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Emotion and rhetoric in Bioshock

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EMOTION AND RHETORIC IN *BIOSHOCK*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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by

Jason Rose

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Abstract

In this paper, I tie four concepts together to form a defense both of videogames as art, and of rhetoric as a value-neutral tool of expression, that can be both positive and useful for society.

(1) In the first chapter, I explain the Platonic view of rhetoric as an “empty knack” and how it differs from other accounts of rhetoric, ancient and modern. (2) In the second chapter I present a nuanced understanding of the role emotion plays in practical moral reasoning under a computational model of the mind, as described by Antonio Damasio’s neurological somatic marker theory in *Descartes’ Error*. (3) I will argue in the third chapter that the strong relationship between rhetoric, emotion and reasoning explains rhetoric’s success in human societies throughout history, and allows modern artists to express ideas in powerful new ways. (4) In the fourth chapter I give an account of rhetoric in videogames and how narrative, visual, and procedural rhetoric are all used in videogame design. (5) Finally, in the fifth chapter I use the concepts established in the previous chapters to defend the value of the expressive power of rhetoric through a thorough analysis of the various kinds of rhetoric used in *Bioshock* to explore these very issues in a philosophically significant way, and what we can learn from it.

Chapter One – A Brief Genealogy of Rhetoric

Historically, rhetoric has a bad rap. Throughout Europe’s history, rhetoric usually referred to the art of persuasion specifically used in political settings like public assemblies and courtroom trials. Rhetoric has long been used in the context of public speech and “especially legal and civic speech... Spoken words attempt to convert listeners to a particular opinion, usually one that will influence direct and immediate action...” (Bogost, 15).¹ Indeed, the earliest use of rhetoric appears in Plato’s *Dialogues* circa 400 BC, referring to the Sophist “art of persuasion” and, in *The Republic*, to the power drama and the arts have over the emotional states of the spectators in the audience. Many contemporary philosophers of art hold this view of “mass art,” as it is now called, as being base, crude, and unsophisticated. I follow Noel Carroll’s defense of mass art against Platonic attacks, as he argues in *A Philosophy of Mass Art*.

Plato thought that emotions like fear and pity were maladaptive – such emotions inhibit the soldiers’ ability to fight the enemy in battle, for example. They cloud an individual’s ability to reason by inflaming his or her emotions, subverting Plato’s ideal picture of human as a “rational animal” and the good city as a “rational state.” The prevailing theory behind ancient oral rhetoric was to subvert the reason of the one to be persuaded by appealing to an emotional response – a powerful move when a citizen has to defend himself in court, for example. Indeed, Plato’s central argument against art and rhetoric “hinged on his conviction that the emotions are irrational in the sense that they undermine the rule of reason, both in the individual and, in consequence, in society...” (Carroll, 250). In Plato’s view, the emotions oppose reason, and any threat to reason constitutes a threat to both the individual and the community

¹ Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

at large. Even worse, Plato felt that artists must inevitably pander to the emotions of the audience, even if they *wanted* to produce “good” art. “That is, Plato argued, the general audience, knowing little, would have to be addressed in terms of their emotions rather than their understanding” (Carroll, 251). This is a flaw inherent to drama and poetry – Plato doesn’t think artists can really escape it, if they want their art to be popular.

Ever since Plato formulated his argument against drama and the arts in *The Republic*, rhetoric has been scrutinized as an empty “knack,” a way for the sly to sway opinions in their favor. Some philosophers still hold to the Platonic (or Neo-Platonic) view of emotion in art.

In his Republic, Plato developed a battery of arguments against drama and painting. Many of the arguments that one finds against mass art in the twentieth century are merely transparent adaptations of Plato’s arguments... Plato’s arguments were introduced in order to state the case for banishing the arts from the good city. Likewise, many latter-day Platonists are in favour of censoring mass art. (Carroll, 250)

Even today, contemporary philosophers will reduce rhetoric to “mere persuasion.”

Distinguished French philosopher Paul Ricœur sums up this view elegantly in his essays on Aristotle’s rhetoric, as “an ironic tale of diminishing returns... in reducing itself thus to one of its parts, rhetoric simultaneously lost the nexus that bound it through dialectic to philosophy; and once this link was lost, rhetoric became an erratic and futile discipline” (Averill, 13).²

² Averill, James. "The Rhetoric of Emotion, with a Note on What Makes Great Literature Great." *Empirical Studies of the Arts*. 19.1 (2001).

Plato argued that civic rhetoric and public artworks make manipulating others far too easy, throwing the good city into disorderly chaos, run by the desires of those who could spin the best speech. The masses are completely unable to make decisions on their own because they could be swayed by the most persuasive speeches. In short, Plato's primary worry was that civic life could be controlled by the man or group of men who could deliver the best speech, not necessarily a capable leader with the city's good in mind. This is due, in part, because the art in ancient Greece was nearly all representational – that is, artistic performance was aimed at reproducing the appearance of something from real life. Ancient Greeks read poetry and drama aloud and by identifying with the characters who vented these emotions, the audience members would adopt the characters' untoward emotional dispositions, which inhibits their reason. It is understandable, then, that Plato could not have foreseen the radically different ways contemporary artists have learned to communicate to an audience. He certainly would not have considered the multi-billion dollar entertainment industries that shape so much of our lives today.

Despite the wide propagation of Plato's view of art in *The Republic*, there were those in Ancient Greece who would classify rhetoric as a civic art, believing that the power of rhetoric could be harnessed by artists to help *direct* and *shape* a community, to help constitute the character of its citizens, and to otherwise improve life. Isocrates lived and wrote in the same time and culture as Plato; like Plato, Isocrates studied under Socrates, but he also studied with a variety of Sophists – the group of orators who bore the brunt of Plato's attack on rhetoric. Isocrates had neither the voice nor the charisma to earn his living as an orator, so he taught rhetoric instead. He excelled at teaching, and students came from all over the Mediterranean to

learn from him. He was, by all accounts, a very practical and down-to-earth man, and thought Plato's brand of metaphysics was a waste of time and energy when there were real, earthly problems to deal with first, namely, attending to the civic and political affairs of running the city. Isocrates placed a strong emphasis on an education system that included art and rhetoric, and the civic benefits that come along with a citizenship educated in this manner. In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates seeks to distinguish himself from the other sophists by arguing for rhetoric as a useful tool – one that allows citizens to positively influence the society in which they live. Even good leaders, competent and honest, need a way to communicate with the people they lead. Sure, bad people can use rhetoric to manipulate others for personal gain, but that only says something about the badness of those people. After all, useful things don't stop being useful just because a bad person can direct it towards his purpose. Without rhetoric, Isocrates thinks even good leaders would be rendered ineffectual.

...those who desire to follow the true precepts of discipline may, if they will, be helped more speedily towards honesty of character than towards facility in oratory. And let no one suppose that I claim that just living can be taught; for, in a word, I hold that there does not exist an art of the kind which can implant sobriety and justice in depraved natures. Nevertheless, I do think that the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character.³

³ *Against the Sophists*, speech 13, section 21.

In his *Antidosis*, Isocrates argues for the power of communication to shape the character of a man (and thus, a city) for better or for ill. Cultivating one's emotions, he thought, is a fundamental part of what elevates human beings above the other animals, who lack language.

[Men] have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish.⁴

Isocrates influenced Cicero, who believed that if the tools of rhetoric were simply put into the hands of the right people, the civic rhetoric of public art could be used to actually *save* the Republic. Aristotle, too, thought rhetoric was a civic art with great potential to do good. These thinkers are very much the source of our systems of education today.

Over time, 'rhetoric' has come to mean more than what Plato and Isocrates understood as rhetoric. James Averill, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, argues that looking at a history of rhetoric shows a recent proliferation of *types* of rhetoric,

Rhetoric has expanded as well as contracted; it is no longer limited to the study of oral presentations, but includes literature and art. Theories of... rhetoric are not only flourishing, they are multiplying in bewildering numbers, but under different rubrics: semiotics, structuralism, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and dialogues, to name but a few.

(Averill, 13)

⁴ *Antidosis*, speech 15, section 254.

Despite rhetoric's largely negative connotations, today advertising forms the basis of entire industries, stories told in books and television shows evoke emotional responses to keep us engaged in the both the specific narrative and the culture at large, and thousands of opinions are advocated every day on the innumerable blogs on the Internet. In the courtroom and on the news, politicians and lawyers still spout well-crafted pleas for support in a fashion very reminiscent of the sort with which Plato was familiar. The new forms of rhetoric that developed in the wake of technological and social changes are not merely *reiterations* of the old, oratory rhetoric with which Plato was familiar. Rather, they are new forms of persuasive communication, each with their own rules and good-making properties, allowing us to express ideas to each other in significantly new ways. Over time, rhetoric has come to mean more than "persuasive speech," and computer games like *Bioshock*, the focus of my analysis in Chapter Five, present a fine example of what I'm talking about here – the way a videogame expresses ideas can be radically different from the way a novel or film expresses ideas. At a fundamental level, a book is read, a film is viewed, and a game is played. The various media differ greatly in preparation, presentation, and reception, and this variety of expression allows for an incredible space of communicative possibility. In the famous words of Marshal McLuhan, "the medium is the message;" put a bit less strongly, the medium in which one expresses an idea, narrative, or aesthetic is often a large part of the experience of the recipient, as the way an idea is communicated can dramatically influence the impact of the communication.

Though the Platonic view of rhetoric has remained popular in philosophy, the influence of Isocrates and Aristotle can also be seen in modern thinkers. For example, James Boyd White, an American literary critic and philosopher of law, argues that community and civic life are

defined by the words of persuasion and identification that persist throughout a society – a subset of contemporary rhetoric called *constitutive rhetoric*. By analyzing the constitutive rhetoric found in legal texts, White hopes to shed more light on the interdisciplinary exchange between law and literature. Along these lines, White maintains that well-crafted artistic rhetoric can address social or political issues in unique ways and, in doing so, subtly but substantially influencing the Zeitgeist of the entire culture. Culture itself, he claims, “is maintained, criticized, and transformed” by the power of rhetoric.⁵

Rhetoric as a craft has flourished in the globalized economy precisely because it *does* work, consistently enough for corporations and syndicates to invest billions of dollars into it every year. Indeed, rhetoric tends to thrive in democratic societies where the individual’s rights to free speech and free assembly create a cultural need for both artistic expression and clear and effective persuasion. If rhetoric were, as Plato suggests, merely a knack for deception and misdirection, how could we explain its pervasiveness and consistent success as a tool of expression? It is significant to note here that Plato clearly knew that a skilled application of rhetoric tends to succeed in its persuasive task – that was why rhetoric worried him so much, and why it represented a very real threat to his imagined Republic. Indeed, it is true that today the best advertisements (the majority of today’s rhetoric) works even when directed towards people who understand rhetoric and have been trained to recognize it. The best ads work their magic without the viewer even realizing its affect on him or her; the viewer may even believe the reasoning to be his or her own, not one from an external source!

⁵ White, James B. *The Legal Imagination*. University Of Chicago Press, 1985.

[Some critics] contend that since some products are basically alike, all too often advertisers appeal to people's baser instincts and emotions to sell their products. To stimulate the demand for a product, they attach psychological values such as acquisitiveness, power, sexual pleasure, attractiveness, social approval, and competitive success, none of which are in the product. To attain these values, all the consumer needs to do is to buy the appropriate product. In brief, advertising is an exercise in a special kind of persuasion. As if these criticisms were not enough, advertisers have been accused of manipulating people without their consent at some deeper level of consciousness, of "selling to the id," as one critic put it. (D'Angelo, 1986)

This picture certainly seems to be what Plato was worried about in his attack on the arts in *The Republic* – the rationality of the audience seems to be weakened by the emotionally stirring content of the rhetorical artifact. But could there be more going on here than the straightforward Platonic story? After all, Plato's position on rhetoric presupposes that dispassionate, distanced reason is a viable alternative to allowing oneself to be swayed by the emotional appeals of rhetoric. It seems Plato's civic concerns over the power of rampant emotion were not unfounded, but could his solution to these problems be antiquated and inadequate?

The Platonic tendency is to think that the emotions are irrational or opposed to reason, Thus if art – drama or mass art – addresses the emotions, it will address the irrational in us and, in consequence, undermine reason's control. But the obvious question to ask about this argument is whether in fact the distinction between reason and the emotions is as sharp and antagonistic as the Platonist maintains...

(Carroll, 252)

This is precisely what I address in the next chapter by looking at Antonio Damasio's neurological approach to emotions in *Descartes' Error*. Attempting to understand the interplay between emotion and reason in the brain offers more insight on how rhetoric utilizes emotion to influence an agent's practical reasoning. We can then better assess Plato's concern that rhetoric threatens rational autonomy, as he maintains in his critique of the emotive element of the arts.

Chapter Two – The Foundation of Emotions in Practical Reasoning

Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a *will*. Since *reason* is required for the derivation of actions from laws, **the will is nothing other than practical reason.** — Immanuel Kant (*Groundwork*, 4:412) (emphasis is mine)

Traditional accounts of the machinery of the human brain have the “older” brain core handling the most basic biological functions at the bottom of the brain, while the neocortex at the top calculates with calm, subtle wisdom. “Upstairs in the cortex there is reason and willpower, while downstairs in the subcortex there is emotion and all that weak fleshy stuff.” In *Descartes’ Error*, Damasio rejects this traditional view, insofar as it distinguishes between higher and lower thought processes. “Nature,” he writes, “appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation, but also *from* it and *with* it... the neocortex becomes engaged along with the older brain core, and rationality results from their concerted activity” (Damasio, 128).⁶ David Hume offers a more philosophical version of the traditional view of the play between reason and passion:

Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform

⁶ Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. (New York: Grosset/Putnam).

themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, 'tis said, is oblig'd to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, 'till it be entirely subdu'd, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle... The eternity, invariableness, and divine origin of [reason] have been display'd to the best advantage: the blindness, unconstancy, and deceitfulness of [passion] have been strongly insisted on. (T 2.3.3, 413)⁷

Damasio argues from neurological empirical evidence that emotion actually plays a crucial role in our reasoning. Based on Damasio's neurological understanding of emotion and reasoning, I hope to defend Averill's and Carroll's view of rhetoric as an emotive tool of communication, against the misguided Platonic view of rhetoric as a vapid excitation of emotion.

According to his somatic marker theory, there is a close bond between "a collection of brain regions and the processes of reasoning and decision making" (Damasio, 78). The neurological systems that are involved in plan-making and response-deciding are also tied to the seat of emotion in the brain. Damasio's theory is based on his studies on biologically-regulated response selections. In short, a somatic marker is "a neurophysiological response that, through learning, comes to be associated with a given mental representation..." Such responses lead to "the visceral experience of an emotion, an emotional quale. These visceral

⁷ Hume, David. "A Treatise of Human Nature." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/603780/A-Treatise-of-Human-Nature>>.

responses help ‘edit’ the vast list of possible [choices]” (Megill, and Cogburn, 309).⁸ These processes are continuous and are made without the organism ever being conscious of them.

The role emotion plays in reasoning is counter-intuitive. In “Easy’s Gettin’ Harder All the Time,” Jason Megill and Jon Cogburn compare Damasio’s theory with Daniel Dennett’s work in the philosophy of cognition and how it relates to developments in the field of artificial intelligence... or, the lack of developments, as the case may be. In Dennett’s hypothetical example, a series of robots are programmed to retrieve a battery from a room where a “bomb” is ready to detonate. Time and time again, the robots fail to carry their programming out – either they freeze up when faced with unexpected conditions and contradictory coding, or they bring the bomb out with the battery. The problem Dennett is illustrating seems simple – the robots’ possible courses of action had too many implications for the computer to sort through effectively, leading to seemingly erratic behavior. These examples exhibit what has become known in the artificial intelligence community as the frame problem.

In short, the frame problem can be seen as a cluster of questions, all of which revolve around the question of how an agent determines relevance: (1) how does an agent determine what the relevant objects in its environment are, (2) how does an agent recognize what the relevant implications of any given action are, (3) how does an agent efficiently access what specific pieces of knowledge in a vast knowledge-base are

⁸ Megill, Jason, and Jon Cogburn. "Easy’s Getting’ Harder All the Time: The Computational Theory and Affective States." *Ratio*. 18.3 (2005): 306-316.

relevant to a given situation? In short, *how does an agent determine relevance?* (Megill, and Cogburn, 308)

The frame problem, as Dennett's imaginary robots show, concerns how machine intelligences can be taught to determine the *relevant* consequences of a set of given actions in a dynamic, adaptive way.

Comparisons have been drawn between the human mind and "thinking machines" ever since the first computers were dreamed up. A problem common to a computational theory of the mind has been the presence of emotion and instinctual desires in humans and other animals, which computers obviously seem to lack. Human reasoning, then, appeared to be ineffectual compared to our digital counterparts, which plugged away at problems systematically until a conclusion could be calculated.

Megill and Cogburn suggest that Damasio's somatic marker theory presents an explanation for how human beings avoid the frame problem. A somatic marker is a neurophysiological reaction in an individual, a visceral experience that is triggered by certain stimuli. This response becomes associated with a specific mental representation. These learned responses make people develop personal feelings about certain things, which help them filter through the staggering list of possible choices at any given moment.

When a human is faced with a rather large and unmanageable list, the emotions play a central role in making the list smaller and more manageable. Negative emotional qualia may eliminate some options from the list, for example, while positive emotional qualia may bookmark other options as desirable..." (Megill, and Cogburn 312).

After emotions have filtered out extraneous inferences and brought in especially relevant inferences, the agent is able to exercise rational deliberation. When the emotional equipment in one's brain is damaged, he or she will likely suffer from the frame problem – they simply won't know where to start as they are overwhelmed with choices with no way of filtering out the most relevant inferences.

In fact, this is precisely what Damasio discovered in his neurological work with people who suffered tissue damage in the emotional areas of the brain. Elliot, one of Damasio's patients described in his book, was a successful, functioning person until a brain tumor in his frontal lobe damaged the brain tissue and had to be removed. The consequences of his operation seemed innocuous at first - Elliot's memories and knowledge-base were intact. In time, however, it became clear that his brain damage completely undermined his decision-making ability. In a psychological test, they showed Elliot and others a set of images depicting horrible disasters,

...buildings collapsing in earthquakes, houses burning, people injured in gory accidents or about to drown in floods. As we debriefed Elliot from one of many sessions of viewing these images, he told me without equivocation that his own feelings has changed from before his illness. He could sense how topics that once had evoked a strong emotion no longer caused any reaction, positive or negative. (Damasio, 45)

Elliot was fired again and again from jobs he tried to hold. He divorced and remarried several times after his illness, and his altered behavior drove away friends and family. "Intriguingly, Damasio was led to link Elliot's inability to make decisions and effectively cope with his

environment with this loss of emotional qualia” (Megill, and Cogburn, 311). Without his emotional faculties, his practical reasoning had no emotional filter. His brain was no longer able to connect somatic markers to case-by-case decision-making. After his emotions were “shut off,” Elliot manifested the same irrationality Dennett’s robots displayed when suffering from the frame problem.

Armed with Damasio’s discoveries, we can begin to make sense of the role emotions play in practical reasoning. Emotions are a necessary neurological component of our *practical* reasoning, as opposed to formal or *theoretical* reason. In practical reasoning, an agent deliberates about what to do by considering itself and its situation. Theoretical reasoning, on the other hand, is concerned with finding explanations for events that have already taken place or making predictions about events that could happen in the future. Perhaps most importantly, theoretical reasoning usually considers matters of impersonal fact. Both the natural sciences and the social sciences are based almost entirely on this kind of impersonal theoretical reasoning. In the same way, finding personal answers to normative questions involves practical reasoning – “what should I do?” is the paradigmatic question of practical reasoning. It makes sense, then, that emotions inform matters of practical reason far more than they influence theoretical reasoning. Somatic markers come into play when a complicated decision needs to be addressed quickly. With facts to check and systematic procedures to follow, matters of theoretical reasoning like science are rarely require split-second assessments. When deciding whether that shadow on the ground is a stick or a snake, a few seconds of thoughtful consideration can be deadly. Practical moral reasoning needs emotional triggers which are sometimes absent or overlooked in dry, theoretical moral codifications. These triggers are

usually learned by living in the world, but didactic art like *Bioshock* can help audiences better understand the complexities of this element of human nature by presenting an experience designed to evoke and explore these concepts. The game's 'first-personal' rhetoric, i.e. the gaming experience, allows players to better understand how emotional reasoning allows for good moral practical reasoning.

Chapter Three – Persuasion through Poetry

In “The Rhetoric of Emotion, with a Note on What Makes Great Literature Great,” Averill argues that art and literature (and other rhetoric) appeal to the emotions and the intellect simultaneously, evoking both the intellectual creativity and emotional creativity.

The phrase “emotional creativity” might seem like an oxymoron.

Consider the following two propositions, both of which are commonly held. First, creativity is a predominantly human (late evolutionary) development, among the highest of the “higher” thought processes. Second, emotions are biologically primitive responses, remnants of our biological past. If these two propositions were correct, emotions and creativity would be distinct – even incompatible – phenomena... Actually, a good deal of evidence suggests that emotional creativity is not only possible, but ubiquitous... (Averill, 8)

Failure to recognize the creative aspects of emotional experience stems from deeply held cultural norms, dating back to that prejudice in ancient Greece which contrasts emotions unflatteringly with reason, “the presumed hallmark of humankind” (Averill, 8). If we follow Damasio, we find that intuitive emotive valuations provide a filter for possible solutions to complex decisions. And, I will argue later, it is through those valuations that rhetoric can subvert otherwise rational deliberations.

Rhetoric often aims to sway people through their feelings, but rhetoric and emotion share several important features in common – “namely, both are persuasive acts and both are occasioned by similar conditions.” Averill thinks emoting is a “persuasive act” because feeling

an emotion is meant to persuade the person experiencing the emotion. Averill notes that rhetoric as a persuasive act is “a means of approaching truth in situations where certainty is not possible, and yet where decision or action is called for” (Averill, 13). Rhetoric steps in when logic and evidence are not conclusive by themselves. If there were no grounds for dispute (that is, if some combination of logic and evidence were conclusive for such a situation) the cognitive deliberation would be resolved immediately. Damasio’s patients with damaged brain tissue, then, would not suffer from the frame problem as they do. Both rhetoric and emotions serve to persuade the intellect towards one decision or another when reason alone does not suffice. In addition, emotions are consulted when an agent is under certain conditions, the same conditions which call for rhetorical persuasion, namely when knowledge is incomplete and goals conflict

Averill posits a third similarity shared by both rhetoric and emotion – they both aim at what is worth doing or preserving. They are “inextricably linked to values.” This is related to Damasio’s somatic marker theory in that they both reject a strictly “hard-wired” view of emotions. Instead, Averill’s understanding of emotions mirrors Damasio’s – emotions are strong individualized states. Biology introduces fundamental emotional states through instinct; consider, for example, a baby crying for food. However, personal experience shapes those basic emotions into the diverse array of emotion-types we categorize generally and unspecifically. “...emotions are not free to vary without constraint. The general form of our emotions is contoured by biological predispositions (phylogenesis), fashioned by beliefs and values of society (sociogenesis), and further molded by individual experiences (ontogenesis).” Averill sees these contextual layers as “reinforcing one another, thus lending an emotional episode an

unambiguous meaning. However, when emotional responses are expressed out of context, they are notoriously subject to misunderstanding” (Averill, 18-22). In part, it is these misunderstandings that perpetuate the view of emotions as evolutionary baggage and rhetoric, as Ricœur puts it, “an erratic and futile discipline.” It is true that rhetoric is usually of more use in practice than in forming theory. Averill notes that, while “theory deals with abstractions, with universals... rhetoric, by contrast, focuses on concrete human actions within particular contexts. In this respect, rhetoric has less in common with theory than with poetry” (Averill, 18).

It is through poetry and the other arts that rhetoric enjoys its arguably greatest successes. Faulkner, Twain, Virgil, Tolstoy, Dickens... when Averill asks “What makes Great Literature Great,” he is thinking of these masterful writers and their ilk, all of whom appeal to the emotions of their readers through their narratives and the poetry of their words. As Averill argues, emotions are not ‘hard-wired,’ but are pliable and can be shaped and reshaped through the particular context of emotional occurrences and, of course, through persuasive rhetoric that appeals to those emotions, as great works of literature do.

Literature – and I am counting rhetoric as a form of literature – can simulate vicissitudes of an emotion on the human brain, much like a computer program can simulate the course of an approaching storm on a computer. To the extent that that is true, we have much to learn about the emotions from a study of literature, including rhetoric. But the reverse is also true, namely, our understanding of literature can profit from the study of emotion. (Averill, 9)

It is worth noting that Averill here appeals to a computational picture of the human mind, just as Damasio, Megill and Cogburn do. Indeed, the correlations between these various fields and disciplines offer strong support for the idea that the human mind is (or is like) a powerful computational system of concepts, memories, and inferences, selected for in nature to provide the human animal with the highly-developed dynamic adaptive richness that distinguishes humankind from the other members of the animal kingdom. Again, according to Averill,

Society provides us with a set of beliefs and rules that, together with biological predispositions ('our untamed animal heritage'), help constitute the emotional syndromes recognized in ordinary language (e. g., anger, fear, love, and grief). These syndromes are part of the culture into which we are born. During socialization, an individual acquires (initializes) the relevant beliefs and rules to form emotional schemas-cognitive structures that help shape the feelings and behavior of the emoter, emotee, and any third-party witnesses to the emotion. (Averill, 23)

The picture Averill presents here is consistent with Damasio's somatic marker theory, as well as Megill and Cogburn's article on Damasio's book and the frame problem. When emotions strike, they do not simply run through prebuilt procedures, hard-wired into our DNA. Rather, a good deal of improvisation occurs. The goals of the emoter and emotee change from case to case, and the context in which the interaction occurs informs the particulars of the emotional sensation being triggered. However, "the results of such [emotional] improvisations may feed back to alter the beliefs and rules that help constitute the emotional syndromes." These

changes accumulate slowly. They are diffused throughout a society; this is one of the ways that emotions “undergo historical change and diverge across cultures” (Averill, 23). This feedback, where the triggered emotional belief alters itself or other, related emotional beliefs, is where rhetoric finds the proverbial chink in the armor.

If Damasio’s theory is correct, emotion plays a crucial role in practical reasoning by filtering out an incredible number of thoughts and inferences, bringing the most relevant options to the surface for our practical reasoning to focus on. If Megill and Cogburn are correct those options, ranked in importance by somatic markers, help humans avoid the frame problem that plagues the development of truly adaptive artificial intelligence. And, if Averill is correct, emotion is not strictly hard-wired, but shaped by other emotional associations. Whether it is oratory, visual, or narrative in nature, rhetoric often persuades successfully because it affects reason indirectly, by appealing to the emotions that set the stage for rational consideration. That is, successful rhetoric can alter a person’s emotional filter, upon which his faculty of practical reasoning relies. This, I think, is how advertising works even on informed, ad-aware people – the television ad for McDonald’s influences viewers’ sensation of satisfying hunger, so even when they dismiss the ad’s affect on their eating habits, their emotional filter begins to associate McDonald’s hamburgers with the sensation of satisfying a hunger. Understanding the relationships found in this triangle of influence that exists between human emotion, reason, and rhetoric can help us better understand all three as aspects of value-forming rational deliberation. Averill is quite aware of the relation between storytelling, rhetoric, and emotional brain states.

Oatley suggests that literature – and I am counting rhetoric as a form of literature – can simulate vicissitudes of an emotion on the human brain, much like a computer program can simulate the course of an approaching storm on a computer. To the extent that that is true, we have much to learn about the emotions from a study of literature, including rhetoric. But the reverse is also true, namely, our understanding of literature can profit from the study of emotion. (Averill, 9)

Oatley, a professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto, echoes Damasio's somatic marker theory, claiming that "emotions are occasioned by situations that call for action when knowledge is incomplete or goals conflict" (Averill, 13). It is in this way that the computational theory of the human mind, combined with Damasio's somatic marker theory, offers an explanation for rhetoric's ubiquitous success in the information age and, in part, what it is that makes great literature great.

This shows, I think, how rhetoric (of some kind) plays a critical role in even the most serious artworks. Great works of music, film, literature – they are all designed to express, and there are good-making techniques that facilitate successful communication to the audience. Often, the rules of the rhetoric of different media overlap. For example, videogame makers borrow liberally from the visual rhetoric of film by utilizing familiar shots and editing techniques for in-game cinematics. Since all media is designed to express something to a *human* audience, the good-making rules of expression for one medium will often overlap with the rules of others. Not only that, but today's artists and audiences are more sophisticated (in a technical sense), having been immersed in various media from a young age. This means mass artworks today

often combine the rhetoric of two or more media. Consider how modern filmmaking includes the rhetoric of music in the form of the soundtrack, the rhetoric of theatre in the acting and writing, and the rhetoric of advertising for the movie's release, on top of the visual rhetoric of directing and camerawork developed by earlier filmmakers specifically for the medium of film. This is part of the reason it takes so much money and so many professionals to make a big-budget film – there's simply a great amount of rhetoric that must be made for a full-blown Hollywood feature.

Chapter Four – The Rhetoric of Advertising, Narrative, and Gameplay

Bioshock is particularly interesting because the developers utilized rhetoric of all kinds to tell the game's story which, ultimately, is about rhetoric, emotions, and freewill. The game leverages everything from the rhetoric of film, the rhetoric of advertising, and the procedural rhetoric of the systems and processes the game computes while the player interacts with the digital environment. These rhetorical devices are used to communicate the game's story and themes, but they are also used to facilitate gameplay. For example, the neon advertisements and posters not only convey narrative elements by passively showing the player what Rapture was like before its devastating civil war, but they are also used to grab the player's attention and show him where to go. I address this feature in my analysis of the game proper, but here I must describe how an artist or creative professional actually *works* with these different types of rhetoric? More specifically, how does an artist make use of the *features* of a particular mode of expression?

Carroll provides a great example of what we mean when we talk about the "rhetoric of film," as distinct from the rhetoric of music or the procedural rhetoric of computer programs. Point-of-view editing is an extremely prevalent editing technique in television and movies to communicate the emotional state of a character through the use of two types of shots – the point/glace shot of the actress emoting while she looks at an object or character off-screen, followed by a point/object shot of the object which brought on her emotional state. Sometimes the object is actually present, and sometimes the character is merely remembering the object in a brief, internal flashback.

Through the point-of-view schema, the author can narrate by showing us what a character is looking at and, thereby, indicate what is on her mind, as well as conveying with some precision what the character feels about whatever it is that she is seeing... the point/glance shot in the point-of-view figure is able to convey information to mass audiences about the emotional states of characters. An obvious hypothesis here is that it is likely that the point-of-view structure is able to do this by activating the spectator's innate capacities to recognize the gross category into which a character's facial expression falls. In short, the point/glance shot is a device that is predicated upon engaging natural recognitional capacities in such a way that mass audiences are able to identify the global emotional state of the relevant character in the point/glance shot.

(Carroll, 284-285)

Point-of-view editing was developed for film, while that technology was still young and people were beginning to experiment with the particulars of that new form of expression. Early filmmakers had to discover what new things film could do that older forms of visual rhetoric couldn't do, or couldn't do very well. It is interesting that point-of-view "editing" has been adapted to graphic novels, where a panel depicts a point/glance "shot" and the next panel contains the point/object "shot." and many videogames use a similar technique to communicate to the player his next goal or destination. A common staple in videogame design involves pausing the action on-screen when the player enters a new area while the "camera" flies through the level, pausing along the way in a series of point/object shots of the various

elements the player will have to interact with in order to proceed: locked doors, hidden keys, particularly difficult or interesting new types of enemies, et cetera.

What this shows, among other things, is that visual rhetoric had to be developed over time by artists and authors. At no point was visual rhetoric “invented” so much as people learned what methods of visual communication succeed and which do not. Indeed, the experimenters were not so much breaking new ground as they were discovering what sorts of pattern recognition capacities humans have. Carroll writes,

...the point-of-view structure functions because of the way in which the point/glance shot engages our constitutional make-up in terms of activating our cross-culturally endowed capacity to recognize at least certain gross categories of emotions... the assimilation of the point/object shot in mass artworks also depends on the audience’s generic emotional capacities... the existence of nearly universal emotions and of recognitional capacities that can track them makes point-of-view editing... possible. (Carroll, 188)

This is why point-of-view editing works in videogames much the same way it works in television and film – the human beings in the audience are constituted in a certain way such that point-of-view editing (correctly done) succeeds in tapping into our biological and psychological emotional make-up. It “speaks” to the human creature at a very basic level (hence, the mass appeal), and this is precisely what worried Plato about emotionally-charged art in the *Republic*. In Damasio’s terms, instrumental reasoning is possible because Nature endowed us with our emotional “filters” to circumvent the frame problem, allowing reason to step in and do its job

even in the face of overwhelming options. It is this neurological component that visual rhetorical techniques (like point-of-view editing) tap into.

The reason these communication techniques succeed regularly is that they speak to the human creature at a very basic level (hence, the appeal of mass art), and this is precisely what worried Plato about emotionally-charged art in the *Republic*.

...Plato and latter-day Platonists have tried to explain the function of the emotions with respect to drama and mass art in terms of purely economic necessity. The audience understands little, Plato and his followers contend, so that the only way in which to engage it is through the emotions, understood as irrational forces. I, of course, reject this account in so far as I think the emotions are connected to cognition. Indeed, addressing the emotions may in fact in some (even many) cases provide an opportunity for understanding. Thus the elicitation of emotional responses from audiences is not an alternative to cognition and understanding. (Carroll, 269)

Damasio's view of instrumental reasoning matches Carroll's claim that emotions are connected to cognition. Human reasoning is possible *because* Nature endowed us with our emotional "filters" to circumvent the frame problem, allowing reason to step in and do its job even in the face of overwhelming options. Our makeup is far from perfect – examples of excited emotions leading to human error are everywhere – but that does not necessarily mean evoking emotions is bad or inappropriate. It only means emotions are complicated – a common theme in art.

The game also makes great use of the rhetoric of advertising, which is a contentious topic even compared to other forms of rhetoric. Advertisements are some of the oldest forms of rhetoric, and remain one of the most prevalent. Even before mass media, businesses relied on advertisements to inform the public on what goods or services they offer, their prices, and their means of distribution. Often, they would include bits of useful information alluding to why buyers prefer (ought to prefer) one store over its competitors. Even early advertising rhetoric used tried-and-true rhetorical strategies. “An ancient Egyptian version of poster advertising made a religious appeal for ‘Ptolemy as the true Son of the Sun, the Father of the Moon, and the Keeper of the Happiness of Men’” (Bogost, 147). But today, there is such a heavy saturation of advertisements, and the advertisements are so much more complex and sophisticated, that society forms what Raymond Williams calls “an institutionalized system of commercial information and persuasion.” Indeed, many people today would see the ancient Egyptian advertisement and scoff at the blatant emotional appeal to cultural and religious identity. Having lived in a world saturated by an enormous volume of advertising rhetoric, customers today are much more savvy to simple rhetoric like the poster, or the objectivist propaganda that decorates the walls of Ryan’s underwater city. Bogost writes,

There is barely a space in our culture not already carrying commercial messages. Look anywhere; in schools there is Channel One; in movies there is product placement; ads are in urinals, played on telephone hold, in alphanumeric displays in taxis, sent unannounced to fax machines, inside catalogs, on the video in front of the Stairmaster at the gym, on T-

shirts, at the doctor's office, on grocery carts, on parking meters, on tees at golf holes, on inner-city basketball backboards, piped in along with Muzak... ad nauseam (and yes, even on airline vomit bags). (Bogost, 147)

This media-saturated social environment has not only made consumers rhetoric-savvy, it has also compelled advertisers to evolve in sophistication. James B. Twitchell has called this modern practice "rent[ing] our concentration to other companies' sponsors." With mass media came advertisements aimed at mass consumers. National print and radio, and especially television, enabled advertisers to communicate to nearly every potential consumer all at once. As marketing guru Seth Godin puts it, "Television was a miracle. It enabled companies with money to effortlessly create more money." These changes developed alongside the integration of the social sciences, and advertising shifted from "a minimalist, rationalistic strategy to a spectacular, emotional one" (Bogost, 149).

Advertisers have become so good at the rhetoric of their craft that even moralistic responses to capitalism often talk of commercial consumption as if it were always a meaningful cultural practice – consider the idea of voting with your dollar, taking personal pride in the brands you buy, or becoming a 'fan' of a company on Facebook. "...advertising has become a self-reflexive practice, with each consumer decision signifying another advertisement, not an actual lifestyle, social, political, or personal choice. Baurillard calls this a simulation of freedom." Social historian Claude S. Fischer observes that "even Americans who critique mainstream culture do so through their own consumption. Eating organic foods, wearing handmade clothing, giving only wooden toys as gifts, and riding bicycles to work amounts to

self-labeling.” Advertisers have come to rely on this mechanism of self-expression, even though it is dubious to think of purchasing products as being automatically meaningful (Bogost, 148).

Rhetorical techniques work by tapping into the human neurological and emotional makeup; Averill argues that great artists are the ones who take advantage of this immediate emotional communication, not to merely get a rise out of the audience, which is both easy to do and lacking in style. As Aristotle says, appropriate emotion is all about feeling the right emotion at the right time and with the right intensity, and a skilled storyteller knows how to leverage the desired emotional responses from the audience at the appropriate parts of the tale, engaging them and lead them through the experience the artist has designed. It is at this task that *Bioshock* succeeds so well.

Before detailing and analyzing the philosophically rich content in *Bioshock*, it will serve at this point to address the elephant in the room – is it even worth our time to give a videogame this kind of thorough, but charitable, academic analysis? In “*Bioshock* and the Art of Rapture,” Grant Tavinor argues that “*Bioshock* is a videogame, and it is also clearly art; but it is not as if the game is art *despite* its being a videogame, that the art is a mere gloss or veneer.” Rather, *Bioshock’s* “nature as a game allows it to be art of a distinctive kind” (Tavinor, 92). Indeed, *Bioshock* is of interest to us precisely because it takes advantage of its nature as a piece of interactive fiction wherein the player-audience explores and interacts with a virtual world.

The game’s clever manipulation of narrative rhetoric, visual rhetoric (the banners and propaganda lauding the objectivist virtues of the society that is now crumbling around the player), and procedural rhetoric allows *Bioshock* to comment on the nature of social and political persuasion, and the threat unethical use of these forces represents to autonomy.

“These themes of freewill and morality take on an extraordinary richness,” writes Tavinor. “*Bioshock* deliberately builds and reflects on its gaming nature to produce compelling and original art” (Tavinor, 93). The development team at Irrational Games under Ken Levine that designed, wrote, and programmed the videogame made excellent use of rhetoric of all types, borrowing traditional techniques from film, literature, and oral rhetoric. This is significant because *Bioshock* is ultimately *about* rhetoric, and the developers make clever use of procedural rhetoric (i.e. the gameplay) to comment on the other, more traditional forms of rhetoric found among the ruins of Rapture.

Propositionalists claim that artworks can be a source of information about the world, either strongly as a source of knowledge or weakly a source of beliefs. In the analysis of an artwork like *Bioshock*, there is a danger to engage in *undue* propositionalism – that is, we should be careful not to project a bunch of themes and ideas that we think we see in the game, but are really only projecting onto the artwork. It is said that art is a mirror in this way, because it is often very easy for the audience to unwittingly project their own ideas and feelings onto the artwork, mistakenly believing the artwork was inherently “about” those things. Again, these issues recall Plato’s worries about art in the *Republic*. That being said, even Plato would agree that it is wrong to dismiss all art commentary simply because there is a danger of misinterpretation – he allowed the lute into the city, after all. In this analysis of *Bioshock*, I will make every effort to back up my claims with evidence from interviews with lead designer Ken Levine – *Bioshock* was his project from the very beginning – and from the game itself. The propositionalist maintains that works like novels often implicitly suggest, imply, entail, or presuppose interesting and informative generalizations and that as a result, they can be

educative. Thus, artists can educate audiences in the same way natural scientists do – by providing us with informative generalizations. (Carroll, 305)

The difference between a textbook and a novel is that, while the former educates readers on the physical makeup of the world through objective description, the latter educates readers on general human affairs through more emotional description. “Art,” Carroll argues, “operates at the level of persons” and so the relevant generalizations presented in artworks are often moral in nature, which scientific texts almost never are. Audiences derive non-trivial moral information by picking up on the emotional cues the artist weaves into his creative design and, when the artist is talented, those emotional punch-lines inform the audience how to feel about the things they see, either about the general subject of the story or in the particular context of the narrative they are following. Representations of human affairs are often used as instruments of moral learning – think of Aesop’s fables or a powerful film like *Schindler’s List*. They contain moral propositions which audiences acquire in the course of consuming the artwork. Like scientific texts, they are “cogitatively valuable because of the information they convey” (Carroll, 306).

There is not much of a fiction at all to chess, because stripping away its apparent fictional content — that the game involves queens, kings, and pawns—would leave intact a formal system apt to encode a game of chess. But in *Bioshock*, and other recent videogames of a fictively rich kind, the game is represented in terms of a fictional world. The play areas in *Bioshock* are the corridors and hallways of Rapture. The moves that the player makes involve battling genetically spliced mutants with a wrench,

shotgun and other weapons. The objective is to defeat Andrew Ryan and escape Rapture. The gameplay involves competition against a number of computer controlled opponents. If these fictive elements were stripped away from *Bioshock*, there simply would not be a game. (Tavinor, 93)

Bioshock is both a thought-provoking story about the human desire for control, and a game of ethically-charged situations designed to evoke emotional responses in its players. But *Bioshock* is worth our time because of the way it blends narrative rhetoric and techniques borrowed from film with procedural rhetoric – using the game mechanics as another form of creative expression. Thus, videogames like *Bioshock* can be more than entertainment – like great works of literature and film, they can teach us important truths through fiction.

Chapter Five – A Propositional Analysis of *Bioshock*

Bioshock opens with simple white letters on a black screen, giving us the setting – “1960 Mid-Atlantic.” Though this is a cutscene, and the player has no ability to input commands or otherwise interrupt the scene, we are already seeing through the eyes of our in-game character – the back of a seat on an airplane fills our view. In our hand is a lit cigarette, reaffirming the setting. Our character speaks in voice over, another rhetorical technique borrowed from film. “They told me... ‘Son, you’re special.’” Our character produces an old black-and-white photo of him with his arms around an older couple that are presumably his parents. “You were born to do great things.” Now our character produces a present, still bound in wrapping paper. The tag reads “To Jack – with love, Mom and Dad.” Especially perceptive players may notice that the writing on the tag continues, “Would you kindly...” but the rest of the message is cut off in the frame. Our character, Jack, concludes his voice over, “They were right.” The plane suddenly buckles. The scene fades to black but the sound continues; we hear the panicked cries of the passengers and the plane crashing into the ocean. The *Bioshock* logo fades into view, water running off of it as though it had been submerged and had just been pulled out of the water.

At this point, the player gains control of Jack, swimming in the waters near the downed plane. We direct him towards a nearby lighthouse – the only thing in sight besides the tail of the sinking plane. This builds up a great deal of dramatic tension, as a lighthouse in the middle of the Atlantic is mysterious, to say the least. We soon discover that Jack has found a secret entrance to an underwater city – Rapture. With nowhere else to go, the player rides a bathysphere down to the art deco metropolis. The bathysphere projects a black and white film on the wall as we sink deeper and deeper. This orientation film was clearly designed as a

welcome to new denizens of Rapture. The city's creator, a successful business magnate named Andrew Ryan, explains how Rapture came to be.

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."

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, as well. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

When the bathysphere opens, Jack finds Rapture a decaying dystopia filled with Splicers – the murderous former citizens of the city who now attack on sight, having been driven mad by the plasmid products that meddle with consumers' DNA, allowing them to control fire or move distant objects with telekinesis. The advertisements for these plasmids still cover the walls of Rapture. They are drawn with a retro, 1950s-style – though the products they advertise are nothing less than commercially available superpowers, they bear straightforward slogans ("Evolution in a Bottle! By Ryan Industries") and perfectly match the art deco architecture of the city. An ad for a teleportation plasmid reads "Get there in a hurry!" with a businessman teleporting to work, briefcase in hand. Various ads for the Incinerate plasmid read, "Fire at your Fingertips! Light up foes to a thousand degrees! Warning, fire spreads – By Ryan Industries" and

“Incineration! When it absolutely positively has to erupt in flames, don't wait – Incinerate! – By Ryan Industries.” It is significant to note here how the game uses the rhetoric of advertising to show the player where to get supplies. There are vending machines with silly names like “The Circus of Values” and even “Ammo Bandito” vending machines that sell various types of ammunition.

These vending machines and advertisements serve two rhetorical purposes. Firstly, there is a certain irony in that fact that, even with Rapture in anarchy, crumbling and flooding, the advertisements are still successful! The player learns quickly to seek out the tale-tell lights and musical jingles that reveal the location of a nearby vending machine or, even better, a new plasmid. This ultimately contributes to the game’s commentary on the nature of rhetoric. Secondly, the developers often use these environmental feature to “nudge” the player in the right direction, keeping the player engaged in the game.

An initial level in *Bioshock* is illustrative of how nudges are used to direct gameplay. Shortly after exiting the bathysphere, I emerged into a darkened room and immediately heard the oddly disquieting sound of a child’s voice. Seeing the path before me blocked by a door with a jammed control, I followed a set of stairs to an atrium area, passing a large colorful wall mural advertising something called “plasmids.” In a strange dispensing machine sat a glowing vial of unknown nature. Unthinking, I grasped the vial, and very suddenly, and disturbingly, was introduced to the genetic tonics that would reshape my body, and which would become a key part of my abilities in the game-world. After the fact, reflecting on

this level—which is a *tutorial* on the nature and functioning of plasmids—
I was amazed at how unconsciously I performed this sequence of
behaviors; and then even more amazed when I realized that one of the
nudges was an enormous and beautifully designed neon sign of a hand
literally pointing the way forward up the stairs! It is a mark of the
Bioshock's confidence that it can so consciously forefront its artifice,
knowing that it will be effective. (Tavinor, 101)

This sort of procedural rhetoric uses the virtual environment to communicate to the player his current objectives, which direction he should be moving, and offer insight into the game's narrative as well. These narrative elements range from Ryan's objectivist propaganda which still decorate the grand halls and storefronts in Rapture to audio-diaries, personal voice recordings of various key figures in Rapture's recent history. Through these elements, the game is able to communicate the details of what happened to Rapture in a way that is unique to videogames – or, more generally, unique to digital environments.

The virtual environments players explore in *Bioshock* are littered with Andrew Ryan's objectivist propaganda – banners proclaim “There are no Gods or Kings, only Man” and the mythical power of the “Great Chain of Industry,” Ryan's version of Adam Smith's “invisible hand of the market.” An ironic touch, considering the gameplay consists of fighting for survival in the crumbling, decaying dystopia wherein the player bears witness to the death rattle of Ryan's idealistic experiment. The developers of *Bioshock* took great care to design each environment to influence the player's gaming experience, and exploring the collapsing ruins of the failed utopia is a huge part of the gameplay experience.

To satisfy the desire for freedom on the part of the player, [linear] games often encourage a kind of *pseudo-freedom*: giving the player as much freedom as possible within the determinate framework of the narrative and game, and indeed, striving for an illusion of freedom. To encode their games while providing the illusion that gamers really are choosing their own actions, games often “nudge” their players down gameplay chutes. In behavioral economics, nudges are devices that are used to guide but not strongly coerce decisions so that people can be encouraged to make decisions that are beneficial for themselves and their societies. In videogames, nudges play a similar role, by guiding rather than coercing the player through a game environment, so that their actions in the environment are given the illusion of being their own. (Tavinor, 101)

Bioshock makes great use of this “haunted house” style of game design. The player moves through a linear game environment littered with triggered events that activate when the player crosses a certain threshold or enters the next room. Of course, these triggered events can be anything from a conversation with another character to a sudden Splicer surprise attack. This allows players control over their character while still ensuring that the narrative plays out according to the developers’ design. This illusion of player-choice, despite an ultimately linear path, is another interesting mechanic that the game later uses to muse on the nature of freewill and the power of rhetoric to influence our choices... even when we do not realize it.

The environments are so important to the *Bioshock* experience that the game goes out of its way to make sure the player’s eyes are constantly surveying the immediate environment

for threats and useful provisions like ammo or food (which grants a small healing bonus to the player's health). One clever way the developers accomplish this is by allowing the player's abilities to effect certain parts of the environment. For example, the player is granted a plasmid-powered ability to shoot lightning from his fingertips early in the game. And since Rapture is a decaying city on the ocean floor, flooding is a common environmental hazard. However, if the player shoots electricity at a pool of water, every enemy standing in the pool gets an extra nasty shock, which is usually enough to take out an entire group of splicers with a single well-placed attack. This kind of interactivity with the environment ensures that a smart player is always paying attention to his character's surroundings, and many of the narrative elements in *Bioshock* rely on this in-game awareness. The developers want to make sure the player does not miss Ryan's objectivist propaganda or the story-revealing audiotapes from many characters scattered around Rapture.

Perhaps the most prevalent fictive element in the game are the various audiotapes the player will stumble upon, strewn throughout the undersea metropolis. There are several key figures in the short history of Rapture, and by hearing their stories, the player is able to piece together the history of Rapture's plasmid-powered civil war. Recording these personal audio-diaries must have been all the rage for the denizens of the fashion-conscious city, because nearly all the character development for these influential figures comes from these recordings. The game allows the player to listen to these tapes while playing through the game, and listening to the people of Rapture recount their drama of their struggles against each other and against themselves while picking your way through the crumbling remains of Rapture provides the player with a deep narrative contrast, a "before and after" effect.

After exiting the bathysphere and taking his first steps into Rapture, Jack hears someone speaking to him through a short-range radio. The man speaking to us is an Irishman named “Atlas” (a nod to Ayn Rand’s novel, *Atlas Shrugged*). He explains that he is the leader of a resistance movement in Rapture that hopes to kill Andrew Ryan and free Rapture from his grasp. For much of the game, Atlas tells the player where he needs to go next. He will ask the player to perform the next task to allow Jack to progress through Rapture and the player to progress through the game’s early levels. Atlas gives us our primary objective: he asks, “Would you kindly head to Ryan’s office and kill the son of a bitch?”

Atlas directs us through the Medical Pavilion, where Steinmann, Rapture’s leading plastic surgeon, has gone completely mad, mutilating his “patients” in his quest for a new kind of beauty. Steinmann’s new motto is scrawled across the walls of the Pavillion: “Aesthetics are a moral imperative.” It is here that the player is introduced to *Bioshock*’s poster children – the Big Daddies and the Little Sisters. Early in the game, the player spots a Little Sister with a large syringe in hand, crouched over a splicer’s dead body. Atlas warns the player,

ATLAS: You think that’s a child down there? Don’t be fooled. She’s a Little Sister now. Somebody went and turned a sweet baby girl into a monster. Whatever you thought about right and wrong on the surface, well that don’t count for much down in Rapture. Those Little Sisters, they carry ADAM; the genetic material that keeps the wheels of Rapture turning. Everybody wants it. Everybody needs it. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

ADAM is the substance that makes plasmids possible, and the Little Sisters were designed to “harvest” ADAM from Splicers with their trademark syringes. It is not uncommon for the player

to stumble across a group of Splicers attacking a Little Sister to get *her* ADAM. Luckily for the girls, each Little Sister has a Big Daddy. The Big Daddies are monstrous men in massive, heavily armored diving suits. Each one has been conditioned by plasmids to protect his Little Sister at all costs. Big Daddies wield various weapons, from gigantic drills to high-powered rivet guns. The Little Sisters were created by Dr. Tenenbaum, a genetic scientist living in Rapture who helped originally develop ADAM. She speaks with a heavy German accent. An audiotope found early in the game reveals her origins:

TENENBAUM: I was at German prison camp only of sixteen years old when I realize I have love for science. German doctor, he make experiment. Sometime, he make scientific error. I tell him of this error, and this make him angry. But then he asks, 'how can a child know such a thing?' I tell him, 'Sometimes, I just know.' He screams at me, 'Then why tell me?' 'Well,' I said, 'if you're going to do such things, at least you should do them properly.' (*Bioshock*, 2007)

She now regrets her actions and is attempting to protect the little girls. Indeed, by the time the player arrives in Rapture, Tenenbaum has become something of a motherly figure for the Little Sisters, calling them her “little ones.” Over the course of the game, the player is able to win her allegiance (and help her achieve redemption) by saving the Little Sisters instead of harvesting them for ADAM (*Bioshock* Wiki). The Big Daddies do not attack the player (or the Splicers) until he or his Little Sister are threatened. If the player can defeat a Big Daddy (a challenging goal similar to a traditional “boss fight”) he will be able to take all the ADAM for himself. Travinor explains the procedural rhetoric behind the Little Sisters and their Big Daddy guardians,

Little Sisters comprise an entirely different kind of gameplay obstacle to the more conventional Big Daddies. When the player first needs to deal with a Little Sister [after defeating her Big Daddy], the game instructs:

CHOOSE whether to RESCUE the Little Sister or HARVEST her.

If you harvest her, you get MAXIMUM ADAM to spend on plasmids, but she will NOT SURVIVE the process.

If you rescue her, you get LESS ADAM, but Tenenbaum has promised to make it worth your while. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

Technically, it is not difficult at all to deal with this situation—one merely presses a button and harvests the little girl. And rationally, in terms of playing the game, harvesting the girls is the obvious thing to do, as it allows the player access to more of the ADAM they need to enhance their own fictional abilities and so to make the game easier. Furthermore, Atlas has assured the player that the Little Sisters are not really human at all, but “monsters.” (Tavinor, 97)

This is where the game throws an *ethical* game obstacle at the player: harvesting the Little Sister grants the player more powerful abilities, but the animation of the player forcing the ADAM out of a Little Sister’s glowing eyes while she screams horribly... is unsettling, to say the least. Tavinor describes his experience with this game mechanic,

But when confronted by the choice, I couldn’t bring myself to harvest the Little Sister; in fact, the prospect of doing so made me feel queasy. And so, I saved her, an action that was accompanied by a sudden swelling of

the accompanying music and my own emotions. This response is not peculiar to me—I'm not an overly sensitive gamer—as almost everyone I have spoken to about the game has acknowledged a similar emotional reaction. Hence the nature of the Little Sister as a game-world obstacle draws on our psychological response to the fiction: when their first line of defense has been defeated—the Big Daddies—the Little Sisters use our own emotions to defend themselves. (Tavinor, 98)

This, of course, ties in directly with the game's other commentary on controlling others by manipulating their emotions. In this case, the "rhetoric" is brilliantly simple: most people experience a visceral emotional reaction to seeing little girls harmed... or cared for. In another of Tenebaum's audiotapes, she wonders why they had to be little girls. The answer is obvious to any player paying attention to the various types of rhetoric found in the game – little girls are extremely effective at manipulating people's sentimental emotions of sympathy and care, and it is just like the scientists of Rapture to exploit this response.

Atlas tries to manipulate us into destroying the Little Sisters, asserting that they aren't really human at all, and of course, part of the multilayered irony in *Bioshock* derives from the fact that the Little Sisters are not really human: they are fictions, part of an imaginary game-world with no real existence. In the fictional world of Rapture, the Little Sisters have been genetically designed to manipulate our emotions. But in the real world, they are fictive artifacts—digital representations—designed to elicit our emotions of sympathy and care to provide a gameplay obstacle. (Tavinor, 98)

In this way, the Little Sisters transcend the game experience by playing not only with Jack's emotions, but the player's emotions as well. And the player's response will manifest ingame when the player directs Jack to either harvest a Little Sister or save her. This ethical decision packs extra punch because the player experiences the choice and its consequences exactly as Jack does.

Our responses to *Bioshock*... show that we can have emotions that depend on our existing in the same world as a fictional character, because we do so through a player-character proxy. The Big Daddies provide a vivid case of how we can become fictionally threatened and fearful for ourselves, and the Little Sisters illustrate the possibility of our fictional sympathy and care. (Tavinor, 99)

In an interview with GameSpot, a videogame news site, *Bioshock* lead designer and writer Ken Levine offers an anecdote about the surprising ethical force of the Little Sister game mechanic.

Levine: My favorite story about people saving and harvesting [the Little Sisters] is when a journalist told me he started harvesting and his fiancé saw him do it, and he slept on the couch for two days. She found it awful. Certainly I think that people who encounter the game think about it not just as [minimum and maximum benefit]... but they think about it in terms of what am I as a character or a person, a saver or a harvester. And I think you see a fair amount of consistency. I heard a lot on threads [from gamers on the Internet] about this... I think it's something that was pretty experimental for us in this game, and something we definitely want to explore further, and take to a deeper level. But my favorite notion – the thing I'm most happy about – is that people think about it generally outside of [minimum and maximum benefit], and from the actual moral choice aspect of it. (GameSpot, 2008)

There is another gameplay mechanic that eventually informs the narrative – “Vita Chambers” are glass tubes built throughout Rapture. With the advent of ADAM, these chambers were designed to rebuild a person from disparate particles based on a genetic recording, allowing the citizens of Rapture to cheat death. However, during Rapture’s civil war Ryan reprogrammed the chambers to only resurrect him – bringing the insane splicers back from the dead would only prolong the chaos indefinitely. Atlas explains that the only way to kill

Ryan for good is to force your way into Ryan Industries Tower and kill Ryan in his office.

Essentially, the Vita Chambers allow the player to jump back into the game in case Jack is killed by Splicers or a Big Daddy. This is one of the most venerable devices in procedural rhetoric – the “respawn point.” Players are punished for dying by losing some of the progress they made, without forcing them to start the game over from the very beginning. That the Vita Chambers seem to work on Jack is something of a mystery, one that is explained in a crucial cutscene later in the game.

In the hours of gameplay leading up to a face-to-face confrontation with Ryan, the player learns more about the man and his city through his audiotapes. At the same time, these tapes offer the player insight into Ryan’s ideology and his motivation for building Rapture.

RYAN: What is the difference between a man and a parasite? A man builds. A parasite asks ‘Where is my share?’ A man creates. A parasite says, ‘What will the neighbors think?’ A man invents. A parasite says, ‘Watch out, or you might tread on the toes of God...’ (*Bioshock*, 2007)

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.

(*Bioshock*, 2007)

Ryan’s plans for his undersea utopia seemed to be going well, until a man named Frank Fontaine appeared on the scene.

RYAN: This Fontaine fellow is somebody to watch. Once, he was just a menace, to be convicted and hung. But he always manages to be where the evidence isn't. He's the most dangerous type of hoodlum... the kind with vision. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

Of course, the irony here is that the same could be said of Ryan. Fontaine was a ruthless businessman... and a thug. Fontaine's name is a reference to yet another of Ayn Rand's books, *The Fountainhead*, and he quickly becomes a thorn in Ryan's side, as his businesses were in open competition with Ryan's. The straw that broke the camel's back was the discovery of a strange species of sea slug they named ADAM. Scientists, lead by Tenenbaum, quickly harnessed the seemingly magical powers of ADAM to manufacture plasmids to sell to the citizens of Rapture.

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. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

Ryan's patience lasted only long enough for Fontaine to monopolize the plasmid market. With his newfound wealth, Fontaine began pushing aggressively to buy out Ryan Industries. To make matters worse, the citizens of Rapture began to show signs of mutation and madness. Ryan refused to outlaw the plasmids, as the free market was the cornerstone of the ideology upon which Rapture was founded. When Ryan discovered smugglers bringing in bibles, he felt he had to criminalize them to avoid Christian ("parasite") values of charity and kindness from

contaminating his capitalist experiment. Eventually, fighting broke out in the shopping centers and theatres of Rapture, and Ryan had to begrudgingly install a degree of martial law.

RYAN: The death penalty in Rapture! Council's in an uproar. Riots in the streets, they say! But this is the time for leadership. Action must be taken against the smugglers. Any contact with the surface exposes Rapture to the very Parasites we fled from. A few stretched necks are a small price to pay for our ideals. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

Someone has to clean the toilets in Rapture, and the incredibly unbalanced distribution of wealth lead to widespread unrest. Atlas appeared seemingly out of nowhere, as the leader of an organized revolution. When Ryan began hanging criminals, full-scale riots broke out all over the city. It was at this time that Ryan Industries began experimenting with new ways to maintain order in Rapture.

RYAN: Doctor Suchong, frankly, I'm shocked by your proposal. If we were to modify the structure of our commercial plasmid line as you propose, to have them make the user vulnerable to mental suggestion through pheromones, would we not be able to effectively control the actions of the citizens of Rapture?

Free will is the cornerstone of this city. The thought of sacrificing it is abhorrent. However... we are indeed in a time of war. If Atlas and his bandits have their way, will they not turn us into slaves? And what will become of free will then? Desperate times call for desperate measures. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

One of Ryan's most recent audiotapes, recorded days before Jack's plane crashes, reveals that he finally begins to have doubts.

RYAN: Could I have made mistakes? One does not build cities if one is guided by doubt. But can one govern in absolute certainty? I know that my beliefs have elevated me, just as I know that the things I have rejected would have destroyed me. But the city... it is collapsing before my... have I become so convinced by my own beliefs that I have stopped seeing the truth? Perhaps. But Atlas is out there, and he aims to destroy me, and destroy my city. To question is to surrender. I will not question.

(Bioshock, 2007)

Finally, after several hours of tense exploration and survival techniques (buying food from vending machines to restore lost health, for example) the player leads Jack into Ryan's Tower. Ryan speaks to the player through his Tower's PA system, and he takes a surprisingly tender tone.

RYAN: So far away from your family, from your friends, from everything you ever loved. But, for some reason you like it here. You feel something you can't quite put your finger on. Think about it for a second and maybe the word will come to you: nostalgia. Even in the book of lies, sometimes you find truth. There is indeed a season for all things. And now that I see you flesh-to-flesh and blood-to-blood, I know I cannot raise my hand against you. But know this: you are my greatest disappointment.

Come now, my child. There is one final thing to discuss. *(Bioshock, 2007)*

The player leads Jack through the Tower until he stumbles upon a strange room. The wall is covered in photographs... including some pictures of Jack and his parents! The words “Would you kindly” are scrawled across the wall of photographs. despite the disturbing room, there is little for Jack to do except continue to Ryan’s office. The confrontation with Andrew Ryan is the key revelatory scene for the game’s narrative, and it is in this cutscene that *Bioshock* drives home its commentary on controlling the acts and thoughts of others through emotionally stirring rhetoric.

RYAN: The assassin has overcome my final defense, and now he's come to murder me. In the end what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No, a man chooses, a slave obeys. You think you have memories. The farm, your family, an airplane, a crash, and then this place. Was there really a family? Did that plane crash or was it hijacked, forced down, forced down by something less than a man? Something bred to sleepwalk through life, until they're activated by a simple phrase spoken by their kindly master? Was a man sent to kill? Or a slave? A man chooses, a slave obeys. Come here, stop, would you kindly? ‘Would you kindly...’ a powerful phrase, a familiar phrase. Sit, would you kindly? Stand, would you kindly? Run, stop, turn! A man chooses, a slave obeys. Kill! A MAN! CHOOSES! A slave, obeys. OBEY! (*Bioshock*, 2007)

Using the conditioning phrase, Ryan chooses to end his life on his own terms, handing Jack a golf club and speaking the order to kill him.

Jack, now revealed to be Ryan's son, cannot resist his genetic conditioning and must follow all of Ryan's commands. "...the player is yanked out of control of their character in a self-referential way: discovering the player-character's true nature, Ryan is able to take control by uttering the trigger phrase" (Tavinor, 103). This explains why Fontaine needed Jack to get to Ryan – Jack's genetic code matches Ryan's well enough to allow him to sneak past Ryan's defenses and make use of the Vita Chambers, both of which Ryan reprogrammed to respond only to *his* genetic pattern. Ryan's death is shockingly violent, even when compared to the run-and-gun gameplay that the player participated in to get here. Again, like the Little Sisters, the emotional content of the scene hits most players hard, as they, like Jack, no longer have any control over their actions. Like the opening scene, we are still seeing the game through Jack's eyes, but pressing buttons on the controller has no effect.

...a cut-scene in which the player is inert is suddenly reintroduced because there is a point to be made by the player's sudden lack of freedom: they are a pawn in the fictional world of the game. Moreover, their lack of freedom leads them to kill Ryan at his own orders, and despite their sudden sympathy. Realizing that he is facing unbeatable odds, Ryan takes the last piece of free will available to him and ends his life on his own terms. (Tavinor, 103)

Like Jack, the player must watch helplessly as he kills Ryan, who has turned out to be a surprisingly sympathetic, tragic sort of character... especially compared to our *real* foe – Atlas! Tavinor summarizes this rather complicated plot twist,

In this key moment of narrative disclosure in *Bioshock*, the tension between control and freedom is foregrounded... *Bioshock* employs an interactive take on the untrustworthy narrator, in that Atlas—the player’s principle source of information in the gameworld, and hence the view of the world that is disclosed to the player— is revealed in the following scenes to be a distortion. Atlas is not the friendly face he appears to be, but is Frank Fontaine, the avarice-filled American who is engaged with Andrew Ryan in a struggle for control of Rapture. The player-character, furthermore, is a genetically designed monster—much like the Little Sisters and Big Daddies—programmed by Fontaine for the task of seizing control of the city. They have been implanted with false memories, and a trigger phrase “Would you kindly,” and the extraordinarily unlikely plane crash that led them to Rapture turns out to have been their own doing.

(Tavinor, 102)

Now the tag on Jack’s present back on the airplane makes sense. The tag read, “Would you kindly not open until: 63’2” N 29’5” W.” The box contained a handgun and another note that asked “would you kindly” hijack the aircraft and crash it... right next to the lighthouse entrance of Rapture. As Atlas, Fontaine has been manipulating Jack and the player by working the seemingly harmless phrase “would you kindly” into his instructions over the radio. Thus Jack’s experience of the narrative runs parallel to the player’s experience of the narrative – as a player playing a videogame, most players do not think twice about Atlas’s instructions, since that kind of handholding is extremely common in videogame rhetoric.

At the same moment that the character realizes that they are a pawn in a struggle between Ryan and Fontaine, the player is made to realize that they are a pawn in the game and narrative of *Bioshock*. Fontaine, through his sympathetic skill Atlas, has played us for a fool by the means of manipulating our motivations and our information about the world. But at the same time, the game has manipulated us through its use of environmental nudges, game-world obstacles, and objectives we have been kindly asked to achieve, so that for the most part, we have “sleepwalked” through the game, unaware of the artifice, an actor in someone else’s artwork. (Tavinor, 102)

Like Jack, the player was preconditioned to follow Atlas’s commands, without even realizing he was being manipulated. Robbing the player of control and forcing us to watch Jack murder Ryan brings this meta-narrative twist to light in an extremely personal way. Fontaine has not simply manipulated Jack; he has manipulated *us* as well! Fontaine mocks the player in Atlas’s Irish accent, before dropping it in favor of his authentic, New York accent.

FONTAINE: Nice work, boyo. It's time to end this little masquerade. There ain't no Atlas kid, never was. In my line of work it takes the full variety of aliases. Hell once I was even a Chinaman for six months. But you been a sport, so I guess I owe you a little honesty. The name's Frank Fontaine. I gotta say, I had a lot of business partners in my life, but you? Of course the fact that you were genetically conditioned to bark like a cocker spaniel when I said “would you kindly,” might've had something to do

with it. But still, as soon as that machine finishes processing the genetic key you just fished off Ryan I'm gonna run Rapture... You've been a pal, but you know what they say, 'never mix business with friendship.' Thanks for everything kid. Don't forget to say hi to Ryan for me. (*Bioshock*, 2007)

This climax marks the midway point through *Bioshock*. For the rest of the game, the player's goal becomes finding and killing Fontaine, to stop him from invading the surface with an army of pheromone-controlled Splicers. If the player has rescued the Little Sisters, the now-human girls will sometimes appear to show the player the way, and Tenenbaum replaces Atlas as Jack's guide through Rapture. She uses her scientific knowledge of plasmids to free Jack from the "would you kindly" conditioning. If the player has harvested the Little Sisters, however, he is on his own for much of the rest of the game, and while such a player has more ADAM than a player that elected to rescue the Sisters, the game is noticeably more difficult despite that advantage. This adds another layer of complexity to what appeared to be a straightforward, economical decision.

But my [rational] response to the Little Sisters was... overridden by the feelings of sympathy and care for the little girls. Saving the Little Sisters does not have the optimal pay-off in the game-world—it is, properly speaking, an act of altruism. The interactive fiction of *Bioshock* thus engages its players' potential for altruism to explore a philosophical idea. (Tavinor, 104)

It is unlikely that the player will have seen Atlas/Fontaine's betrayal coming, and so would have no reason to suspect that saving the Little Sisters becomes its own reward later in the game. It

is a subtle touch, but it nicely illustrates the glaring flaw in Ryan's version of objectivism – people are finite creatures, and are rarely in a position to completely and accurately judge what is in their own rational self-interest... especially with ruthless power mongers like Ryan and Fontaine. In the same way, It was impossible for Ryan to predict the fantastical discovery of ADAM on the sea floor, which was what ultimately led Rapture to its decline. Replace “pheromones” and “plasmids” with mass advertising and political rhetoric (as the game suggests), and *Bioshock's* real-world message becomes clear – we are fundamentally emotional creatures, so treating human beings as dispassionate, calculating rational agents misses what it means to be human, biologically, psychologically, and socially. Sure, some people try to create a distance between their reason and emotions, as Plato advocated, with varying degrees of success, but in the end we cannot escape our emotional nature. Damasio's somatic marker theory uses real-world science to arrive at nearly the same conclusion – our reason is, at some level, inherently tied to our emotional capacity.

These themes of freedom and control are also explored by way of the clearly failing politics of Rapture. The objectivist political manifesto that drove the construction of the city relied for its credibility on a distortion of human nature: that people act principally on narrowly economic or rational motivations; or that at least, if they do not, they could be convinced to do so by the objectivist propaganda seen throughout Rapture. But, as becomes clear through the player's own actions, people also act from sentiment. We are sympathetic beings, and we care for the less well off, and for the vulnerable, sometimes to the detriment of our immediate well-being. (Tavinor, 104)

Ryan did not fully understand this facet of human nature until it was too late for him. This oversight is the main reason Ryan's idealistic utopia failed so horribly, a fact repeated again and again in the audio-diaries left behind by the movers and shakers of Rapture. The science fiction metaphors are often a bit heavy-handed, but Ryan decided the only way to save his objectivist utopia was controlling the population of Rapture through pheromones. This is a very simple illustration of how Ryan's fanatic ideology is ultimately self-defeating, because it lacks humanity.

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