say, that the whole point of my life was to see my goals accomplished. They called it objectivism. I remember my Dad reading an article to me years ago when I was in bed. It was by a woman named Harriett Rubin and called *Ayn Rand's Literature of Capitalism* (2007). My Dad said, "individuals have the right to live entirely for their own self-interest." I can even tell you that it was on page eight. Then Dad mumbled something about how objectivism can only be accomplished by living in a laissez-faire capitalist society free from social constraints, be they imposed by the church, the state, or society itself. I don't know why on Earth he thought I would have been interested in hearing something like that when I was kid.

“Well, Mom and Dad,” I say to myself, “you were right.”

My vision turns black.

The sound of men and women around me screaming snaps me back to the reality of the plane. My stomach lurches as the nose of the plane plunges.

Frigid sea water grips me. I can't breathe. A leather shoe sinks before me as I panic and swim for the surface. I'm surrounded in a ring of flame that blazes on the surface of lapping waves, the blistering heat scorching my arms as goose bumps from the water form on my legs. As I struggle to keep my head above water the wreckage of my plane slowly sinks below the surface, the tail fin the metallic flukes of a whale. A giant tower of steel several storeys high spikes out of the water ahead of me like a lighthouse. I swim for it, a weak breaststroke, my body weighed down by my sodden clothing.

I pull myself up the marble stairs and open a pair of colossal bronze doors. I find myself inside a cavernous opening of marble and steel. Lights illuminate automatically as I stumble, trying to regain my strength, throwing jagged beams on the stone floor. I turn a corner. A towering bronze bust of a man wearing a jacket and tie gazes down at me from across the wall. Across his chest a massive red banner reads

*No Gods or Kings. Only Man.*

I've seen his face before. What is his name? Andrew Ryan. The industrialist. My father knew all about him. He was an objectivist.

The long, introspective notes of a violin reach my ears. A recording, surely? I descend a spiral set of stairs beneath the bust and follow a long corridor. An elevator stands before me with plush red felt benches on either side. A large brass handle attached to a brass device rests in the middle of the elevator. The handle is labelled *bathysphere*. I pull the lever.

The glass door to the elevator closes behind me and the elevator lurches downward. I watch bubbles rise through a circular glass window. Am I...descending? Signs rise with the bubbles as the elevator sinks. They read *five fathoms. Ten. Fifteen.*

A projection screen on the wall beside the glass opening flickers to life showing a young man and woman. The woman's index finger touches the man tip of the man's cigarette. Smoke wafts up from her skin.

*Incinerate! Fire at Your Fingertips! Plasmids by Ryan Industries* reads the text on the poster. The screen flickers again. The poster for *Incinerate* is replaced by an image of Andrew Ryan sitting in a wingback chair, a pipe in his hand. Speakers in the elevator crackle to life. I listen:

"I am Andrew Ryan, and I am here to ask you a question: Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington, it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican, it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow, it belongs to everyone!" Hmm. Andrew Ryan. Ayn Rand.

Ryan keeps talking. "I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose...Rapture! A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city, too!"

Wow. Ryan is a hard-core objectivist. I mean, if you forget about the more detailed, theoretical aspects of the philosophy, its central tenet is that people should be able to pursue their own self-interests without any interference from anyone else. Not from friends or family, the government, religion, censors, special interest groups, or, God-forbid, university research ethics boards.

The screen displaying Ryan slowly winds back up to the ceiling and reveals the glass window behind it. I see a neon sign. It reads

*Rapture.*

My God. A city at the bottom of the ocean. Skyscrapers stretch through the murky blue salt water, forever out of reach of any human authority. Blue and pink neon lights illuminate the sides of buildings. A school of black and white clown fish swim past the window as it cracks slightly from the pressure of the water.

I hear a man's voice over the bathysphere's public address system. It's not Ryan. "Plane's crashed up by the light house. Bathysphere's moving. We'll be getting a visitor soon."

The bathysphere connects to a different track and enters a large open airlock. The faint silhouette of a man appears in the dark hallway before me. "Please lady," he begs. "I didn't mean no trespass. Don't hurt me." His hands are raised, pleading, his voice insistent. "Just don't hurt me. You can keep my gun."

A hunched-over woman appears in the shadows behind him. She wears a modern dress edged with lace and some type of New Year's Eve masquerade mask with pink fur and giant bunny ears. And...oh my God. Her hands clasp giant steel hooks that are used in a meat processing plant. Before he can react, the woman lunges forward, notching the curved steel into his abdomen. With a vicious tug on each, she rips his stomach open and he crumples to the ground on his face. Blood oozes from the wounds and mixes with puddles of sea water that drain off the bathysphere. She vanishes into darkness.

My heart thuds. What...just happened?

A voice crackles over the speakers. “Would you kindly pick up that shortwave radio?” it asks politely. My father always told me I was too altruistic for my own good, that doing what people tell me to do would get me into trouble one day. I’ll try the lever again.

Nothing happens.

Okay, pal, this is your game and these are your rules. I pick up the shortwave radio and I tuck it into my breast pocket so I can hear it at all times. The door out of the bathysphere opens. A man’s voice comes from the radio. “I don’t know how you survived that plane crash, but I’m Atlas and I aim to keep you alive.”

I gingerly leave the bathysphere, my legs trembling. Resting on the ground in the dark corridor, illuminated by the shimmering water from giant skylights, is a collection of cardboard protest signs affixed to lengths of wood. It looks like there was a riot here. They read,

*Let It End! Let Us Ascend! We’re Not Your Property! Ryan Doesn’t Own Us!*

And then, chillingly,

*Rapture Is Dead.*

I hear a bloodcurdling scream and glimpse a pair of steel hooks in the shadows. Atlas’s voice comes over the radio. “Now will you kindly find a crowbar or something? Goddamn Splicers.”

It doesn’t take a genius to see that killing this crazy woman with the hooks – I guess down here she’s called a Splicer – is what Atlas wants me to do. “Things were supposed to work out for me down here!” screams a deranged masked man running past me. “Ryan! Where’s my turn, you son of a bitch?” I smash the debris blocking the only way out with my wrench, allowing me to leave. That was rather...exhilarating. Up on the surface I couldn’t just run around destroying things, but down here, in Rapture, there’s no one here to stop me.

Oh, my god, that crazy woman just kicked a burning sofa down a staircase at me. I guess down here there's no one to stop her, either. I bludgeon her to death with my wrench. I...just killed someone.

A giant poster near a second staircase says *Pick Your Plasmid And Evolve*. It features a painting of a girl being carried by her father, holding a light bulb that's being lit by a bolt of electricity shot from her mother's fingertips. I hear the recorded voice of a child that comes from the poster. It says, "My Daddy's smarter than Einstein, stronger than Hercules, and lights a fire with a snap of his fingers. Smart Daddies get spliced at the Garden!"

I find a broken down vending machine that says *Gather's Garden: Genetic Modification*. In one of the slots of the machine is a large glass bottle filled with red fluid and a hypodermic syringe. A label on the bottle reads *Electro Bolt*. What is this all about? I study the syringe as I recall words I've seen in Rapture: *Genetic modification. Fire at your fingertips. Stronger than Hercules*. What is going on down here?

I plunge the needle into my left wrist. Blue arcs of lightning course up my arm and spark from my fingertips. The pain is excruciating. "Steady now," says Atlas, over the radio. "Your genetic code is being rewritten. Just hold on and everything will be fine." I stumble forward and trip over a railing at the top of a nearby balcony. Blackness engulfs me.

I feel a pair of stranger's hands on me, patting down my pockets. "This little fish looks like he just had his cherry popped. I wonder if he's still got any Adam on him?" What is Adam? I hear a monstrous sound, like the guttural call of a giant whale. The stranger runs for the cover of nearby shadows as a giant creature in a massive diving bell hovers over me, its right hand replaced with a rusty steel drill over a meter long. A little girl crawls out from behind it and

prods at me. “Look, Mr. Bubbles,” she says. “It’s an angel.” The girl carries a giant syringe with a needle as long as my arm.

Wait, come back...I’m not dead. The room goes dark.

Consciousness returns and I stumble to my feet. Atlas’s voice returns over the radio. “You alright boyo? First time plasmid’s a real kick from a mule. But there’s nothing like a fistful of lightning, is there?” I lean my body against the only door leading out of this room, but it refuses to open. Beside it I glimpse an electricity box with a circuit connected to the door. If I could restore power, I could escape, but there’s no source of elec –

I hold my hand up and concentrate. Blue lightning sprays from my fingertips into the panel box. The panel crackles to life and the door opens. I become giddy as I spray the walls of Rapture with random blasts of lightning. I spot a mark on the wall to use for target practice, aim my outstretched palm at it and focus. Lightning courses through my arm but refuses to leap from my fingers. Is there a limitation to my newfound ability?

I must have more. A corpse of a man catches my eye. Next to him sparkles the tip of a syringe with a neon blue serum within labeled Eve. I jam the syringe into my wrist and depress the plunger. Strength returns to me like a suffocating man reaching a source of fresh air. Joyously I spray lightning again from my hand, white-blue arcs of power illuminating the room. I come to a realization: Adam is the genetic modification which allows me to throw lightning and Eve is its fuel. That explains why that woman attacked me. She wants it for herself.

I turn down a corridor. A gigantic glass tube as large as a man towers before me, and lightning crackles within beyond the outline of a door. Surely death by electrocution would await anyone who was to enter it? A label on the front reads *Vita-Chamber*. What is this monstrosity?

A masked man leaps out at me from the shadows, a crowbar in his hand. He backs me into a corner and smashes the crowbar into my skull. Blood pours down my face and I weakly raise my hands to protect myself. I try to summon lightning but the strikes are too strong and his rage too unbridled. I fear I will not withstand another blo –

The darkness of void is replaced by the crackle of electrically charged air. I stand in the Vita-Chamber as lightning crackles around me. What sorcery is this? No man could have lived through such a beating. I run my hands over my skull. My wounds are healed. What kind of sick game is this?

I enter a large hall decorated with large banners hanging from the ceiling that read *Ascendancy, Liberty, Commerce, Independence, Creativity*. A woman stands before me, singing a lullaby to a child in a crib. I cave in her skull with my wrench for the hell of it. The radio crackles. “Plasmids changed everything,” says Atlas. “They destroyed our bodies, our minds. We couldn’t handle it.” No kidding. Rapture is a city with no laws and no morals.

I enter a personal residence through a hole in the drywall and hear a couple arguing. “I’ll do what I want with it,” says a woman’s voice. “It’s my Adam. I earned it.”

“Careful now,” says Atlas. “Would you kindly lower that weapon for a moment?”

What? I could be attacked at any moment. I watch as my hands lower my blood-spattered wrench without my consent, like someone else is in control of them. Atlas’s voice is oddly compelling.

Gingerly, I step out on a piece of broken railing and look down at the sight below me. A young girl stabs a corpse repeatedly with a giant syringe, extracting fluid from its body. “You think that’s a child down there?” says Atlas. “Don’t be fooled. That’s a Little Sister. Somebody went and turned a sweet baby girl into a monster. Whatever you thought was right and wrong on

the surface, that don't count for much in Rapture. Those Little Sisters, they carry Adam. Everybody wants it. Everybody needs it.”

I descend a staircase to get a better look at the Little Sister and find her on the other side of a plate glass window. A man holding a pistol appears at a door nearby. From his movements his hostile expression, it's clear he wants the Adam in her syringe.

The loud groan of a whale heralds the return of the monstrous creature in the diving bell. It goes the man on the tip of its spinning steel, then smashes his head through the glass. Content that the man is dead and the Little Sister is safe, the creature lumbers off. “That's the Big Daddy,” says Atlas. “She gathers Adam, he keeps her safe.” The underlying message is impossible to miss: If I want to gain Adam for myself, I will have to defeat the Big Daddy. At least I'll earn it.

I turn a corner. Hanging across the hallway is another of the red banners I've come to expect. This one reads *Altruism is the Root of All Wickedness*. I asked my father about that once. He pulled out *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* and said altruism was defined as “unselfish concern for the welfare of others; selflessness.”

I enter the medical pavilion and am greeted by a poster that says *Dr. Steinman's Cosmetic Enhancement*. Above it there is a photograph of a woman and text that reads *With Adam, There's No Reason Not to be Beautiful*. If Dr. Steinman is a plastic surgeon living in a city with no restrictions on his behavior, this could get ugly. I raise my wrench defensively, my palms sweating.

Another poster catches my eye. It reads

*Fontaine Futuristics Accu-Vox Personal Voice Recorder! Recording the thoughts and lives of Rapture citizens for five years and counting! Fontaine Futuristics for the city of the future!*

As I wonder if any of the citizens of Rapture have left these around, a female voice booms over the public address system. She intones, “The Parasite hates three things: free markets, free will and free men.”

Atlas tells me the only way out of the medical pavilion is to find Dr. Steinman and take his security key, with force, if necessary. I scour the medical pavilion for the dear doctor. A female spirit coalesces into a ghostly apparition before me. “You promised me pretty, Dr. Steinman!” screams the ghostly woman. “Now look at me!”

“You wanna find Steinman,” says Atlas. “just follow the blood.” A pair of electronic doors open in front of me and I enter the surgery wing. On the wall behind them are three photographs of the same woman, each slightly differ –

Oh, dear God. In every photo the woman’s face has been marked up with the dotted red lines of future surgery: her eyes, ears, lips, cheeks – her entire face is scheduled to be altered. The surgeon’s signature is at the bottom of each. A small black box catches my attention. It’s one of those personal voice recorders I saw advertised earlier, labeled *Diane McClintock*. I press the play button. “Dr. Steinman tells me when the bandages come off I’ll be the prettiest of all the girls.” Somehow I don’t believe her.

I find a second recorder labeled Dr. Steinman and press play. He says, “With Adam, the flesh becomes clay! What excuse do we have not to sculpt and sculpt and sculpt until the job is done?” A group of female Splicers attack me, but I kill them all with my machine gun. I pass through a door labelled *Dr. Steinman’s Aesthetic Ideals*. My heart thuds. I pick up another voice

recorder. Steinman's voice says, "With genetic modifications, beauty is a moral obligation! Do we force the healthy to live with the contagious? Do we mix the criminal with the law abiding? Then why are the plain allowed to mingle with the fair?" He sounds like a great guy. I can't wait to meet him.

I open a pair of doors leading to the surgery. *Aesthetics are a Moral Imperative!* is written on the floor in dark, dried blood. I find more photographs of the woman who was being prepped for surgery – but her nose has been removed. The word *perfection* is scrawled across her forehead. "Why do we have two eyes?" I hear Dr. Steinman yell from his surgery. "Is there some law that says we must?" I turn the corner and find myself face-to-face with Steinman. He runs for his life, triggering an explosion that covers the entrance to his surgery with debris. I'll have to find a way through.

The poster of a woman with perfect teeth catches my eye. The text reads *For a limited time, get a free plasmid by Ryan Industries at Dandy Dental with any root canal!* I find the Incinerate Plasmid I saw advertised earlier in a vending machine and scour the nearby area for Dr. Steinman, but find a passageway blocked by water that has leaked through the city walls and frozen from a cooling system. A female Splicer shoots at me with a machine gun, but she kicks over an oil drum and the black liquid gathers beneath her feet. I unleash Incinerate, igniting the oil, the woman and melting my obstruction with a torrent of flame.

I enter a laboratory, spot a voice recorder and hit play. A woman addressing herself as Tenenbaum speaks to me: "At the German prison camp they put me to work on genetic experiments on the other prisoners. They called me Das Wunderkind, 'the wonder child.' Germans, all they can talk about is blue eyes and shape of forehead. All I care about is why is this one born strong and that one born weak? This one smart and that one stupid? All that

killing, you think the Germans could have been interested in something useful.” Is Tenenbaum related to the Plasmids?

Music from a phonograph reaches me. It’s Sheree North singing *The Best Things in Life are Free* from the 1957 musical of the same name. Here in Rapture, everything is free if you only can find the means to take it.

In the middle of the laboratory I find a Plasmid labeled Telekinesis. I grab it and inject the liquid into my arm. A Splicer appears out of nowhere and runs for me, blades in her hands. I telekinetically grab a tennis trophy off the wall and drive it through her skull. The debris pile that blocked my access to Dr. Steinman is no match for me now. As I retrace my steps the public address systems crackles with a woman’s voice who says, “Andrew Ryan asks you a simple question: are you a man or are you a slave?”

When I return to the debris pile a nearby Splicer hurls makeshift grenades at me. I catch one out of the air with my mind, redirect it to the obstruction and take shelter from the upcoming explosion. Success! Dr. Steinman’s security key is as good as mine. I make my way down the hall. I find *Adam Denies Us Any Excuse for Not Being Beautiful!* written on the wall in blood. Dr. Steinman is locked behind security glass, shouting as he hacks apart a woman on his surgical table. “I try to make them beautiful!” he screams, pointing to corpses pinned to the walls like butterflies on an insect board, “but they always turn out wrong! That one too fat! This one too tall! That one too symmetrical!”

Steinman sees me and shrieks, “You are hideous!” He snatches a machine gun from under the operating table and opens fire. I wrench an oxygen tank off the wall with telekinesis and hurl it towards him. The tank explodes and the security key tumbles from his smock.

As I head for the security door, a Little Sister appears in front of me. If I were to...how shall I put this...obtain the Adam she carries, I would grow in power. As I approach, a bullet zings past my ear. "I'll not have you hurting her!" shouts a woman from a balcony, a smoking gun in her hand. It's Tenenbaum. "Don't hurt her!" she shouts. "Have you not any heart?"

"Listen to me, boyo," says Atlas. "You won't survive without the Adam those...things are carrying. Are you prepared to trade your life for Tenenbaum's Frankensteins?" What a fitting name: a story of a dear doctor trying to overcome the limits of life itself.

The Little Sister cowers as I approach. "Here," says Tenenbaum, throwing me a Plasmid. "There is another way. Free them and I will make it worth your while." I gaze at the defenseless creature before me. If I Rescue her I will receive 80 Units of Adam. If I Harvest her I will receive 160 Units of Adam – but she will not survive. Andrew Ryan said it himself: Altruism is the Root of All Wickedness. Sorry, Little Sister. It's a shame you won't survive. I harvest the Little Sister, and in my hands squirms a giant sea slug. What the hell? I toss the slug to the ground where it withers and dies. "That Adam should do the trick," says Atlas. "You did the right thing."

Tenenbaum's voice breaks. "How can you do this thing? To a child? There are other little ones who have need of your help. Will you be so cruel to all of them?"

I'm afraid, Ms. Tenenbaum, that down here in Rapture I can do whatever I want.

I locate another Gatherer's Garden to spend what I've just earned. I look at the Plasmids on sale. My choices include Armored Shell to thicken my skin and reduce damage taken in combat and Enrage, which causes my enemies to attack one another instead of me. I inject the Enrage Plasmid into my arm. It throbs with power. Atlas says, "You're ready now. It's time to take on one of them Big Daddies." The guttural groan of a nearby Big Daddy reaches my ears. I

press my back against a wall and glance down the hallway, my pistol at the ready. There they are: the Little Sister, extracting Adam from the corpse of a dead Splicer, the Big Daddy standing guard.

I stalk the Big Daddy and hurl at him the blob of organic goo that the Enrage Plasmid forms in my hand. He forgets about me and attacks a nearby Splicer. It's over quickly: the Big Daddy beats the Splicer to death with several violent blows, but combat has left it weakened. I easily finish it off with a series of blasts from my shotgun. As I gaze at the Little Sister that looks up in terror, an odd feeling washes over me: compassion. Should I Harvest this one like the other or should I let her live?

I take her syringe full of Adam and escort her to a small ventilation hole in a nearby wall. "Thank you, mister," she says, the ghostly hollow of her gaze replaced by the appreciation of a little girl. She crawls through it, forever out of my reach.

A voice recorder catches my eye. It's Ryan again, lecturing about objectivism: "On the surface the parasite expects the doctor to heal them for free, the farmer to feed them out of charity. How little they differ from the pervert, who prowls the streets, looking for a victim he can ravish for his grotesque amusement."

Atlas tells me to find him in a submarine at Fontaine's Fisheries. Along the way I find a vending machine labelled Gene Bank. It has a giant syringe attached to it for public usage (haven't these people heard of not sharing needles?) and three massive vials. In addition to Plasmids, Ryan has created what are called Gene Tonics. There are four different categories available for me to equip at the Gene Bank: Plasmids, Physical Tonics, Engineering Tonics and Combat Tonics. Physical tonics let me alter my body, like letting me gain Eve whenever I use a

medical kit. Engineering tonics alter how I interact with machines. Combat tonics let me alter my ability to resist and deal damage. I inject myself with several.

I find the entrance to the fisheries and knock on the door with my wrench. A horizontal slot opens to reveal a man named Peach Wilkins hiding behind a welder's mask. Peach says he'll grant me access to the fisheries if I find him a research camera and take pictures of something he calls a Spider Slicer. To make my task easier he gives me a grenade launcher. Ooh, I've always wanted one of these. He says if he smells a whiff of Frank Fontaine on me it'll be my end. Who?

Atlas gets on the radio and says Fontaine is dead and everyone knows it. While I search for the camera, I come across a voice recorder by Tenenbaum. She says, "this little sea slug has joined together all of my ideas since the war. I can bend the double helix. Black can be reborn white. Tall, short. Weak, strong." Could it be that the Little Sisters have genetically modified sea slugs implanted in them?

I find the camera and snap the photos of the Spider Slicers before I kill them. "That should about do it," says Atlas. "Head back to Fontaine Fisheries, would you kindly?" I make my way back, killing Splicers and harvesting Little Sisters, my life in my hands at every step. Before Peach will let me through the iron door he demands that I relinquish all my weapons. I lay down my various firearms on a table nearby. But I'm far from defenseless: my Plasmids are part of me and cannot be removed by anyone including these "parasites" I keep hearing about.

Peach jabbers something non-sensical at me about a guy named Frank Fontaine and Ryan being in some kind of war for Rapture, that I'm doing Fontaine's dirty work. That's ridiculous. I'm helping this guy Atlas – not someone called Frank Fontaine – of my own free will. And Atlas said Fontaine is dead.

Another recorder tells me how Fontaine was trying to squeeze Peach out of business by using the markets to get rid of weak competitors. I turn a corner and find yet another vending machine. This one is called *Power to the People*. I study the machine and discover it lets me upgrade my firearms so they inflict more damage. I upgrade my shotgun and the machine turns off immediately, as though someone had yanked out the power cable from the wall. I find the entrance to the submarine bay. Atlas gets on the radio. “You’ll find the control button up ahead. Push it and we’ll finally meet face-to-face.”

Again Ryan interjects: “I came here to build the impossible. You came to rob what you could never build, a hun gaping at the gates of Rome. Breathe deep, so that you may remember the taste. Even the air you are sponging off of my account.”

I enter Rolling Hills, Rapture’s city park. Ryan’s voice again cuts through the radio: “On the surface I once bought a forest. The Parasites demanded that I establish a park, that the land belonged to God, so the rabble could stand slack-jawed under the canopy and pretend that it was Paradise earned. When Congress moved to nationalize my forest, I burnt it to the ground. God did not plant the seeds of this Arcadia, I did.”

That reminds me of a character in *Atlas Shrugged*, who, upon learning that his oil fields are going to be nationalized, lights them on fire to prevent the government from taking possession of them. Surely Ryan doesn’t mean to –

A foul-smelling, ugly yellow fog oozes into the park from ventilation pipes. The radio crackles. “Ryan’s put something foul into the air. We’re at the bottom of the ocean. No trees, no oxygen. Give me a spell to think.” He orders me to find a botanist named Julie Langford who can help me save the vegetation – and all of Rapture – from dying.

Another voice recorder catches my eye. It's Ryan: "There has been tremendous pressure to regulate this plasmid business. There have been side effects: blindness, insanity, death. But what use is our ideology if it is not tested? The market does not respond like an infant, shrieking at the first sign of displeasure. The market is patient, and we must be, too."

I spot another recorder. It's Ryan again, lecturing someone. He says, "Gregory, don't come whining to me about market forces. And don't expect me to punish citizens for showing a little initiative. If you don't like what Fontaine is doing, well, I suggest you find a way to offer a better product."

I spot another vending machine. It's different from the others, mechanical. It's called U-Invent. I study it. Apparently this machine will let citizens take Rapture's junk (rubber hoses, steel screws) and forge useful items out of them, thus rewarding them for their ingenuity. I make a mental note to pick up pieces of scrap that may prove useful.

I track down Julie Langford. She's in a lab on the other side of a glass window and is about to offer me an antidote to the herbicide that is destroying the trees when Andrew Ryan's voice comes through the public address system. He reminds her Ryan Industries retains exclusive rights to her creations and floods the room with poison. She stumbles, coughs and falls before my eyes, scrawling 9457 into the fog-covered glass with her finger as she dies. Bloody hell.

I find a safe nearby and enter the four digit code. Inside I find a formula for a chemical that regenerates dying plant life. If I can assemble the ingredients she's listed I'll be able to synthesize what she calls the Lazarus Vector and be able to counteract Ryan's poison. Otherwise we're all dead.

Midway through my task I find a recording of Tenenbaum's. She says, "Adam acts like a benign cancer, destroying native cells and replacing them with unstable stem versions. While this very instability is what gives it its amazing properties, it is also what causes the cosmetic and mental damage. You need more and more Adam just to keep back the tide. From a medical standpoint, this is catastrophic. From a business standpoint, well...Fontaine sees the possibilities."

That explains why everyone in Rapture has gone crazy. And why everyone is wearing masks. And if this Frank Fontaine fellow was able to market Adam and sell it, he'd become the most powerful man in Rapture.

A second recorder of Tenenbaum's catches my eye. She says, "The children must remain functional to be effective producers of Adam. I had hoped we could place them in a vegetative state so they would be more pliable. Even with those things implanted in their bellies, they are still children. They play, and they sing. And sometimes they smile."

I wonder what happens if I try to shoot a Little Sister. I find one and open fire, but the wounds my bullets cause heal before I can reload. The Little Sisters cannot be harmed by weapons or Plasmids, they can only be Harvested or Rescued. I notice that the Splicers are growing more powerful. Some of them exhibit the same abilities I have: they can throw fire, they can teleport to new locations in a grotesque mist of blood.

I hear the chime that prefaces another public service announcement, and I listen: "The Little Sister's Orphanage. In troubled times, give up your child for care, free of charge. After all, children are the future." I scan the nearby wall and find a poster that says the orphanage is an initiative by Frank Fontaine's Helping Hands program, and that he also runs a home for the poor.

I spot another recorder by Tenenbaum. She talks about how a Little Sister came and sat on her lap, the Adam oozing thick and green out of her mouth, her filthy hair, dirty clothes, and cold, dead eyes. Then she says, “These children have awoken within me something that for most is beautiful and natural, but in me is an abomination: my maternal instinct.” Nature: 1. Objectivism: 0. If Tenenbaum can find it within herself to love them, I will stop harvesting them and start rescuing them. After all, it’s my choice.

After hours (and hours) of scouring Rapture, I synthesize the Lazarus Vector. I deploy it into the ventilation system and Ryan’s poison is replaced with fresh oxygen. I breathe deeply, but waves of Splicers attack me. “You people will never amount to anything!” one screams, wielding a wrench. I ignite her clothing with napalm I found in the laboratory.

Ryan’s voice comes through the radio. “You’re not CIA, are you? You belong to Atlas. You’re the one roach I can’t seem to exterminate. Don’t worry. I just need to find the proper poison.”

Sorry, Ryan. I belong to no man.

I enter an area called Fort Frolic. “Ryan’s handed over the keys to a man named Cohen,” says Atlas. “I’ve seen all kinds of freaks, cut throats and hard cases in my life, but Cohen’s a real lunatic, a dyed-in-the-wool psychopath.” A new voice comes on the radio. “Atlas, Ryan, Ryan, Atlas. It’s time something new is on the radio, and an artist has a duty to seduce the ear and enchant the spirit. Say hello to an evening with Sander Cohen.” He’s cut off communications with Atlas. I can’t explore Rapture further unless I do what he says.

Cohen locks the doors out of Fort Frolic, preventing me from leaving unless I assassinate four artistic rivals, photograph their corpses, then arrange the pictures in a quadtych in the lobby of a great theatre. He calls it his masterpiece. When I am finished assembling his creation,

Cohen walks down the stairs of the theatre under the glow of a spotlight and clouds of confetti. He thanks me for my work and gives me a gift of extra Adam. I put a bullet in the back of his head and snap a photograph of his corpse. Serves him right.

Atlas gets back on the radio. “What happened to you? I’ve been trying to raise you on the radio for a dog’s age. Would you kindly head over to Hephaestus? Next stop is Ryan’s house. It’s time for blood.”

Excellent.

I enter Hephaestus, the industrial section of Rapture. Atlas gets on the radio. “It’s time to either run the table or go home empty. Ryan’s got the genetic key to Rapture. We get the key from him and we get out of this hellhole. We don’t, and you and I are ghosts. Now would you kindly head to Ryan’s office and kill that son of a bitch? It’s time to finish this.”

I have to say that for a guy who’s telling me what to do, Atlas is always very polite to me. He says “would you kindly?” quite often. Nice guy, that Atlas.

I follow the signs that point to Andrew Ryan’s office, past giant metal cogs that creak slowly in wooden walls next to signs that say *Ryan Industries*. My heart starts to race and my palms sweat. I switch to my shotgun and load both barrels. The door to the office antechamber lies just ahead. I press my back against the wall, kick the door down, and charge in, the grey steel of my weapon glinting in the dull light.

I gasp. Pinned to the walls with giant steel harpoons hang a collection of decaying human corpses. Any man or woman who ever voiced displeasure with Ryan sway dead before me like a macabre collection of marionettes.

Ryan’s voice comes through the radio: “A worm looks up and sees the face of God. But look around: it’s a regular convention of worms in here. They all had mothers, fathers, people

who loved them. They got married, fucked their wives. What makes you think you're any different? I haven't chosen a spot for you on the wall yet. Let me know if you have a preference." I must apologize for the profanity, Dear Diary, but to accurately represent Rapture I must record the events as they unfold.

A group of Splicers storm the room. "Kill him!" one shouts, "and then string him up like the others." I electrocute him in place, incinerate another, and then wade into the throng of humanity with a stream of napalm arcing out of my chemical thrower. Bodies pile up around me like sandbags holding back a flooding river. Beneath the final corpse I find another voice recorder and hit play. It's Ryan, pedantic, full of himself: "What is the difference between a man and a parasite? A man builds, a parasite asks, 'Where's my share?' A man creates, a parasite asks, 'What will the neighbours think?' A man invents. A parasite says, 'Watch out, or you might tread on the toes of God.'"

I don't care how much you worship Ayn Rand, Ryan. *Atlas Shrugged* will be the last book you ever read. I find another recorder and hit play. A man named McDonagh's voice comes through – I passed his corpse hanging in the antechamber. "It strikes me that Fontaine wasn't overly inconvenienced by his own demise. On New Year's Eve, his Splicers come streaming out of the poor houses and stormed the proverbial barricades. The dead rot in the streets, and Johnny and Janey Citizen are lined up around the block for plasmids. Anything to help fend off the rabble."

So that's what happened: the Splicers Fontaine sold Adam to gorged themselves on power and attacked the city in waves because they were tired of a menial existence. Their attack forced the rest of the city to inject plasmids to defend themselves. Adam worked its magic on their bodies at the same time as their minds, and soon all of Rapture was headed straight to hell.

Rand couldn't have written a better story herself (and let's face it: in terms of storytelling, *Atlas Shrugged* is as compelling as a grad school textbook).

Ryan's electronically sealed the door to his office. I'll need to short out the lock to get in. I head downstairs to the electrical room, killing the Splicers that attack me every step of the way. Ryan comes on the radio again: "Imagine the will it took to create a place like this. And what have you built? Nothing. You can only loot and break. You're not a man, you're just a termite at Versailles."

I can't argue with him. All I've done since I got to Rapture is slaughter, destroy and consume. But his little objectivist rant isn't going to stop me. Once I get his door open, he's still a dead man.

I grab another recorder as I look for a way to unlock Ryan's security door. It's McDonagh again: "I begged Ryan to hand Fontaine Futuristics over to Atlas's boys as a peace offering, but the stupid sod won't listen to reason." Well, of course he won't. He doesn't believe in altruism. "Stead he's just splicing his mob up, giving them more and tougher plasmids. There's an arms race here in Rapture, but it's not about who can build the best guns and the biggest bombs, it's about who can become less of a man and more of a monster."

Ryan appears on the radio again. He says, "A man builds a city at the bottom of the sea. That's a marvel. Another man happens to be on a plane that crash lands on the same city in the middle of the ocean. Why...that sounds more like a miracle."

I don't know what he's driving at, but it's not going to stop me. Ryan is a despot. He has to go. A Splicer attacks me by shooting balls of flame from his hands, all the while shouting "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." I cover his body with liquid nitrogen

from my chemical thrower and shatter his frozen figure with my wrench. Jesus doesn't exist down here, buddy.

I continue my search. I come across the desk of one of Ryan's engineers and activate the voice recorder on it. Once again Ryan's voice fills the air: "Is there blood in the streets? Of course. Have some chosen to destroy themselves with careless splicing? Undeniable. But I will make no proclamations. I will dictate no laws. It is our impatience that invites in the Parasites of big government. And once you've invited it in, it will never stop feeding on the body of the city." It's dark and oppressive down here in Rapture's industrial section, and the entire place has been rigged with electrified tripwires but with telekinesis I can throw corpses of the Splicers through the wires to trigger them without harming myself.

I come across another Gather's Garden to spend some of the Adam I've collected on new plasmids...but my body refuses to receive any additional powers. If I wish to gain a new plasmid I must forfeit one and store it in a Gene Bank. This is a significant limitation on my development, but I guess my body can only hold so much Adam. A pity, really.

I find another recorder of Ryan: "To build a city at the bottom of the sea? Insanity. But where else could we be free from the clutching hand of the Parasites? Where else could we build an economy that they would not try to control, a society that they would not try to destroy? It was not impossible to build Rapture at the bottom of the sea; it was impossible to build it anywhere else."

How poetic. I kill another Splicer and loot his pockets for cash. My own wallet is bursting with paper bills and it seems I can carry no more than \$500. You'd think that Ryan would have found a way for me to store unlimited cash. This limits my economic growth

because it restricts how much ammunition I can purchase at his many vending machines.

Frankly, Ryan, I'm surprised you didn't find a way around this.

I find the electrical switch and flip it. Again his voice comes to me. "What did Atlas offer you? A piece of my plundered city? Mark my words: your only reward will be a knife in your back."

I retrace my path to his room. He must know the end is near, as again he comes on the radio. "Though my physical defenses fall," he yells, "you will not defeat me. My strength is not in steel or fire, but in intellect and will. You hear me, Atlas? Andrew Ryan offers you nothing but ashes!" He's almost hysterical.

I stand outside the door, my shotgun raised. Shouts Ryan, "In the end, all that matters to me is me. And all that matters to you is you. It is the nature of things." Then he begins to scream. "You can kill me, but you will never have my city. A season for all things! A time to live and a time to die. A time to build and a time to destroy." His voice softens. "Come now, my child. There is one final thing to discuss."

The floor around me starts to shake. Atlas shouts through the radio, "Ryan's set the city's core to self-destruct. Get in there and kill him before the whole city blows!"

I check my weapons, inject a fresh vial of Eve into my arm, and brace myself. This will be the final battle. I scour every inch of the room I stand in for spare ammunition to make sure I'm ready – it's what any player caught up in this deadly game of cat and mouse would do – when I spot a cover of a ventilation shaft dangling open. A glimmer of light within catches my eye. I crawl through it, the walls around me trembling as the city prepares to explode.

What is this? I find myself in a room full with a giant corkboard on the wall and photographs pinned to it. Under each is a name: Ryan, Tenenbaum, Atlas, all voices of people

I've heard since I've been here. The photographs are connected with giant red arrows, and the phrase *Would You Kindly* is drawn across the entire wall in mammoth crimson letters. Beneath it are two voice recorders. The first one is labeled "Dr. Suchong." I press play and hear a voice I haven't yet heard, say "Is that your puppy? She's very pretty." A puppy barks in the background.

A little boy responds. "Thank you, Papa Suchong."

"Break her neck for me," orders Dr. Suchong.

"What?" says the boy.

"Break that sweet puppy's neck."

"What? No." He starts to cry.

"Break that puppy's neck...would you kindly?"

I hear the puppy whimper, a loud snap, then silence. "Very good," says Dr. Suchong.

I pick up the other recorder and hit play. Suchong says, "Advanced Deployment, Suchong for Fontaine Futuristics, Lot 111. Mind control results are within expected tolerances."

Something is wrong, very wrong. Why was Suchong experimenting with mind control for Frank Fontaine? With a trembling hand on my shotgun, I make my way down the corridor into Ryan's office. He stands behind a pane of bullet proof glass, bent over a golf putter, aiming the white ball towards an empty tin can.

"The assassin has overcome my final defense and now he's come to murder me," says Ryan, aiming his shot. "In the end, what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No. A man chooses, a slave obeys."

Yes. I am a man.

“You think you have memories,” continues Ryan, eyeing me up and down through the glass. I don’t know what he’s going on about. I’ve been experiencing flashbacks of them since I’ve been here. “A farm,” he says. “A family. An airplane. A crash. And then this place. Was there really a family? Did that airplane crash or was it hijacked?”

My mind races to the image of the gift box that sat in my lap as I crossed the ocean. In my memory I unwrap it. A pistol rests within.

“Was the plane forced down by something less than a man? Something bred to sleepwalk through life until it was activated by a simple phrase spoken by his kindly master? Was a man sent to kill? Or a slave?”

Ryan unlocks the door to his room. “A man chooses,” he yells. “A slave obeys.” His voice softens. “Come in.” I stare at him, my mind reeling with the implications. Flooded with memories and conflicting thoughts, I lower my weapon. I can no longer pull a trigger any more than I could flip a light switch. I enter the room. At the back I glimpse yet another Vita-Chamber – but instead of crackling with lightning, it stands deactivated. Why is this one not operational?

“Stop, would you kindly?” says Ryan. “Would you kindly? Powerful phrase. Familiar phrase?”

Memories of Atlas’s voice plague me, his directions to me since I’ve been in Rapture: “*Would you kindly pick up that wrench?*” “*Would you kindly open that door?*” “*Would you kindly head to Ryan’s office and kill the son of a bitch?*” Everything Atlas ordered me to do, I did without question.

“Sit, would you kindly?” says Ryan.

My limbs no longer obey me. I watch my body move as if it were controlled like a marionette. I sit.

“Stand, would you kindly?”

I stand.

“Run!”

I run down the hall.

“Stop! Turn.” I can do nothing but watch as my body does what it has been ordered.

“A man chooses,” intones Ryan. “A slave obeys.” He glances at the golf putter in his hand then passes it to me.

“Kill!” he shouts.

I watch as my arm strikes him in the head with the golf club. Blood spurts from his cheek and he falls to the ground. He picks himself off the floor and gingerly touches his face.

“A man chooses” he sputters. Again I can do nothing but watch as I strike him again with the golf club. The gun metal of the club head drips dark crimson. “A slave obeys!” he growls, his voice fading, blood streaming down his face. “Obey!” he screams.

Still powerless to do nothing but watch, I strike him one last time and impale the putter in his forehead. Blood spurts out from his face and spatters on the carpet. He falls backward, limbs askew, the light in his eyes gone.

Atlas’s voice comes through the radio. “Hurry now,” he yells, his voice insistent.

“Would you kindly grab Ryan’s auto-destruct override key and put it in that goddamn machine?”

My faculties return to me. I search his body like I have searched countless others, find the key and deactivate the self-destruct.

Atlas heaves a huge sigh of relief. “Nice work, boyo!” He laughs. “It’s time to end this little masquerade.” He continues to laugh, and his voice deepens in pitch and timber. “There ain’t no Atlas, kid. Never was. Fella in my line of work takes on a variety of aliases. Hell, once I was a Chinaman for six months. You’ve been a sport, so I guess I owe you a little honesty. The name’s Frank Fontaine.” My heart lurches.

“I gotta say, I’ve had a lotta business partners in my life but you... ‘course the fact that you were genetically conditioned to bark like a cocker spaniel when I said ‘would you kindly?’ might have had something to do with it, but still. Now as soon as that machine finishes processing the key you fished off of Ryan, I’m going to run Rapture, tits to toes. You’ve been a pal. But you know what they say? Never mix business with friendship. Thanks for everything, kid.”

An endless wave of Splicers, far more than any man would ever be able to defeat, bursts through the door to Ryan’s office. I defend myself with my weapons and my plasmids until I am out of ammunition. From the mob, a lone woman with a pair of steel hooks for hands walks slowly towards me, a glint in her eye.

Goodbye, Diary. Tell my wife I lo –

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### **But What Does It All Mean?**

“The play is the thing.”  
*Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2*

Although Shakespeare clearly didn’t have a paper on video games in mind when he wrote this famous line, it seems apt: it is the playing of *BioShock* and the above narrative that serve as my data; there’s nothing quite like gunning down hallways of deranged attackers with a grenade launcher knowing that it’s all for the good of academe. Now that the blood has dried and the

shrapnel cooled, it seems prudent to reiterate my two research questions: “How does *BioShock*’s game world (including fictional content, level design, narrative, and backstory) enact and depict objectivism?” And, “ How does the philosophy of objectivism inform game world?”

In order to explore these questions I will first break down Espen Aarseth’s framework of game methodology to illustrate how a video game can be broken into three separate components: game play, game structure, and game world. From there I will explore why analyzing game play and game structure are not particularly fertile grounds for analyzing the enactment of Rand’s philosophy, compared to game world. I will then explore Aarseth’s three subdivisions of the game world category (topology, level design and fictional content) to show why fictional content proves to be the most fecund.

Finally, I will focus my attention on *BioShock*’s narrative to explore how it paradoxically both enacts and contracts Rand’s philosophy of objectivism.

### **Framework Analysis**

The core of the enactment of objectivism in *BioShock* comes from a careful study of the title’s elements identified as part of the game world (Aarseth, 2003). Although the enactment of objectivism is communicated to the gamer in many different manners, all of the game’s fictional content is built on Ayn Rand’s philosophy; in particular, all of the game’s characters embody or contradict the philosophy in one form or another.

But why study the enactment of objectivism in *BioShock* in the first place? My research has shown that once the developers at Irrational Games chose to create a narrative built on the philosophy, objectivism permeated every aspect of the title: game play, game structure and game world. All subcategories, including topology, level design and fictional content were affected by this decision. Even incidental elements of the game, like passing comments by computer

controlled enemies, enact objectivism. If Ayn Rand were alive today and allowed video games to be considered art, I suspect she would be thrilled to see her philosophy enacted in interactive multimedia, for she writes,

Art is a concretization of metaphysics. Art brings man’s concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were precepts. *This* [italics hers] is the psycho-epistemological function of art, the reason of its importance in man’s life and the crux of objectivist esthetics. (Rand, 1969, p. 418).

In comparison, little is communicated in terms of game play or game structure. The following table illustrates this. (A complete listing can be found in Appendix A).

**Table 1 – Examples of Enacted Objectivism Sorted by Aarseth’s Framework**

<b>Game Play</b>	<b>Game Structure</b>	<b>Game World</b>
I smash the debris blocking the only way out with my wrench.*	Debris must be smashed with a wrench.*	A towering bronze bust of a man wearing a jacket and a tie gazes down at me.
I bludgeon a woman to death with my wrench.	Electronic lock is opened by Electro-Bolt Plasmid	A banner reading <i>No Gods Or Kings. Only Man.</i>
Blue lightning sprays from my fingertips.	Frozen doorway is thawed with Incinerate Plasmid	A poster reading <i>Incinerate! Fire at Your Fingertips!</i>
I cave in her skull with my wrench for the hell of it.	Wounds are healed by Vita-Chamber.**	Andrew Ryan lecturing, “Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington, it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican, it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow, it belongs to everyone!”
A group of female Splicers attack me, but I kill them all with my machine gun.	Debris blocking a doorway is destroyed by using Telekinesis to redirect a grenade.	Protest signs reading <i>We’re Not Your Property! Ryan Doesn’t Own Us!</i>
I kill another Splicer and loot his body for cash.	Incinerate, Telekinesis, Electro-Bolt, Enrage Plasmids	A poster that reads <i>Pick Your Plasmid And Evolve</i>
I light a woman on fire with the Incinerate Plasmid.	Gene Tonics, Adam, Eve	A banner reading <i>Altruism is</i>
	Rescuing/Harvesting the Little Sisters generates 80 or 160 Units of Adam	

		<p><i>the Root of All Wickedness</i></p> <p>A poster that says <i>With Adam, There's No Reason Not to Be Beautiful</i></p> <p>Propaganda from the public address system which states "The Parasite hates three things: free markets, free will and free men."</p>
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\* Note that two pieces of data fall into two categories.

The reason that game play and game structure fail to enact objectivism as successfully as game world is that game play and game structure *derive* their enactments from game world. This also leads to the difficulty in applying Aarseth's framework: virtually all of the rules of the game are derived from the fact that objectivism has led to Rapture being overrun by individuals with no restrictions on their behaviors. Splicers and the player are free to attack and kill one other as they see fit, Plasmids can be combined and used in any combination Splicers and the player can think of, and even death itself – the ultimate restriction – has been removed from the player's list of limitations. Furthermore, almost all of *BioShock's* puzzles must be solved through using Plasmids which were created through story elements drawing from tenets of objectivism. For example, consider the problem of the frozen doorway (game structure) which must be thawed using the Incinerate Plasmid (game play). Incinerate was created in Rapture by characters who had already accepted objectivism as their philosophy, found the genetics-altering serum Adam in sea slugs at the bottom of the ocean, and were able to experiment with it without any institution or oversight committee limiting their actions. In other words, *the creation* of Incinerate is a direct enactment of objectivism. *Using* Incinerate as a form of game play is an "enactment of an enactment." In other words, an objectivist puzzle in an objectivist world is only solvable by an

objectivist creation. Or, to further confound my poor reader, the frozen door and its solution represents an “enactment of objectivism *of* an enactment of objectivism *on* an enactment of objectivism.” A meta-meta-enactment, if you will. [*And people think video games are mindless.* – *Ed.*]

But if using the powers bestowed by Plasmids (an element of game play) could be seen as an enactment of objectivism, what about firearms? Is shooting an enemy with a gun (another element of game play) an enactment of objectivism because there are no laws in Rapture? If that is so, then almost every possible action within *BioShock* could be considered a form of objectivism because there are almost no restrictions on anyone’s behavior. I deal with the paradoxical answer to this question in my discussion of game world, below.

**“Heads, I win. Tails, you lose.”**

While on the surface it seems highly logical to separate a virtual environment from the player’s actions within it, I argue that in many situations in *BioShock*, they cannot be separated. Much like a coin has two sides, an avatar in a virtual world can only act according to the freedoms and constraints imposed and afforded by the world he inhabits, thereby allowing him to surpass (or fail to surpass) the obstacles within.

Lars Konzack (2002) says much the same thing. In his paper *Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Game Analysis*, he writes,

A computer game consists of two different levels: a) the virtual space, and b) the playground. These two levels may under special conditions combine, but normally they are kept apart. We find the same conditions in a game of chess. The board and the pieces represent the virtual space with its own intrinsic logic. The board, pieces and the two players situated in the surrounding space are all part of the playground. These two levels of course interact, but still they are in fact kept apart from one another...they are indeed both sides of the same coin.

The seminal *Super Mario Bros.* serves as a simple yet illuminating example of how game play and game world exist as two sides of the same coin: A player controlling Mario comes across a bottomless pit. For the game to continue, Mario must jump over the pit – there are no other alternatives. In this example, the pit is both an obstacle (game structure) and part of the virtual environment (game world). For game play to continue, the player has no other choice but to jump over the obstacle (game play).

Aarseth published his framework in 2003, three years before the release of *BioShock* (2006) but eighteen years after *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), and yet his framework is better suited to dissect the antiquated non-story of an Italian plumber than the sophisticated narrative of *BioShock*. Early games from the 1980s often gave no fictional backstory for the world the player inhabited, its structure, or a player's abilities. In *Super Mario Bros.*, players could shoot fireballs to defeat enemies: Mario touched a plant called a fire flower and his clothing changed color to red and orange to indicate his new ability to the player, who simply accepted it. In this example, Aarseth's framework works well because the shooting of fire is part of the game's structure and game play simultaneously: structurally, players must touch a fire flower to gain the ability; they lost it if they collided with an enemy. In terms of game play, fireballs would defeat certain enemies while others were impervious. In *BioShock*, the Incinerate Plasmid (which serves essentially the same purpose as Mario's fireballs) is inextricably woven into the game's fictional world. This fusion of game play (shooting fireballs) with the game world (the Incinerate Plasmid) makes Aarseth's framework extremely difficult to apply, due to the overlapping nature of his categories. Indeed, Aarseth's framework seeks to subdivide two categories that developers go to great lengths to seamlessly fuse, a concept known in the video game industry as "organic game design." Simply put, organic game design means there must be a reason for any aspect of

game play to exist in a game's world. Stuart Urback of the video game website *GamaSutra* provides a clear definition of this, which illustrates how the frozen door puzzle discussed above could be considered organic, as all of its properties stem from the philosophy of objectivism:

Frank Lloyd Wright coined the term [organic]...The idea behind organic architecture was the notion that a house or building should be fully integrated into its natural environment so that it fits seamlessly with its surroundings...Organic game design could be seen as a seamless integration between the mechanics and the flavor (images, characters, and world) of the game. (Urback, 2011).

In my initial attempt to apply Aarseth's framework, I chose to combine his categories as they seemed to best fit. For example, the frozen doorway would be a fusion of game world (fictional content, level design, topology) and game structure (the player is trapped by the iced-over door). Overcoming the obstacle would be a fusion of game play (shooting fire) with game world (the fictional Incinerate plasmid). This led to a narrative where I colour-coded every event that occurred in Rapture which served only to frustrate my progress.

### **“I See Trees of Green...”**

However, game play and game structure in *BioShock* are large variations on a theme: if igniting a man with Incinerate is an enactment of objectivism, is shocking a Splicer to death with Electro-Bolt any different? How different is thawing a door with Incinerate from clearing a debris pile with Telekinesis? Due to the repetitive nature of *BioShock's* game play and game structure, I chose to focus on game world because it offered a larger and more diverse spectrum of data to analyze. Aarseth's game world framework includes “fictional content, topology and level design (textures, etc.)” I must clarify two terms: “textures” is video game industry jargon which is defined thusly:

In computer graphics, shading or other attributes added to the “surface” of a graphical image to give it the illusion of a physical substance. For example, a surface could be made to appear reflective to simulate metal or glass, or a scanned image of wood grain could be applied to a shape intended to simulate an object

made of wood. (Microsoft Computer Dictionary, Third Edition).

Finally, “topology” is the study of topography, defined as “a detailed, precise description of a place or region” (American Heritage Dictionary, Third Edition). Table 2 illustrates samples of how game world data is subdivided according to Aarseth’s definition. A full listing can be found in Appendix B.

**Table 2 – Aarseth’s Framework Subdivided to Reveal the Enactment of Objectivism.**

Topology	Level Design	Fictional Content
Physical layout of Rapture itself  Giant red banners  Discarded protest signs  Looping audio propaganda  Bronze Statues of Andrew Ryan  Posters Advertising Plasmids	Frozen door requires thawing with Incinerate Plasmid.  Debris pile must be destroyed with Telekinesis Plasmid.  Shorted-out electric doors must be opened with Electro-Bolt Plasmid  Plasmid Use Requires Eve Syringes.  Hacking (rewiring) security cameras, turrets, alarm systems, and vending machines  Gather’s Gardens, Gene Banks and U-Invent Machines  Player’s abilities begin to border on super-human.  Health Stations can be destroyed to earn a free medical kit	Tenenbaum’s backstory: “Germans, all they can talk about is blue eyes and shape of forehead. All I care about is why is this one born strong and that one born weak? This one smart and that one stupid?”  Tenenbaum musing about her own gifts, free of limitations: “I can bend the double helix. Black can be reborn white. Tall, short. Weak, strong.”  Tenenbaum’s own struggle with objectivism: “These children have awoken something that for most is beautiful and natural, but for me is an abomination: my maternal instinct.”  Dr. Steinman and his uninhibited expression of his “art”: “With Adam, the flesh becomes clay! What excuse do we have not to sculpt and sculpt and sculpt until the job is done?”  Andrew Ryan intoning “A

		<p>man chooses, a slave obeys,” challenging Jack to prove his is a free man (who cannot).</p> <p>Andrew Ryan’s suicide by golf putter: “Kill!”</p> <p>Removal of Jack’s free will (“Would you kindly?”)</p>
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## **Objectivism Enacted in Topology, Level Design and Fictional Content**

### **Topology**

In a topographical sense, an environment can only have its physical structure and the corresponding sounds: in *BioShock*, this pertains to Rapture itself. And, to their credit, the developers at Irrational Games enacted objectivism as well as one could expect: there are tenets of the philosophy hanging on the walls, statues to Andrew Ryan in the corridors, and a relentless barrage of propaganda from the city’s public address system. But because topography deals with only the superficial, the enactment of objectivism in this fashion could only therefore be superficial.

### **Level Design**

A vast majority of the game’s puzzles must be solved with powers that are bestowed on the player via Plasmids – which were created around tenets of objectivism. For example, using Incinerate to thaw items frozen in ice, Electro-Bolt to restore power to dead circuitry, or Enrage to confuse Splicers into attacking a Big Daddy are all enactments of objectivism because the Plasmids themselves were created to remove human constraints and the puzzles are found in Rapture, which is itself founded on objectivism.

There are some puzzles that do not deal with objectivism no matter how thinly the ideology is stretched (such as discovering that the keycode to a locked door is spoken on a

nearby Voice-Recorder) while others could be argued to enact objectivism in an indirect fashion: for example, the player can hack (rewire) the many electronic devices in Rapture to serve his own purpose, reduce the cost of purchasable goods, or disable alarms and security systems. Even the ubiquitous health stations can be smashed with the wrench to earn a free final health kit while simultaneously preventing Splicers from using them.

In summary, *BioShock's* level design is based on objectivism, but like with topology, this is largely because level design is derived from the title's fictional content which is based on objectivism.

### **Fictional Content**

Fictional content, according to Aarseth's definition, includes "level design, narrative, and backstory." No discussion of objectivism as it relates to *BioShock's* fictional content could begin with anything other than an analysis of Andrew Ryan, and how his frequent ideological assertions compare to Rand's own.

Andrew Ryan declares the game's objectivist philosophy via voice-over minutes after the game begins, as the player descends to Rapture in the bathysphere. If the player were to miss the subtle mention of the philosophy in the cut scene on the airplane in "Son, you were born to do great things" there would be no missing it once he set foot into the city. Andrew Ryan's first spoken words to the player are essentially a summation of Rand's ideology:

"Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington, it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican, it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow, it belongs to everyone! I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose...Rapture! A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city, too!"

Rand creates a society of this exact nature in *Atlas Shrugged* where the novel's captains-of-industry protagonists take refuge from the parasites of their modern world, an alternate post-World War II America. Dubbed Atlantis by its founder John Galt, located in the Rocky Mountains, accessible only by plane and with an entrance hidden by a form of science fiction cloaking device, Rand's utopia is invitation-only. Sam Bostaph surmises the hidden city in *Atlas Shrugged* in his article "Ayn Rand's Atlantis as a Free Market Economy," thusly:

Ayn Rand's fictional Atlantis is a free society concealed within a crumbling authoritarian one...The contrast between the two societies is an argument that the order of the market and the prosperity that it creates can exist only so long as the rule of law and the existence of property rights provide a context for creative and productive men. Interventionism and authoritarianism destroy that context and eventually destroy those men and their production by eliminating both the incentive and the ability to produce." (Bostaph, 2007).

Rand's philosophy appears visually in Rapture as well, as enacted by the many red banners that are draped across the corridors (remember that according to Aarseth's definition, the banner themselves constitute topology while what's written on them constitutes fictional content). In the first few levels many tenets of the philosophy are stated essentially as propaganda: *No Gods or Kings, Only Men* and *Altruism is the Root of All Wickedness*. The phrase *Ascendancy, Liberty, Commerce, Independence, Creativity* also appears on several banners, but this is not as straightforward an enactment as the previous two: the list of concepts are themselves enactments of objectivism, making the text on the banner a meta-enactment. Nevertheless, gamers who are new to Rapture (and the fictional future citizens that Andrew Ryan built the city for) would be hard pressed to miss them.

After the opening banners, enactments of objectivism become more obscure because they are fused with advertisements for the Plasmids created by Tenenbaum. The advertisements throughout Rapture serve multiple purposes: they enact objectivism while fusing it with the

game's story and simultaneously advertising and instructing the player on future game play mechanics. An illustration of this is the advertisement for the Incinerate plasmid, which shows a woman's fingertip igniting her husband's cigarette. From the poster, gamers would learn what the upcoming plasmid is capable of doing and how it works. The fact that the plasmid is only available to the citizens of Rapture (it is not available to anyone outside the city) is possible only because the plasmid was created by Rapture's scientists working in a society free of any restrictions on their research. The game designers rely on the argument that Tenenbaum and the other scientists who developed the plasmids would have been unable to do so outside of Rapture because of the ethics involved in creating a genetic modification that bestows pyrokinesis.

It must be noted that the developers at Irrational Games also visually contradict Rand's philosophy of objectivism. When players enter the medical pavilion in search of the deranged Dr. Steinman, they come across a poster which features a young woman with a pearlescent smile and text that reads *For a Limited Time, Get a Free Plasmid by Ryan Industries at Dandy Dental with Any Root Canal*. Beneath the woman's smile the poster offers the plasmids Slim-Down and Telekinesis while supplies last. While it could be argued that this is merely a cheap attempt at humor, upon deeper reflection one would realize that the idea of giving something away runs directly opposed to objectivism. In *Atlas Shrugged*, a character named Ragnar Danneskjöld lectures industrialist Hank Rearden on exactly this topic by saying, "Until men learn that of all human symbols, Robin Hood is the most immoral and the most contemptible, there will be no justice on earth and no way for mankind to survive." (Rand, p. 700). While it seems odd that the developers would contradict objectivism in this fashion, I would argue that enacting the opposite of objectivism also serves to raise consciousness about the philosophy. This contradiction is also apparent when the player encounters a phonograph of Sheree North singing *The Best Things in*

*Life Are Free*. In Rapture, however, this song paradoxically both enacts and contradicts objectivism because while the city was founded on achievement through the sweat of man's brow, the resulting anarchy has created an environment where ownership is all but gone and all material goods lay scattered in the street.

Ryan's objectivist propaganda is also enacted audially as players make their way through Rapture. The city's public address system features several pithy sayings amidst the game play, including Ryan pedantically intoning, "On the surface the parasite expects the doctor to heal them for free, the farmer to feed them out of charity. How little they differ from the pervert, who prowls the streets, looking for a victim he can ravish for his grotesque amusement." But more noteworthy is the lifeless voice of the public address system declaring, "The Parasite hates three things: free markets, free will and free men." While comment on free markets is largely a variation on Andrew Ryan's opening objectivist rant, the declarations of a Parasite's hatred of free will and free men foreshadow *BioShock's* legendary twist.

As Andrew Ryan promises throughout the game, Rapture is a city where "the artist would not fear the censor" and "where the great would not be constrained by the small." Nowhere in *BioShock* is this philosophy more grotesquely personified than in the character of Dr. Steinman, the deranged plastic surgeon. Free from both an artistic censor and "petty morality," Steinman is armed with a scalpel – and later, a grenade launcher – to recreate the flesh in any way he sees fit. He keeps his promise to Diane McClintock that she will be "the prettiest of all the girls" – who then is horrified to learn when her bandages come off that he has removed her nose. While this might seem to be a perversion of the ideology, Leonard Peikoff surmises objectivism as it relates to art in *The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* with,

"An artist, as she often suggests elsewhere, does not have to depict the good. Depending on his sense of life, he may depict heroes or average men or

even ‘crawling species of depravity’...so long as within his own context, he adheres to all the principles of good art...” (Peikoff, 1991).

The character of Sander Cohen serves as a similar enactment. Equally deranged from his time in Rapture, Cohen’s demand to the player that he assassinate four artistic rivals, photograph their corpses and then arrange their photos in a quadtych to assemble what he calls his greatest artistic “masterpiece” turns the player into his medium, making the player an objectivist by proxy. Whether or not the player considers his creation to be art is irrelevant. All that matters is that it adheres to the principles of good art “within his [Cohen’s] own context.” (Peikoff, 1991)

This concept of turning the player into an agent by proxy is the core conceit (and twist) of *BioShock’s* gameplay, and must be explored at length as it both enacts and contradicts objectivism. Shortly after entering Rapture, the player hears the line “The Parasite hates three things: free markets, free will and free men” over the city’s public address system. It’s doubtful that anyone playing the game for the first time would anticipate how prescient this quotation truly is, for the player’s character, Jack – and the player himself – are neither free men nor do they have free will. From the game’s opening cut scene that features the text *Would You Kindly Not Open* on a gift-wrapped package which is later revealed to contain a pistol, the character (Jack) and the player embark on a journey which can only have one possible ending. It’s the realization that both the character *and the player* are merely servants of Frank Fontaine and the developers at Irrational Games that lifts *BioShock* from being, as some critics would call it, “just another mindless video game.” (It is both ironic and *apropos* that this common disparagement of the entire industry metaphorically – but accurately – implies that players have no mind of their own.)

Because of the page limitations of this paper I was forced to omit dramatizing Jack’s complete backstory in my data narrative, but briefly it is this: Shortly before the player comes

face-to-face with Andrew Ryan, it is revealed via a recorded voice message in a hidden office that Jack was conceived in Rapture by Andrew Ryan, the fertilized fetus removed by Dr. Tenenbaum from a prostitute, brainwashed with the phrase “Would you kindly?” by Dr. Suchong and sent above the surface with false memories to grow at an accelerated rate before his return to the underwater city to work as a sleeper agent for Frank Fontaine (the true identity of Atlas). Ryan hints as much to Jack when he says, “Come, my child” before the final showdown.

While this narrative might seem unnecessarily convoluted and more suited for a Hollywood summer film, it is further revealed that the reason the player can be resurrected repeatedly via the city’s Vita-Chambers (and that the city’s Splicers cannot) is that the chambers were created by Andrew Ryan to work only for his genetic code – and his offspring. Finally, the key that controls the power supply to Rapture can also only be operated by someone who shares Ryan’s genetics. Ryan had disabled the Vita-Chamber present in his office before Jack bludgeoned him with the golf putter, making his death an intentional suicide.

While many gamers (and scholars) might overlook the Vita-Chamber as simply a game mechanic, they enact objectivism in the purest sense imaginable. If objectivism states that individuals have the right to live entirely for their own self-interest, what could be more self-serving than creating eternal life for oneself while ignoring the mortality of the common man? Even John Galt abandoning the alternate United States at the end of *Atlas Shrugged* to economic collapse and a likely depression pales in comparison to Andrew Ryan recreating himself as a virtual god while those around him die.

As noted above, the notion of Jack (and the player) being immortal might seem like a clever dramatization of a game mechanic; indeed, many games deal with a player’s death in a somewhat ham-fisted manner where the game simply reloads from a pre-determined checkpoint

with all of the player's actions and their consequences repealed. But this notion of immorality is core to *BioShock's* enactment of objectivism because it deals with the concept of Jack (and the player) as free men with free will.

It is when the player learns that Jack has been acting not of his own free will but has been programmed by Frank Fontaine to carry out his dirty work that *BioShock* truly enacts objectivism through its contradiction. This fusion of the character's free will with the *player's* free will had never been addressed in a video game. How better to contradict objectivism by revealing that both Jack and the player are not acting in their own self-interest whatsoever? Because there are no choices to be made in Rapture that do not directly serve Frank Fontaine's self-interest, the philosophy of objectivism in *BioShock* is an illusion.

Once the player (and Jack) embark on their adventure, all the actions that they commit serve to advance Frank Fontaine's interest in one fashion or another, be it killing an enemy, opening a door, walking down a corridor, or even merely looking around. Suicide – the ultimate action which would serve *against* the player's self-interest – is impossible because of the existence of the Vita-Chambers. While it could be argued that the player could squander his resources to make defeating enemies impossible (shooting bullets into a wall, using up syringes of Eve in the same fashion), the player receives a minor refill of Eve upon resurrection in a Vita-Chamber. Further compounding this problem of the player acting against his own self-interest is the existence of the wrench: as a melee weapon which requires no ammunition, the offensive power of this armament can never be extinguished. Because of this, the logical argument can be made that while reaching the end of *BioShock* with any expediency requires skill, defeating the game is a mathematical certainty if by attrition alone. Even players who have never held a controller could defeat *BioShock* through a nigh-infinite amount of wrench strikes and Vita-

Chamber resurrections. Looked upon through this framework, there are virtually no actions that can be committed in *BioShock* which do not serve Frank Fontaine's self-interest. While it may be argued that doing nothing does not serve Fontaine, the metaphysical component of Rand's philosophy that argues "A is A" rejects the notion of inaction as an action. As John Galt argues in his speech to the United States at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*,

Whatever you choose to consider, be it an object, an attribute or an action, the law of identity remains the same. A leaf cannot be a stone at the same time. It cannot be all red and all green at the same time, it cannot freeze and burn at the same time. A is A." (Rand, p.1211).

Ultimately, simply playing *BioShock* is paradoxically both an enactment and contradiction of objectivism: from Jack's point of view, any action he takes only serves Fontaine's self-interest. From the player's point of view – within the framework of *BioShock* as a video game – any action is taken in the interest of the developers at Irrational Games, who could see players as little more than canines at a dog show running through series of obstacles at their owners' insistence. But when viewed externally, a player who is enjoying his life with video games is enacting objectivism by acting in his own self-interest (though parents would likely reject this argument from precocious children).

The fact is that, in simple terms, players of *BioShock* only have one true choice: to play the game or to turn it off. Every action they take within the game has been anticipated, and the consequences of all player actions were established while the game was being created. To put it more simply: while a person playing a game of chess has an infinite number of moves available to him, there are only three possible outcomes: victory, defeat or stalemate. Because of the immortality of the player in *BioShock* thanks to the Vita-Chambers, the only outcome that is possible is either the ultimate victory over Rapture or the player abandoning the game out of frustration or boredom.

It is this realization that makes the twist in *BioShock* so remarkable: when it is revealed to Jack that he has been brainwashed by Frank Fontaine into being “little more than a Cocker Spaniel who barks every time [Fontaine says] ‘Would you kindly?’” particularly introspective players will realize when they choose to participate in *BioShock* – or indeed any game – they give up any act of their own self-interest beyond the boundaries of the game itself. Will less insightful players realize this or simply continue to give up their self-interest to video games? One wonders. [*Ooh, BioShock Infinite was just announced for February 2013. Gimme gimme gimme! – Ed.*]

This point is driven home explicitly by the developers at Irrational Games when the player comes face-to-face with Andrew Ryan. He repeatedly asks Jack (and the player, by extension) if he is a man or a slave, because according to Ryan, in objectivist philosophy, “a man chooses and a slave obeys.” Ryan repeats this mantra while Jack (and not the player, for the game is in watch-only letterbox mode) beats him to death with the golf putter, a dying proclamation that neither Jack nor the player have free will in *BioShock* (not Rapture). Whereas the rest of the game’s story is handled via voice-recorders (players have the choice to listen to them or not), the confrontation and the player’s implicit participation in Ryan’s death is unavoidable.

This philosophy is also featured in John Galt’s lecture at the end of *Atlas Shrugged* when he tells the nation, “If a man dies fighting for his own freedom it is not a sacrifice; he is not willing to live as a slave” (Rand, p.1227).

When Ryan passes the golf putter to Jack (and the player) and orders him to kill, the game enters a cut scene: letterbox bars appear at the top and bottom of the screen, the inputs of the player are no longer accepted and all control over his avatar is lost. Jack (and the player),

being completely brainwashed and stripped of acting out of their own self-interest have no choice but to watch as Andrew Ryan dies, his point that Jack (and the player) have no free will being driven home with a golf putter through the forehead. Had the player *truly* been able to act out of his own self-interest, the player would have been able to choose whether or not to kill Ryan. But because allowing Ryan to live would prevent the game's narrative from reaching its conclusion, this choice is unavailable. From the moment the Jack and the player enter Rapture, Andrew Ryan was destined to die, stripping players of the right to act in their own self-interest.

Much has been made in the gamer press about the moral quandary that the title provides its players. In discussing the decision the player must make regarding the Little Sisters, Leigh Alexander writes,

Never before *BioShock*, though, has the player had such control over [a] child's fate. Though some are arguing whether the choice to harvest the Little Sisters for Adam or not is truly a "choice," no one can say that the nature and manner of her life versus her death is not within the player's jurisdiction. (Alexander, 2007).

Indeed, in a trailer for the game a camera floats through Rapture while Andrew Ryan asks future players this explicitly: "So I ask you my friend: if your life was prized, would you kill the innocent? Would you sacrifice your humanity? We all make choices, but in the end our choices make us." (*BioShock* Trailer, 2006).

Clint Hocking makes the astute observation that the biggest possible choice in the game – to pursue an objectivist philosophy at all – is not an option at all, saying,

I am constrained by the design of the game to help Atlas, even if I am opposed to the principle of helping someone else. In order to go forward in the game, I must do as Atlas says because the game does not offer me the freedom to choose sides in the conflict between Ryan and Atlas...[If I wish to help Ryan] I can stop playing the game, but that's about it. (Hocking, 2007).

Despite the many game play choices (such as which plasmids to use), the only *moral* choice the player is given is to either rescue (save) or harvest (kill) the Little Sisters. Though the

player is rewarded with twice as much Adam for harvesting them as for rescuing them, Tenenbaum leaves the player bonus packages of Adam at various locations in the game as a gift for rescuing the Little Sisters, making the total amount of Adam received at the end of the game completely equal no matter which choice the player makes. In this instance, *BioShock* sidesteps objectivism's tenet of acting for one's self-interest because the choice the player makes is irrelevant. There is no way to act in one's self-interest, just as there is no way to act against one's self-interest.

### **Are Games Just Mindless Entertainment?**

If it's true that gamers give up any semblance of free will while playing a game and are completely at the mercy of the game designers, can the same be said of other forms of fiction? Can an audience who watches a film like *Minority Report* be said to have free will outside of either watching it or leaving the theatre? And what about readers of fiction, poetry, or even grad papers? Once the decision has been made to engage in the interaction, does free will exist or are audiences and readers similarly at the mercy of their directors and writers? When we speak of "suspending disbelief" should we really speak of "suspending volition?"

Perhaps it is this abdication of our power of choice that gives storytelling, interactive or not, its true power. Could it be that gamers, audiences and readers don't partake in stories to escape their lives but to escape the tyranny of endless choice?

In the end, *BioShock* is a comprehensive enactment of objectivism through its game play, game structure and game world, having derived much of its level design and topology from its fictional content. Having read *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand's 1,200 page enactment of her philosophy in a literary medium, I would argue that *BioShock* further succeeds in engaging its audience in a way that Rand's own novel does not. As the rather apt review from *GameShark* puts it,

[*BioShock*] is a tale of moral imperative, the nature of man, tragedy, betrayal, right, wrong, and the gray that lives in-between. And if you're not interested in the depth its story line explores, it's also an immaculate action game with [plenty of] ways to bludgeon, maim, and blow stuff up. (Gameshark, 2006).

And how does *Atlas Shrugged* fair? Notes *New York Times* critic Paul Krugman,

There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year old's life: *The Lord of the Rings* and *Atlas Shrugged*. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally-stunted, socially-crippled adult, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves orcs. (Krugman, 2010).

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## Appendix A.

**Table 1 – Examples of Enacted Objectivism Sorted by Aarseth’s Framework**

Game Play	Game Structure	Game World
I smash the debris blocking the only way out with my wrench.*	Debris must be smashed with a wrench.*	A towering bronze bust of a man wearing a jacket and a tie gazes down at me.
I bludgeon a woman to death with my wrench.	Electronic lock is opened by Electro-Bolt Plasmid	A banner reading <i>No Gods Or Kings. Only Man.</i>
Blue lightning sprays from my fingertips.	Frozen doorway is thawed with Incinerate Plasmid	A poster reading <i>Incinerate! Fire at Your Fingertips!</i>
I cave in her skull with my wrench for the hell of it.	Wounds are healed by Vita-Chamber.**	Andrew Ryan lecturing, “Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington, it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican, it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow, it belongs to everyone!”
A group of female Splicers attack me, but I kill them all with my machine gun.	Debris blocking a doorway is destroyed by using Telekinesis to redirect a grenade.	Still more from Andrew Ryan: “I chose Rapture! A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small.”
I kill another Splicer and loot his body for cash.	Incinerate, Telekinesis, Electro-Bolt, Enrage Plasmids	Atlas activating Jack’s brainwashing: “Would you kindly pick up that shortwave radio?”
I light a woman on fire with the Incinerate Plasmid.	Gene Tonics, Adam, Eve	Protest signs reading <i>We’re Not Your Property! Ryan Doesn’t Own Us!</i>
	<b>Rescuing/Harvesting the Little Sisters generates 80 or 160 Units of Adam</b>	Wounds are healed by the Vita Chamber**
		A banner reading <i>Altruism is</i>

		<p><i>the Root of All Wickedness</i></p> <p>A poster that says <i>With Adam, There's No Reason Not to Be Beautiful</i></p> <p>Propaganda from the public address system which states "The Parasite hates three things: free markets, free will and free men."</p> <p>Dr. Steinman's ranting, "With Adam, the flesh becomes clay! What excuse to we have not to sculpt and sculpt and sculpt until the job is done?"</p> <p>A poster that illustrates <i>Dr. Steinman's Aesthetic Ideals</i></p> <p>Dialogue from Dr. Steinman: "With genetic modifications, beauty is a moral obligation!"</p> <p>Brigid Tenenbaum musing, "All I care about is why is this one born strong and that one born weak? This one smart and that one stupid?"</p> <p>More lecturing from the founder of Rapture: "Andrew Ryan asks you a simple question: are you a man or are you a slave?"</p> <p>An audio advertisement that states: "My Daddy's smarter than Einstein, stronger than Hercules, and lights a fire with a snap of his fingers. Smart Daddies get spliced at the Garden!"</p>
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## Appendix B.

**Table 2 – Aarseth’s Framework Subdivided to Reveal the Enactment of Objectivism.**

Topology	Level Design	Fictional Content
Physical layout of Rapture itself	Frozen door requires thawing with Incinerate Plasmid.	Text on a New Year’s Banner which reads <i>1959</i>
Giant red banners	Debris pile must be destroyed with Telekinesis Plasmid.	Text on banners which reads <i>Ascendancy, Liberty, Commerce, Independence, and Creativity</i>
Discarded protest signs	Shorted-out electric doors must be opened with Electro-Bolt Plasmid	Text on other banners which reads <i>No Gods or Kings. Only Man</i>
Looping audio propaganda	Plasmid Use Requires Eve Syringes.	Text on signs which reads <i>Ryan Doesn’t Own Us</i>
Bronze Statues of Andrew Ryan	Hacking (rewiring) security cameras, turrets, alarm systems, and vending machines	Audio propaganda which says “The Parasite Hates Free Will, Free Markets and Free Men”
Posters Advertising Plasmids	Gather’s Gardens, Gene Banks and U-Invent Machines	Andrew Ryan saying, “I am here to ask you a question: Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington, it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican, it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow, it belongs to everyone!”
	Player’s abilities begin to border on super-human.	Andrew Ryan also saying, “I chose the impossible. I chose Rapture! A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small. And with the sweat
	Health Stations can be destroyed to earn a free medical kit	

		<p>of your brow, Rapture can become your city, too!”</p> <p>Tenenbaum’s backstory:  “Germans, all they can talk about is blue eyes and shape of forehead. All I care about is why is this one born strong and that one born weak? This one smart and that one stupid?”</p> <p>Tenenbaum musing about her own gifts, free of limitations:  “I can bend the double helix. Black can be reborn white. Tall, short. Weak, strong.”</p> <p>Tenenbaum’s own struggle with objectivism: “These children have awoken something that for most is beautiful and natural, but for me is an abomination: my maternal instinct.”</p> <p>(Apparent) social welfare programs: “The Little Sister’s Orphanage. In troubled times, give up your child for care, free of charge. After all, children are the future.”</p> <p>Frank Fontaine’s Helping Hands Program</p> <p>Vita-Chambers Created to Resurrect Only Andrew Ryan (the player’s resurrection is only by extension).</p> <p>More Objectivist Ranting by Ryan: “On the surface the parasite expects the doctor to heal them for free, the farmer to feed them out of charity.</p>
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		<p>How little they differ from the pervert, who prowls the streets, looking for a victim he can ravish for his grotesque amusement.”</p> <p>Dr. Steinman and his uninhibited expression of his “art”: “With Adam, the flesh becomes clay! What excuse do we have not to sculpt and sculpt and sculpt until the job is done?”</p> <p>Dr. Steinman’s attempt to justify his Picasso-esque notion of aesthetics: “With genetic modifications, beauty is a moral obligation! Do we force the healthy to live with the contagious? Do we mix the criminal with the law abiding? Then why are the plain allowed to mingle with the fair?”</p> <p>Andrew Ryan’s rationalization of poisoning Rapture’s air supply: “On the surface I once bought a forest. The Parasites demanded that I establish a park...when Congress moved to nationalize my forest, I burnt it to the ground.”</p> <p>Dr. Suchong’s removal of a child’s free will: “Break that puppy’s neck...would you kindly?”</p> <p>Andrew Ryan intoning “A man chooses, a slave obeys,” challenging Jack to prove he is a free man (who cannot).</p> <p>Andrew Ryan’s suicide by</p>
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		golf putter: “Kill!” Removal of Jack’s free will (“Would you kindly?”)
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*[As the table is too small to fit in the remaining white space on this page, I now have several lines with which to amuse myself. What follows is a not-so-hidden gaming “Easter Egg.” – Ed.]*

*Roses are red,  
Violets are blue  
Some poems rhyme  
This one doesn't.*