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# The Pressure Of 10,000 Leagues: The Social Contract in *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*

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## Abstract

Game studies is a rapidly emerging field, combining many of the prominent areas of the humanities under one umbrella of entertainment research. As an emerging mode of popular entertainment that includes active participation, games present a unique and interesting landscape for philosophical analysis and inquiry via a game's narrative. I will, in this paper, show how *Bioshock*, a first-person shooter originally released in 2007, and its sequel recapitulate and analyze the early modern notions of social contract theory by Hobbes. I will be analyzing his theories through the design of the games' lore and the landscape which the player moves through, as the world design of games allows for a much richer look into the subtleties of philosophical ideas. *Bioshock*, although stringently modeled after Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, provides a vehicle in which the theories that influenced Rand are also played with and extrapolated. Although Rand is a rather controversial writer, *Bioshock* gives her both an homage and a playable critique of how her systems fall apart due to their lack of adherence to any formal social contract, leading to a greater discussion as to why the theories of Hobbes are so important to political theory.

*Keywords:* Game Studies, Social Contract Theory, Objectivism, Thomas Hobbes

“No gods, no kings. Only man.” These are the inspiring, yet harrowing words of Andrew Ryan, the founder of the underwater city of Rapture, which is the primary location of *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*. *Bioshock*, a video game from 2K studios originally released in 2007, was hailed as a masterpiece and a prime example of the strength of video game narratives. Rapture and its constituents, the brainchild of game designer Ken Levine, are an intimate look into the political theories of Ayn Rand as she expresses them in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*. *Bioshock 2*, although not directed by Ken Levine, continued the political analysis by flipping the political script and taking a deep look into the values of socialism and religious cultism. These two games are excellent, both as games and as narrative, serving, even today, as examples of good mechanical and narrative design. Beyond their potency as games, however, they provide a unique look into the early modern notion of social contract theory. An argument could be made that any social contract could be studied in conjunction with the narratives of these two games but, for this paper, Hobbes will be the focus. Although the games focus on newer political theorists in Marx and Rand, their political theories are rooted in social contract. Thus, although these games do focus on more modern ideas, the analysis of these modern theories through the games, in conjunction with an analysis of the games as a whole, provides a fictional, but tangible perspective on the older notions of social contract theories.

### **The Sin of ADAM: The Fall of Rapture**

When starting *Bioshock*, the player is greeted with a brief cutscene of a plane crash before they take control, swimming to a nearby lighthouse standing in the middle of the open ocean. Entering, one is greeted by a massive, golden statue of Andrew Ryan and a long,

grandiose monologue as one takes a Bathysphere (an underwater transport similar to a train pod) into the city of Rapture. In one of the most iconic monologues in video game history, Andrew Ryan lays out his reasons for beginning Rapture:

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. (Andrew Ryan, upon entering the Bathysphere, *Bioshock*)

His dialogue, of course, echoes the Randian idealism of absolute individualism which he is based off of, building a place with no overhead or oversight, where everyone is equal in so far as they all have the right to any work which they care to set themselves to. Rand, perhaps, would be proud of being represented in such a beautiful way, but her theories, although laying the groundwork, are not where the game ends its theoretical intrigue.

Rand, in being so staunchly for laissez-faire capitalism, also formed her own commentary on social contract theory, which the game picks up as well. In fact, Rand's view of freedom as a person could easily be attributed to Hobbes' definition of the free man in *Leviathan*, which is, "the that in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do is not hindered to do what he has a will to" (136). In other words, the free man is anyone who has no obligation, law, government, or church to prevent him from doing what he wishes to do.

But, Rapture is not a critique of the system; in fact, Ken Levine stated in an interview what is precisely the beauty of the series: "I'm fascinated by Objectivism. I think I gave it--I think the problem with any philosophy is that it's up to people to carry it out. It could have been

Objectivism, it could have been anything. It's about what happens when ideals meet reality. If you had to sum up BioShock's story, that's what it is." (qtd. in Shacknews). Levine was creating an analog of philosophy in the form of a game; he created a world in which the player could experience the philosophy of Rand and, through Rand, Hobbes.

Rand, although possibly pulling some of her concepts from Hobbes, stands quite at odds with the much older political theorist. Hobbes was adamant that human nature was a dangerous prospect when left to its own devices. As such, he advocated for near-absolute sovereignty, believing that a strong, centralized government would uphold the social contracts necessary for the survival of a civilization, even if this came at the cost of some individual autonomy. Rand seemingly saw the precise opposite, believing that heavy government oversight would reduce overall individual freedoms, which leads to a weaker and unstable people. Thus, although both saw freedom as important, Rand sees freedom in autonomy, whereas Hobbes sees freedom in security.

Andrew Ryan, as an analog of Rand, trusts the intellect of individualists to protect the personal rights of others in Rapture, rejecting any kind of social contract that has extensive control of rights. To use Hobbes' language, Ryan sees the end of the "state of all against all" in the light of unobstructed reason. Morality, even, as he states in his monologue, is one of these impediments, echoing the not nearly as politically minded Nietzsche. The necessity of a social contract is denied, and individualism is held as supreme. The only contract is that of industry. As he states in an audiolog, "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 Great Chain," *Bioshock*). Thus, the contract is not between people, so much as between a person and their labor. However, the citizens of Rapture still confer upon Andrew Ryan some sovereign authority over the city (he is its creator, after all); thus, Ryan becomes a sovereign. It is a flimsy commonwealth, but it does exist. Hobbes' only qualifier for the existence of one is that all people involved agree to the same terms (109). In this case, those terms are not to have any rules beyond "do not kill each other." As Hobbes further explains, it is up to the sovereign to impart the "liberty of the subject"; as such, Ryan allows his subjects absolute liberty (138).

Unsurprisingly, however, the industrial and anarchical foundation ends up being built on the shifting sands of the ocean, and soon the underwater city of Rapture falls into turmoil. The capitalists begin to corner markets and monopolize, while the scientists dip into the unethical. These two problems coincide in the character of Frank Fontaine, a usurper to Andrew Ryan, and his investment into the gene therapy of ADAM, a unique gene serum which can alter a user's DNA, giving them the equivalent of magical powers. This substance, however, is highly addictive and, of course, leads to an unnatural power wielded by individuals. Fontaine desires to take ADAM back to the surface—where he could make a fortune—but Ryan wants no contact with the outside world, thus creating their conflict.

In response to Fontaine's initial attempts to overtake him, Ryan begins rapidly to congeal his authority. He creates a council, nationalizes Fontaine's business to decentralize it, and even institutes the death penalty for smuggling to prevent Fontaine (who, at this point, is known as Atlas) from seizing control of the city. Due to the situation, Ryan must operate autonomously and even supersede a social contract altogether. This echoes Hobbes'

commonwealth by acquisition in a situation where there is a foreign (or, in this case, domestic) invader. Hobbes writes, “*A commonwealth by acquisition* is that where the sovereign power is acquired by force; and it is acquitted by force when men (or many together by plurality of voices) for fear of death or bonds do authorize all the actions of that man or assembly that hath their lives and liberty in his power” (127, his emphasis). But, because the contract of Rapture is based entirely on individualism, Ryan’s exercise of his newfound power via commonwealth, due to the invasion of Frank Fontaine, leads to dissension. The people *need* someone to exercise rule, but they are also afraid of giving him any power at all, as this stands against their perceived absolute sovereignty as individuals.

In establishing the city without a social contract, the attempt to institute it later leads to more dissension, as the citizens become unwilling to sacrifice the liberties they were promised upon the formation of the city. Because there is no actual sovereign, the attempt to become one leads people to walk away, especially since most people had come to Rapture in an attempt to escape government or economic overhead. This is coupled in the lack of lawful negotiation within Rapture. The citizenry, as Hobbes states, is one obligated to the sovereign in so far as it protects them and, here, Ryan is no longer protecting them from something—especially not something which they feel that they need to be protected from (144). There are, of course, some laws within the city (especially against theft), but Frank Fontaine has, by definition, broken none. He has capitalized on a business venture and simply wants to expand it beyond the bounds of Rapture. Ryan is exercising control over someone who is, by his own law, innocent; at least, up until the point that the actual conflicts begin. But, at that point, the law has fallen away on both sides of the table, and civil war is an inevitability.

The desperation of Ryan grows greater as time moves on, as he soon begins to consider absolute sovereignty to prevent the war. As a final attempt to thwart Atlas, Ryan considers a change to plasmids, which are different flavors of ADAM (ADAM is like a wizard's staff, and the plasmids are the spells), that would make people vulnerable to suggestion. He says in another audio log, "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" ("Desperate Times," *Bioshock*). Again, Ryan is caught in a balancing act between his ideal and the necessities of social contract. When Ryan rejects this option, as it infracts on his ideals, Dr. Suchong, the originator of the idea, begins to work undercover for Atlas, developing what is referred to as the "Ace in the Hole." In fact, this experiment is where the player factors in. The character, named Jack, is the initial test subject of the "Ace in the Hole," which turns him into a compulsory assassin triggered by the phrase, "Would you kindly?" In perhaps peak irony, Ryan's rejection of the program, since it is an infraction on free will, is what gets him killed, as the player, guided by Atlas via the trigger word, kills Ryan. The slave defeats the master.

Thus, the events of Rapture begin to show the cracks in Rand's ideology or, rather, the game, in creating a semi-realistic Randian society, shows the importance of Hobbes' theories of sovereignty and contract. When individualism is the central tenet of a person's life, no situation becomes a moment in which one is willing to give up one's freedoms. Even the fear of civil war does not persuade them into contracts, which forces Ryan to seize power *from his own citizenry* by force. In perfect symbolic fashion, Ryan, as a pragmatic analog of Rand and her theories,



finds his city falling into the very thing which Hobbes feared and was writing against throughout *Leviathan*. Ryan's fear is null in the face of his fearless populace, because it is power, not greed, which scares them. Rapture is a city without contract beyond the industrial, and as such falls on the tides of power and demand which industry creates. Ryan is the imperfect paragon of Rand's philosophy; he is precisely what Ken Levine envisioned, in more ways than one. As he states in the same interview as before:

When philosophers write books, when they write fictional works like *Atlas Shrugged*, they put paragons in the books to carry out their ideals. I always wanted to tell a story of, what if a guy wasn't a paragon? What if his intentions were really good, but at the end of the day he was human? I think that's where the problem is.

It's not an attack on Objectivism, it's a fair look at humanity. We screw things up. We're very, very fallible. You have this beautiful, beautiful city, and then what happens when reality meets the ideals? The visual look of the city is the ideals, and the water coming in is reality. It could have been Objectivism, it could have been anything. (qtd. in Shack news)

Ken Levine's statement that it is a "fair look at humanity" echoes into the second game in the series, where a character of similar ambition to Ryan finds her ideals slowly collapsing around her. Both games are a paradise lost, not to the outright failings of a philosophical theory, but to the error of being human.

### **Wrath of the Lamb: *Bioshock 2***

*Bioshock 2* picks up ten years after the end of the first game. With Ryan and Fontaine defeated, the city of Rapture is in distress and has fallen into an even deeper anarchy than what it was already struggling with. Seeing her opportunity, Dr. Sofia Lamb, one of the major figures in the background of Rapture's founding, takes her chance to seize power.

Lamb, unlike her individualist counterparts, is a self-proclaimed social psychiatrist interested in the natural law of human interaction. She came in incognito, under the guise that

she was interested in the social competition which Rapture had created (“Know the Beast,” *Bioshock 2*). Where Ryan saw a place for competition, Lamb saw a place where people could be tied together into a singular order.

Being a social psychiatrist, Lamb is also a staunch materialist, taking humanity to be little more than an intellectual animal, just as easily controlled as any of our mammalian counterparts. She finds the “Ace in the Hole” program fascinating and a proof of such beliefs and, with the power vacuum in Rapture, she takes her chance to create a grand experiment: a utopia.

Lamb’s collectivism is extremist, but in a strikingly horrid way. Although she proclaims minutia of Marxist communistic ideology in her utopian conceptions, much of the work is entirely her own. In fact, Lamb’s project seems more reminiscent of Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World*, in which people were literally cultured and grown to fulfill specific roles and functions. Lamb even practices this cultivation on her own daughter, using the genetic modificative powers of ADAM to turn her daughter into a superhuman full of all the knowledge of Rapture (“The People’s Daughter,” *Bioshock 2*). This genetic modification inadvertently gave her daughter telepathic abilities, which is how the player talks to her throughout the game.

The development of the social contract under Lamb takes a starkly different form than that of Ryan. While Ryan created his minimal social contract under the belief that reason would guide people, that Natural Law would prevent a collapse, Lamb rejects any human-centric views of the nature of the world. A human is just a beast, and the contract exists to keep the beast contained to a box. Although both Ryan and Lamb come from Hobbes’ state of “all against all,”

Lamb sees the end of it in a diluted society of “we,” where individualism—where the concept of the Self at all—is completely destroyed.

Lamb’s contract is absolute and all-encompassing. She often refers to the other people of Rapture as “the family,” along with using religious iconography, to keep people in a state of control. She uses the psychological control pioneered in the “Ace in the Hole” program to its fullest extent, doing everything within her power to control everyone using verbal and psychological cues.

She accomplishes this feat with “Family.” Rapture is now a “family,” and one is to go about doing “family duties.” Sprinkled in along with this idea is her constant tying of the self to tyranny. Together, she creates a simple, but effective, dichotomy: the self is the tyrant, and the family is the way out. Thus, she is no sovereign, but a self-ascribed “mother to the Rapture Family” (Sofia Lamb, dialogue in Adonis Luxury Resort, *Bioshock 2*).

What Lamb has created is unique and unlike many of the social contracts which have been created or theorized; however, at the most basic level, Lamb seems to be taking, like her predecessor, after Hobbes. Lamb, unlike Ryan, is taking the necessary precautions at the beginning of her rise. She is taking sovereignty from a fractured state and, as such, has implemented her sovereign powers over much of the populace. It is important to note that, although Hobbes believed that people had sovereign rights and that they should be allowed to have them, these rights can always be relinquished *to any extent* in states of emergency. Lamb twists Hobbes language, perpetuating a cycle of emergency which gives her the authority that she wants for continued control. To reiterate Hobbes, “*A commonwealth by acquisition* is that where the sovereign power is acquired by force; and it is acquitted by force when men (or

many together by plurality of voices) for fear of death or bonds do authorize all the actions of that man or assembly that hath their lives and liberty in his power” (127, his emphasis). Lamb twists this idea by perpetuating the fear, both by literally having the citizens perceive the player as a “threat to the family,” but also through psychological manipulation through ADAM. She also perpetuates the threat that the collection of ADAM must be for the family alone, punishing anyone who takes it for themselves with death and creating her own mechanized force (called “Big Sisters”) who can sniff out ADAM like bloodhounds. She even perpetuates the emergency of the dangers of leaving the Family by warning them against leaving Rapture, thereby scaring people into staying within the underwater city. Thus, Sofia Lamb takes absolute control for the security of her “family.” The people are to act, not as individuals, but as cogs in a great collective machine.

Lamb’s actions as an absolute sovereign leading a full-on surveillance state culminates in her final act of will. Although Lamb has been working tirelessly to steal the will of the inhabitants of Rapture, she recognizes, towards the end of the game, that she is going to lose. In a fit of anger, she attempts to kill her own daughter, which will in turn kill the player character due to their imbedded psychological bond. When this fails, she chooses instead to set Rapture to self-destruct, destroying her attempted utopia and taking herself down with it. Lamb, in her final moments, heralds the dangers of autonomous rule. Her exercise of fear and dominance over the citizens of Rapture gave her the opportunity to take all their lives into her own hand, sacrificing them in the name of rejecting failure. She is the embodiment of the dangers of absolute sovereignty and, although Hobbes felt that a small, more centralized

system of government was better, becomes the worst-case scenario in a Hobbesian state: a mad tyrant.

Ryan emphasized the importance of choice in a person's life, while Lamb rejects it. Ryan saw the freedom to choose as an individual as the key to a utopian society, while Lamb sees the removal of choice to be the only way in which a society can be perfect. These two starkly different beliefs both lead to collapse, because both deny the fundamental needs of a social contract.

### **A Man Chooses, A Slave Obeys: Will and Social Contract**

Whether one reads Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, or any of the other social contract theorists, they all agree on one point: choice is both important and dangerous. The individual has a freedom to choose against their instinct or in favor of altruism. They can kill one night and give money to charity the next. The delicate balance of government overhead and the will of a population is one which countries are still struggling to find today, as populations revolt and riot against their governmental constituents across the world over everything from election results to active censorship of government dissenters. The legitimacy of government is, perhaps, one of the most complex philosophical questions for those whose minds turn towards the pragmatic, and it is one that *Bioshock*, of course, could not answer.

However, both *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2* offer clear warnings about what happens on the two extremes of the spectrum. On the one hand, the sovereign will to be ruler and illegitimacy as a sovereign leads to the collapse, while on the other the absolute sovereignty of a single individual leads to Rapture's final fall into the trench.

Between the two games, the power of will is described in the two ways in which it is most important to political philosophy. In the first, the will of the *people* prevents Ryan from exercising power. Even though they are all “rational individualists,” it is their collective agreement that Ryan should not be allowed more power, and that his attacks against Frank Fontaine are unfounded, which leads the populace to cut him off. His illegitimacy culminates in a civil war of the control of the city, or, if not violent, a dissolution of the commonwealth, which Hobbes expected to occur in such a situation (210-211). Ryan’s failure to exercise the power he needed to kept his commonwealth flimsy and, by the time it dissolves, everyone is once again in a state of all against all.

In the second game, it is the will of the *sovereign* which leads to collapse. Lamb is given legitimate authority via social contract during her rise to power in Rapture. The populace willingly gives up some of their rights to her authority so that she can work to prevent Rapture from collapsing again. However, as she perpetuates the emergency so that she can gain more and more power, her will becomes more than suggestion: it becomes law. She usurps the social contract by keeping the rights of her citizens and then exercising *her will* over them. The citizens agreed to her having some control and working to better the city; they did not agree to allowing her to toss them at an invader as death fodder—at least, not initially. Her social experiments trick the populace into slowly giving her literal control over their minds and bodies, but such an act is not sanctioned by any political theorist writing about a legitimate government. But, as is discovered, Lamb is acting out of a self-interest: a selfish desire to create her vision of a utopia. Faced with seeing that she is wrong, she exercises her final authority and

sends herself and all the citizens of Rapture to their death. She is the epitome of the tyrant sovereign.

Choice factors into both games beyond just the political philosophy of the two figures as well. Consider the character of the first game: a seemingly normal person and the sole survivor of a plane crash. The player and character move, unwittingly, through the game, assuming that they are acting with volitional will, although the game offers few hooks beyond the “you (the player) need to get out of Rapture.” But, as it turns out, the player-character is psychologically held through the Ace in the Hole program, walking in whatever direction Atlas tells them to go. Amid Rapture’s individualist utopia, which, as of beginning the game, is near the collapse, as the civil war is raging, the player is a slave.

In the second game, the roles are reversed. Lamb and her constituents (who make up most of the enemies in the game) are acting seemingly without personal will. The Splicers (people who have become addicted to ADAM) run at the player, willed onward by Lamb’s doctrine of the “Family.” The player, however, is individualistically moved forward via the pathos of the character. The character, known simply as Subject Delta, was the protector of Eleanor, Lamb’s daughter. Lamb, however, rips the girl from Delta, which, since the two are psychologically bonded, nearly destroys both. This pathos compels the player-character forward and, by the end of the game, will likely have the player vengefully murdering the splicers which stand in their way.

Thus, the player is also a tangible part of the social contract theory at work. In the first game, they watch in horror as they discover that their individual freedoms were all a ruse in the now-iconic scene of the player discovering the Ace in the Hole program. Ryan, in fact, in his last

act of will, compels the player to kill him with the trigger phrase, stating with all the strength he has left, “A man chooses, a slave obeys” (Andrew Ryan, dialogue in Rapture Central Control, *Bioshock*). In the second, the player knows and participates in the contract willingly, giving up rights of the “Family” by attacking it for the sake of the young Eleanor. This contract is destroyed without a second thought the moment the first few cutscenes of the game take place.

It is in these subtleties that games present such powerful tales of philosophy. Although *Bioshock* is stringently about political philosophy, it is the immersion of the game which brings such philosophy to life. The player of *Bioshock* gets to walk through the type of scape (albeit a bleaker one) envisioned by Rand in *Atlas Shrugged*. Through this tangibility, the player then gets to experience the philosophy of Hobbes, watching hundreds of pages of hard to read political philosophy diluted into a sixteen-to-twenty-hour gaming experience. Then, the astute player gets to watch this philosophy evolve and shift as the second game picks up where the first left off, once again playing with aspects of Hobbes (and other social contract theorists) in a way that allows them to see the theory in practice.

### **The Theory of the Meta Contract**

Perhaps, however, Ken Levine and *Bioshock* are making a meta commentary about the social contract. Considering how powerful and detailed the narrative and world are, it does not seem particularly far-fetched. During an interview about the first game, Ken Levine said this about the moment the player had to kill Ryan: “I think that it was really the ultimate insult to the player, that he chooses to die but you can't choose to do anything. You have no will at all. The rest of the game after that is to establish your will in the world. Will is a very important



thing in video games. What will do you have?" (qtd. in Shacknews). In just a few sentences, Levine brings up what is one of the most interesting questions in the philosophy of games: what is the will of the player? The player has willingly opened this world and given away their volition to the character in front of them. We players think that we act volitionally, but we do not. We are being corralled by a system.

And yet, in this system, the player has the autonomy to experience and to understand the philosophy presented in the game. Although the player may not get to choose their path, they do get to choose what they take from the experience. A player chooses their experience, while a slave allows the game to impress its beliefs upon them. The contract exists, but it can only control one's actions—not one's thoughts. Thus, it is a meta contract: one which exists unconsciously between the player and the designer. What we give to a game upon taking a controller or keyboard in hand is our prerogative, and yet most will give away their soul to the designer for the sake of a little entertainment. Ken Levine's intentions with sweeping the rug from out from under the player in *Bioshock* only shows how poignant this is, as a designer who, clearly, was intending for players to get more out of his game than just a few hours of fun. The player is faced with the ugly truth: that they had given up their volition and were simply following orders. The astute player, however, sees this as a turning point, and may, perhaps, begin to experience the game—even though they are still being cajoled forward with check points and a person in their ear—in a new way.

Philosophical theory is a beautiful thing, but it can often be marred when faced with the reality of being human. Whether it be Rand or Marx, Hobbes or Locke, the theory sometimes shatters in practice. Under the pressure of the ocean, a city built on philosophical idealism

began to crack. Its paragons became human, and the fundamental nature of humanity began to surface. What Ken Levine and the team which worked on *Bioshock 2* managed to do was show just how dangerous reliance on theory can be. It showed the flaws—and the values—of social contract theory in a setting where, perhaps ironically, real people were involved, instead of caricatures. In the form of a game, however, this theory breathed in a new way. The player can walk through the broken city, listen to its characters, and literally experience theory which may never truly see real practice. The Leviathan may have taken Rapture into the trenches of the ocean, destroying it for its failure to comply to its contract, but in its destruction an enlightenment was found: an enlightenment found only in play.

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