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## **Popular culture's take on modern philosophy: Video game *Bioshock* as a criticism of Ayn Rand's objectivism**

Literature and academia have always stood at the forefront of ideological and philosophical debates, but the rise of post-modernism gave birth to new critical media that incorporate equally deep and comprehensive studies of values and ideas. After all, post-modernism is a period of freedom of choice that obliterates cultural boundaries.<sup>1</sup> It is a cultural phenomenon that thrives on plurality and subjectivity, introducing new notions, new views and re-interpreting old traditions. As Jean-François Lyotard defines it, it is a state in which

you listen to reggae; you watch a western; you eat McDonald's at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong [...]. Together, artist, gallery owner, critic, and public indulge one another in the Anything Goes — it is time to relax.<sup>2</sup>

It is also a movement that roots itself in the ideals of capitalism and efficiency. One of the first thinkers to notice this attribute was again Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his *Postmodern Condition*, he emphasises that at the time of postmodernity

the question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer "Is it true?" but "What use is it?" In the context of the mercantilisation of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: "Is it saleable?" And in the context of power-growth: "Is it efficient?"<sup>3</sup>

To be post-modern is thus to efficiently incorporate elements of various cultures and individually assemble oneself through them. From this perspective there is hardly a more explicit post-modern medium of narration than a video game.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Malpas, *The Postmodern*, London-New York 2005, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982–1985*, Sydney 1992, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester 1984, p. 51.

Video games are products that exist beyond cultural conventions adopting a visual, audio, written and, most importantly, interactive mode of communication. They are accessible and entertaining. Being creations of the technological advancements of the second half of the twentieth century, they are a truly post-modern form of popular culture that dares to challenge mainstream literature, plastic arts and film as a new platform for conveying ideological, critical and philosophical discourse. As such, one of the first examples of a video game that flaunts its post-modern structure is perhaps *Bioshock*, developed by Irrational Games and written by Ken Levine. The game is a peculiar example of a title that aside from being a product of widely defined popular culture is also a “powerful critique of objectivism,”<sup>4</sup> as established by Joseph Packer in *The Battle for Galt’s Gulch: Bioshock as Critique of Objectivism*.

However, whereas the text by Packer and also another one by Grant Tavinor — *Bioshock and the Art of Rapture* — focus on the visuality and procedural rhetoric of the game, the primary concern of the following paper is to analyse the in-game narrative and character backgrounds, to illustrate how they: paraphrase the major tenets of Randian philosophy, criticise them, and in the process transform *Bioshock* into a post-modern form of narration that independently of the academic discourse engages in ethical, political and philosophical debate.

Objectivist philosophy, the main concern of *Bioshock*’s criticism, is a creation of Ayn Rand (1905–1982) — full name Alissa Zinovien Rosenbaum — an American novelist who initiated her doctrine in 1957 with the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*. Ever since its emergence, objectivist philosophy has caused much controversy and opposition among members of academia, while at the same time gaining popularity with college students in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The outspoken critics of objectivism — such as Michael Huemer, Scott Ryan, Albert Ellis, Noam Chomsky or John Kenneth Galbraith, for example — emphasise its hostility towards altruism, socialism and conservatism, arguing that the Randian views on integrity, individuality, independence, selfishness and the right to self-definition intrude upon the freedom of other individuals. Even though the criticism of objectivism outlined in *Bioshock* starts with observations made earlier by Huemar, Ryan and Ellis, it quickly ventures much deeper, incorporating Rand’s biography and transforming each tenet of her philosophy into a narrative representation, at the same time retaining the video game structure and its incorporation of audible, visual and interactive aspects.

Rand’s philosophical doctrine relies on four main principles: reality as a metaphysical foundation, reason as an epistemological base, self-interest as a leading ethical notion and capitalism as the primary political idea.

<sup>4</sup> J. Packer, ‘The battle for Galt’s Gulch: *Bioshock* as critique of Objectivism’, *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 2, 2010, no. 3, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> *Ayn Rand*, [entry in:] *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig, London-New York 1998.

In Rand's words, "nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed" thus "reality exists as an objective absolute — facts are facts, independent of man's feelings, wishes, hopes or fears."<sup>6</sup> The metaphysical foundations of the objectivist philosophy rely on the notion that "something exists which one perceives and that one exists possessing consciousness, consciousness being the faculty of perceiving that which exists. If nothing exists, there can be no consciousness: a consciousness with nothing to be conscious of is a contradiction in terms."<sup>7</sup> Reality in the objectivist doctrine is thus the most basic unit governing our existence; as Rand writes, "a leaf cannot be a stone at the same time, it cannot be all red and all green at the same time, it cannot freeze and burn at the same time."<sup>8</sup> The metaphysics of objectivism hence dismisses, as Rand and her students claim, spirituality, ideals or any other kind of non-material factor that may influence human reality; A is A and that always remains as a solid, undeniable fact.<sup>9</sup>

The ontological base, set on the ground of reality rejecting the influence of abstract concepts not rooted in the physical dimension, connects with the second principle of the objectivist philosophy, the notion of reason. Reason, as Rand says, "is man's only means of perceiving reality, his only source of knowledge, his only guide to action, and his basic means of survival."<sup>10</sup> Reason is "the faculty which identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses,"<sup>11</sup> synthesizing it to create a coherent image of the world. As Leonard Peikoff, one of the most prominent of Rand's students, explains, reason is man's only source of knowledge; it exists in contrast to feelings and emotions that are not part of logic.<sup>12</sup> The process of reasoning is rooted in the sensory data acquired from the surrounding world; thus, a valid and objective image of reality can be created. Emotions and feelings, on the other hand, distort the sensory data, thus creating an interference that may result in a non-objective reality. "The conclusion is clear," as Peikoff claims, "there is no alternative or supplement to reason as a means of knowledge. If one attempts to give emotions such a role, then he has ceased to engage in the activity of cognition. Instead, he is subverting the integrity of his mental processes and invalidating them — by introducing as their guide nonobjective elements."<sup>13</sup> Reason is thus the sole epistemological faculty of the objectivist philosophy.

The elevation of reason as the only means of understanding reality indicates the third objectivist principle, that of man, the entity possessing and utilizing rea-

<sup>6</sup> A. Rand, *Introducing Objectivism*, [http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=objectivism\\_intro](http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=objectivism_intro) (access: 13.05.2013).

<sup>7</sup> A. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, New York 1999, p. 981.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> L. Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Meridian 1993, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> A. Rand, *Introducing Objectivism*.

<sup>11</sup> A. Rand, *The Objectivist Ethics*, [http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari\\_ayn\\_rand\\_the\\_objectivist\\_ethics](http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari_ayn_rand_the_objectivist_ethics) (access: 13.05.2013).

<sup>12</sup> L. Peikoff, op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

soning. Rand considers that “man is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others.”<sup>14</sup> She believes that a human being “must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life.”<sup>15</sup> In the eyes of the objectivists, man is an organism of a “distinctive kind” that lives in the “universe which has a definite nature.”<sup>16</sup> He utilizes the faculty of reason to survive and learn but the crucial fact here is that the faculty belongs to man only. Man is the thinker; as Peikoff claims, he is not a part of the collective mind or brain.<sup>17</sup> Objectivist philosophy considers man as an individual that chooses his own ends and methods of learning and fulfilling his goals. As Peikoff continues: “man is not a pawn of forces beyond his control. He is not a product of conditioned reflexes or instincts or the tools of production. He is not a puppet dancing on the strings of power lust, jealousy, anger, or any other »tragic flaw«. He is not a cipher ruled by fate or by any supernatural power;”<sup>18</sup> man is thus an individual that has the ultimate power over his fate.

The elevation of an individual to the level of absolute faculty determining one’s fate relates to the final principle of objectivist thought, capitalism. According to Rand, *laissez-faire* capitalism is an ideal system in which “the government acts only as a policeman that protects man’s rights; it uses physical force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use, such as criminals or foreign invaders.”<sup>19</sup> In her view, it is the only just system that treats “men not as victims and executioners, nor as masters and slaves, but as traders, by free, voluntary exchange to mutual benefit. It is a system where no man may obtain any values from others by resorting to physical force, and no man may initiate the use of physical force against others.”<sup>20</sup> From the objectivist perspective, the free market offered by capitalism is a result of a free mind, and only through independence and individuality can one create an objective image of reality.<sup>21</sup> Capitalism thus “implements the right code of morality because it is based on the right view of metaphysics and epistemology. It is a system of virtue because it is a system of objectivity;”<sup>22</sup> its separation of an individual from the collective corresponds well with objectivist metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.

Rand’s doctrine is thus a system that rejects spirituality and mysticism, replacing them with realism and reason. It elevates the individual above the group through his tools of cognition and reasoning that can be utilized to achieve any

<sup>14</sup> A. Rand, *Introducing Objectivism*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> L. Peikoff, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> A. Rand, *Introducing Objectivism*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> L. Peikoff, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

goal one deems necessary, as long as it does not extend beyond the notion of objective reality.

*Bioshock*'s critique of Rand's doctrine is centered on countering the four foundations of her system. It is not established directly, though. The game creators decided to incorporate a series of hints, attributes and characters that would link the game with objectivism while never calling it by name. The game's premise, for example, is a direct reference to *Atlas Shrugged* — the most important of Rand's novels that contains a complete presentation of her philosophy. In *Atlas Shrugged*, intellectuals and artists of the United States go on strike as the government decides to nationalise private companies. Capitalists, philosophers, thinkers and musicians flee to Mulligan's Valley or Galt's Gulch, a hidden capitalist utopia in which they are not constrained by politics, religion or ideology, and they can practice their craft freely. *Bioshock* parallels this motif by being set in Rapture, a capitalist utopia built under the Atlantic Ocean. Rapture was built by Andrew Ryan, a capitalist who decides to rebel against the United States government in a reaction to the introduction of social reforms of the 1930s. Ryan invites intellectuals, scientists, philosophers, capitalists and artists to join him in what is a capitalist dreamland built on the rules of *laissez-faire* and not constrained by government regulations. Ryan's motivation — serving as a link between the game and Rand's novel — is explicitly stated at the very beginning of the game when he addresses the players through what seems to be a propaganda film shown to new citizens:

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 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.<sup>23</sup>

Ryan's goal seems to be similar to that of John Galt, the protagonist of *Atlas Shrugged*, who establishes Mulligan's Valley and roams the United States to recruit more capitalists to join him. Establishing a link between Rapture and Mulligan's Valley is crucial as it clearly indicates the direction of the narrative and an undeniable connection with the premises of objectivist philosophy.

Another element that establishes a clear connection between the game and the objectivist doctrine is the idea of the Randian hero, an individual of supreme intellect who works hard to achieve his or her goals and maintains a selfish attitude towards the rest of the society, never, as John Galt says, living for the sake of another man, nor asking another man to live for the sake of her or him.<sup>24</sup> In that respect, John Galt, Dagny Taggart, Hank Reardan or Howard Roark are embodiments of such features, impersonating the objectivist spirit, living their lives in

<sup>23</sup> Irrational Games, *Bioshock* [DVD-ROM], 2K Games, Microsoft Windows, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> A. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, p. 1026.

accordance with Randian tenets in relation to ethics, metaphysics, epistemology and politics. *Bioshock* establishes a cast of similar characters as well; nevertheless, whereas Rand used her heroes to promote the objectivist doctrine and indicate its perfection, *Bioshock* incorporates Randian heroes to present the flaws of objectivist mentality. Characters like Andrew Ryan, Brigid Tenenbaum, Sander Cohen, Gil Alexander, Yi Suchong or Dr. Steinman serve to tackle critically the respective tenets of the objectivist philosophy. Their perfection and genius are used to extrapolate objectivist flaws and eventually present deformed and twisted versions of characters from *Atlas Shrugged* stripped of their uncorrupted nature and exposed to human cravings.

Andrew Ryan alone is an interesting character, as he is established not only as a Randian hero but as Ayn Rand's alter ego as well, which serves to further strengthen the connection between the game and the objectivist philosophy. The apparent similarities between the names only provoke to encourage further interest in the character. Similarly to Rand, Ryan was born under the rule of the tsarist regime; he witnessed the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and eventually emigrated to the United States, fascinated by its culture that rewarded talented and hard-working individuals. But eventually he was forced to leave America, disgusted with the social reforms of the 1930s that empowered the lower classes, reminding him of much-hated Bolshevism. This development is not without a context, as Rand herself was known for her avid criticism of the post-Great Depression reforms and the New Deal. The difference between the two figures lies in their ultimate goals: Rand created a philosophical system that elevates selfishness, whereas Ryan creates a capitalist Utopia founded on the ideals of egoism. Nevertheless, the further one becomes acquainted with the *Bioshock* narrative, the more both goals seem closely related, implying that both Rand and Ryan are attempting to create something impossible and detached from reality.

Further parallels between objectivist philosophy and the game are established in the course of the narrative as the player becomes acquainted with the idea of the Great Chain. Rand believed that selfish efforts of outstanding individuals eventually influence the development of civilization, as each of them contributes to the improvement of the human condition without the aid of the government, ideology or society. Although she does not give this idea any name, in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1966) the following description can be found:

A rational mind [...] does not work under compulsion; it does not subordinate its grasp of reality to anyone's orders, directives, or controls; it does not sacrifice its knowledge, its view of the truth, to anyone's opinions, threats, wishes, plans, or "welfare." Such a mind may be hampered by others, it may be silenced, proscribed, imprisoned, or destroyed; it cannot be forced; a gun is not an argument.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> A. Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, New York 1986, p. 8.

In turn, in *Bioshock* players encounter the following audio log recorded by Ryan:

I believe in no God, no invisible man in the sky. But there is something more powerful than each of us, a combination of our efforts, a Great Chain of industry that unites us. But it is only when we struggle in our own interest that the chain pulls society in the right direction. The chain is too powerful and too mysterious for any government to guide. Any man who tells you different either has his hand in your pocket, or a pistol to your neck.<sup>26</sup>

Both Rand and Ryan believe in the same ideal that individuals within society should work independently without the interference of the government if they are to push civilization into another stage of advancement. The Great Chain described by Ryan is an embodiment of *laissez-faire* capitalism and as such functions as another characteristic of the game that establishes its connection to the philosophy of Ayn Rand. The idea of the Great Chain can also be attributed to the notion of slavery imposed by the *laissez-faire* system which will be explored later in the analysis.

The final attribute that establishes a connection between the game and the philosophy of objectivism, clearly indicating the goal of the game's narrative, is the figure of Atlas. Atlas in both the game and Rand's *opus magnum* — *Atlas Shrugged* — functions as a crucial element of the narrative, although on different levels. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the figure of the mythical titan serves as the archetype for the Randian hero. Atlas symbolises the effort of brilliant individuals and social ignorance towards them. He is the silent hero that advances civilization without social praise or acknowledgement.

In *Bioshock* Atlas is utilized to symbolise freedom from the oppression of Andrew Ryan, becoming the face of the rebellion within the city. The reason this aspect is crucial is that Atlas' function is similar to that of John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*. The recurring question "Who is Atlas?" appearing throughout Rapture mimics the same question — "Who is John Galt?" — that appears in the novel. The presence of Atlas serves, on the one hand, to strengthen the connection between the two narratives, but also to present the archetypical Randian hero as a villain. In *Bioshock*, Atlas is first portrayed as a helpful individual who guides the player through the city, yet, as the narrative unveils, he turns out to be one of Andrew Ryan's rivals — Frank Fontaine. The most significant fact about this development is that Fontaine is also a Randian hero who is eventually depicted as the game's antagonist, possessing all the traits of an objectivist, yet consumed by his selfishness and desire to rule — a tyrant against whom objectivism is supposed to struggle.

With the firm establishment of the links between the game narrative and the philosophy of Ayn Rand, the story proceeds to challenge the basic tenets of the objectivist doctrine. The game ignores the metaphysical aspect of objectivist phil-

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<sup>26</sup> Irrational Games, *Bioshock*.

osophy — most likely because of its universal application in other philosophical systems — and focuses entirely on the epistemological, ethical and political aspects of Randian ideology.

The critique of the epistemological principle stands in the centre of the game's narrative. As Rand herself argues, for an objectivist man reason is the only credible device capable of perceiving the reality:

The virtue of Rationality means the recognition and acceptance of reason as one's only source of knowledge, one's only judge of values and one's only guide to action [...]. It means one's total commitment to a state of full, conscious awareness, to the maintenance of a full mental focus in all issues, in all choices, in all of one's waking hours. It means a commitment to the fullest perception of reality within one's power and to the constant, active expansion of one's perception.<sup>27</sup>

According to Rand, reason is the only neutral method of experiencing the world, as opposed to the faculty of emotions that can easily be deceived or manipulated. Rand suggests that reason cannot be corrupted nor controlled as long as it roots itself in logic and objective perception of the world without the interference from any ideology or religion. *Bioshock* game creators argue with her by indicating that individuals are dependent on their peers for upbringing and role models. As such, they are unable to develop an individual and objectivist vision of the world.

*Bioshock* counters her claim in an interesting manner. During the game, players believe they are proceeding through the game of their own free will and without any external stimuli. They incorporate their reason to investigate an alien and strange world they have found themselves in, and nothing indicates things are not what they seem. But as the game slowly progresses towards the confrontation with Andrew Ryan, the world the players have come to know is being shattered. Ryan reveals that the players' character — Jack — is in fact a former citizen of Rapture, born and raised there and later sent to the surface to answer the call of whoever could control him. Jack has been conditioned to obey whatever order he has been given as long as it is preceded by the phrase "would you kindly." And indeed throughout most of the game until the moment of this revelation, the phrase is conveyed to players numerous times, implying that all actions leading to this point have been manipulated, and all knowledge concerning Jack that has been conveyed to players has been actually implanted. Both of these facts indicate that the reality players perceive is controlled and their faculty of objective reason easily deceived.

By undermining the position of reason as an incorruptible and objective means of perceiving the world, the game raises an important question: is reason really as objective as Rand believed? As Albert Ellis writes, "cognition itself (and its product, reason) are biased and restricted by our limited powers of perceiv-

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<sup>27</sup> A. Rand, *The Objectivist Ethics*.



ing, emoting, and acting.”<sup>28</sup> Reason cannot be perceived as an incorruptible force through which one can experience the world because the process of cognition is deeply influenced and shaped by external and internal stimuli. Humans are subject to codes, values and rules conveyed to us in the process of upbringing and social interaction. Reasoning and perception of the world are shaped by the cultural and social context that influences individuals from early stages of childhood before they even develop the ability to employ reason. Reasoning cannot be the basis of one's epistemology as it is prone to influence from numerous factors that shape the way one thinks. This particular point is further reinforced and expanded in the second part of the game, when players visit Rapture's amusement park, where young children are to be conditioned to fear the surface world, indicating that the formation of reason is sculpted by human experience.<sup>29</sup> Objectivist tools of cognition are thus presented as equally vulnerable to deviation as any other tools — senses or emotions — used to experience the world. The game ultimately rejects the epistemological foundation of Rand's philosophy, implying that such a thing as the objective faculty of reason is corruptible and eventually not sufficient to support Randian claims concerning human cognition.

In addition to ontological and epistemological, the game also engages in a criticism of the ethical foundations of objectivist philosophy. Rand's ethical system — as mentioned above — relies heavily on the notion that life is an end in itself, meaning that “man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose.”<sup>30</sup> The Randian ethical system thus glorifies selfishness and empowerment for one's own sake. In Rand's own words,

The Objectivist ethics proudly advocates and upholds rational selfishness — [...] which means: the values required for human survival — not the values produced by the desires, the emotions, the “aspirations,” the feelings, the whims or the needs of irrational brutes, who have never outgrown the primordial practice of human sacrifices, have never discovered an industrial society and can conceive of no self-interest but that of grabbing the loot of the moment.<sup>31</sup>

However, in order to maintain its validity, Rand contained the application of her ethics to detached and idealised environments portrayed in her books. For her ethics to be successfully applied, she needed a society of individuals that would not succumb to the influence of desires or emotions — as shown in *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. This development is particularly evident in her selective utilization of objectivist ethics in relation to the problems outside of her novels, suggesting possible uncertainty concerning its effectiveness. This clearly visible

<sup>28</sup> A. Ellis, *Is Objectivism a Religion?*, New York 1968, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> 2K Martin, 2K China, Digital Extremes, Arkane Studiop. *Bioshock 2* [DVD-ROM] 2K Games, Microsoft Windows, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> A. Rand, *Objectivist Ethics*.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

feature of Randian ethics — its inability to fully function outside an idealised world — serves as the basis for *Bioshock*'s criticism of it.

The creators of the game have taken the idea of Randian heroes that adhere to the ethical doctrine of objectivist philosophy and added human emotions and desires to the equation. The result can be seen in characters like Dr. Steinman or Sander Cohen, who by utilizing objectivist ethics and their glorification of selfishness and self-development eventually become exploitative tyrants. By presenting caricatures like Cohen and Steinman, the game undermines selfishness as the basis for the ethical system. It argues that absolute freedom granted by the premises of Randian ethics will eventually result in deviations from one's own humanity and in exploitation of others.

Both Steinman and Cohen begin as Randian heroes who decide to pursue their ambitions not for society, culture or authority but for themselves. They fully employ objectivist ethics in their lives, disregarding morality, ideology, and social constraints to achieve their particular goals. Nevertheless, at some point they reach the limit of what they can do on their own, and in order to further pursue their selfish desires — as Randian ethics dictate — and achieve new artistic heights, they begin sacrificing others for selfish gains. Steinman deforms and maims his patients and Cohen devotes himself to coating the remaining citizens of the city in plaster. They both thrive on the suffering of others yet do not feel guilty or accountable, as all they do is try to fulfil their selfish and individualistic desires in accordance with the ethics of objectivist philosophy.

Objectivist selfishness entails the pursuit of individual development, claiming that every professional, scientist or artist, should not be constrained by ideology, morality or ethical limitations, as those concepts are artificial and stand in the way of the development of civilization. Rand advertises absolute freedom with no controlling authority, believing that society governed by the incorruptible faculty of reason cannot deviate into communist or religious barbarism. The game undermines these claims with the characters of Dr. Steinman and Sander Cohen, whose apparent pursuit of objectivist ethics eventually leads them to become dehumanised monsters. Perhaps that is the strongest criticism the game makes with regard to Randian ethics: an unconstrained pursuit of selfish desires will eventually intrude upon the freedom of others, contradicting the basic premise of Rand's ethical system — living for one's own sake.

This particular point is further strengthened and reinforced by the gameplay mechanics, identified as the moral centre of the game.<sup>32</sup> In the course of the game players encounter harmless non-playable characters referred to as "little sisters." The players are given a choice: they can either harvest little sisters, killing them in the process, or save them. Each action will reward players with some amount of

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<sup>32</sup> G. Tavinor, 'Bioshock and the Art of Rapture', *Philosophy and Literature* 33, 2009, no. 1, p. 104.

“ADAM” — a substance given to players as a means of enhancing their strength in their journey through the city. The conflict inherent in every decision whether to help or harvest “little sisters” is a form of an interactive discussion: will you succumb to selfish desires and the pursuit of self-empowerment or will you sacrifice your ambition and show altruism? Ultimately the players are not told how to act, but the idea of a choice and participation in the process of their pursuit of either the objectivist, portrayed as brutal, or altruistic — noble mentality, is the final and strongest notion functioning as a decisive critique of objectivist ethics.

The final criticism concerning objectivism deals with its last founding tenet: capitalism. Rand believed that capitalism “is the system of the future — if mankind is to have a future.”<sup>33</sup> She endorsed “pure, uncontrolled, unregulated *laissez-faire* capitalism — with a separation of state and economics, in the same way and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church.”<sup>34</sup> In her *Capitalism. The Unknown Ideal* (1966), she claims that no other “politico-economic system in history has ever proved its value so eloquently or has benefited mankind so greatly.”<sup>35</sup> Capitalism is the only system based on the objective theory of values<sup>36</sup> as it is just and allows for the unconstrained development of an individual — hence its strong connection with the Randian ethical system.

Rand employed capitalism as the political basis for her philosophy because its nature aligns itself so perfectly with the idea of selfishness, self-development, and utilization of reasoning and logic. In addition, the dynamic character of a capitalistic economy, connected with the idea of competition and the distribution of goods, directly opposes the statism or collectivism rejected by Rand herself as an ideology of “primordial savages who, unable to conceive of individual rights, believed that the tribe is a supreme, omnipotent ruler, that it owns the lives of its members and may sacrifice men whenever it pleases to whatever it deems to be its own »good«.”<sup>37</sup>

In *Bioshock* the criticism of the political aspect of Randian doctrine occurs in the background of the game narrative. *Laissez-faire* capitalism is portrayed on the one hand as one of the greatest achievements of the city founders but on the other as a concept leading to the eventual fall of Rapture. The game's creators argue that an uncontrollable free market without intervention from any kind of authority leads to the implosion of society.

The critique of the political aspect of the objectivist philosophy is presented through the employment of *laissez-faire* capitalism and its economic consequences, such as the creation of the plasmids market and an uncontrolled distribution of its products. Plasmids and gene tonics based on “ADAM” are untested

<sup>33</sup> A. Rand, *The Objectivist Ethics*.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> A. Rand, *Capitalism...*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

commodities that create addiction problems and start dividing the society into those that could afford them and those who cannot. The introduction of plasmids — a kind of a super product that revolutionises the commodity market — leads to the stratification of the society and exploitation of workers. High demand for plasmids forces researchers to produce “ADAM” in large quantities, hence the introduction of “little sisters” and their protectors, who are recruited from the lower classes of society and whose purpose is to procure the substance, while basically remaining in the state of constant submission and slavery. The game attempts to recreate the mechanisms ruling the *laissez-faire* market in order to advance its critique regarding its exploitative potential that benefits the few at the expense of the many.

To further promote their point, the game’s creators allowed their characters to fully commodify life in Rapture, which leads to the monetization of such basic needs as the oxygen supply. The idea of The Great Chain advocated by Ryan returns not as a symbol of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand of the capitalist market” but an analogy for slavery. *Bioshock*’s creators argue that capitalism is thus not much different from the statism rejected by Ayn Rand. *Laissez-faire* empowers those few who strive to enrich themselves with no regard for human life or social welfare. In addition, when competition becomes too dangerous one can eradicate it by nationalization — as Andrew Ryan did — to ensure one’s monopoly of the market. Uncontrolled capitalism is presented as an exploitative force whose nature prevents the establishment of a thriving society. Its dehumanizing concept encourages greed. The discovery of “ADAM” had a potential to create great advancements in medicine but, because of the emphasis on selfishness, wealth and individuality, it was utilized to create commercial products that developed addictions.

Ultimately, the game rejects the political foundation of objectivist philosophy based on the notion that the uncontrollable development of an economy without any supervision from the public or the government cannot be the basis of any community as it is equally destructive and no different from the collectivism Rand feared. The selfish nature of capitalism may indeed have beneficial effects on the development of civilization, but a lack of supervision, advertised by Rand, is what *Bioshock*’s creators fear and challenge most. According to them, the prospect of society embracing all aspects of the objectivist doctrine, including *laissez-faire* capitalism, is daunting.

In conclusion, *Bioshock* is a unique type of postmodern narrative that functions not only as a medium for entertainment but also as a ground for epistemological, ethical and political critique of objectivism. The game utilizes the Randian philosophy to create a utopian society, incorporating such concepts as human greed, ambition, and desire for power. The result is a grim and dark environment that thrives on exploitation, murder and suffering fuelled, as the game points out,

by the nature of objectivist philosophy, which encourages selfishness and unsupervised development of free market.

The combination of critical points raised by the game indicates that Randian doctrine is in fact a system that is detached from reality and thrives on idealistic concepts that are unreachable for human beings, unless they are like the Randian heroes from the pages of her novels. The game dismisses reason as the sole faculty of cognition, indicating that the process of learning and experiencing the world is much more complex and highly dependent on external stimuli. It also criticises Randian ethics for its glorification of selfishness without considering the destructive factors of human ambitions and hunger for wealth. And finally, it rejects the idea of *laissez-faire* capitalism, extolled by Rand, seeing it as a dangerous development that uncontrolled has the capacity to obliterate society.

*Bioshock* thus stands in line with other critical voices that have opposed Randian philosophy and in the process gives us a glimpse of what video games might become in the future. Its success, complexity and theme are an indication that such a neglected medium as video games has indeed a lot of potential for becoming a much more serious area for study. *Bioshock* successfully proves that politics, ethics and philosophy can be discussed and criticised in a medium that embodies tenets of post-modern philosophy. Whether game industry will take advantage of this development in the future, and whether academic critics will see it as a convincing reason to further explore the medium of video games, remains to be seen.

## **Popular culture's take on modern philosophy: Video game *Bioshock* as a criticism of Ayn Rand's objectivism**

### Summary

The article explores criticism of objectivist philosophy conveyed through the pop cultural medium of a video game, *Bioshock*. However, compared to previous critical texts commenting on the role of objectivism in the game in question — namely those by Joseph Packer and Grant Tavinor — the following text, instead of visually, explores three key aspects of Randian philosophy — epistemological, ethical and political — and confronts them with the narrative of the game to find connections and proofs of anti-Randian tendencies. Still, the ultimate goal behind the analysis is not mere re-indication that *Bioshock* is an anti-Randian story but also a presentation of how game narratives can be utilized to discuss politics, ethics and philosophy. *Bioshock* proves that video games are indeed a powerful modern medium capable of handling deep, meaningful and even academic narratives.