

Columbian Nightmare: Narrative, History, and Nationalism in *BioShock Infinite*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the video game BioShock Infinite for how its world, the history of the city it is set in, and its narrative events are suffused with questions of nationalism and imperialism. As an alternate-history first-person shooter, the game does not deal with imperialist or colonialist topics in a direct narrative manner or explicitly through its gameplay, but it does depict a world whose society is characterized by nationalism, discrimination, and racial oppression. Accordingly, in a close reading of the game's narrative and discursive elements, I work towards uncovering the 'narrative background' of the world that BioShock Infinite lets players explore by analyzing the way it presents its setting to players, its use of history, and its narrative complications. I thus argue that these aspects are used particularly to criticize the nationalist elements of Columbia's society, to complicate simplistic portrayals of binary oppositions, and to point to the constructedness of narrative and history.

Keywords: narrative; transmediality; US nationalism; imperialism; history of US colonialism

1. Introduction

At first glance, the 2013 video game *BioShock Infinite* might seem like an unlikely candidate for a thorough criticism of or engagement with the history of US imperialism, as it is a first-person shooter set in the fictional floating city of Columbia in the year 1912, sharply deviating from US history through this fantastic device and instead entering the realms of alternate history.¹ However, in this article, I want to demonstrate that it is exactly this fantastic setting that allows the game to use exaggeration and satire to point to nationalistic and imperialistic tendencies characterizing parts of US society, politics, and culture around the turn of the 20th century and throughout its entire history. Specifically, the game interweaves world-building, historical, and narrative elements to criticize underlying notions of nationalism and imperialism in US history. While, outwardly, *BioShock Infinite* is very much a story about the fates of its protagonists (Booker and Elizabeth) and about the struggle between a hero (Booker) and a villain (Comstock), beyond that, I point out how it also tells a compelling story about the city of Columbia and the excesses of nationalism and fanaticism that are both explicitly

and implicitly displayed as part of this setting.

I argue that *BioShock Infinite* fosters discussions about US nationalism by the way it lets players explore a setting fused with historical elements and combines its larger narrative arc with what I call the 'narrative background' of this setting. The game initially frames Columbia as a potentially utopian society, only to thoroughly dismantle that first impression particularly through players' exploration of the narrative background. Ultimately, this effort primarily works to complicate binary representations of heroes and villains, good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, and to point to the narrative constructedness of history. To arrive at this argument, this article devotes itself to a detailed case study and close reading of *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative and discursive elements, with a particular eye towards its setting's narrative background. I first briefly outline how I understand a video game like *BioShock Infinite* as a narratively liminal text and then analyze the game from three larger angles, centering around setting, history, and narrative complications. In the first and largest section, I examine the game's setting, the floating city of Columbia, which can be read as an exaggerated microcosm of parts of US society of the time. I

analyze a number of carefully selected examples from the game that representatively establish a pattern of how the game chooses to (narratively and visually) portray a world characterized by a nationalistic and imperialistic ideology. Secondly, I look at how the game makes use of history to connect its world to questions of colonialism and nationalism, through both its references to US history and its deviations from historical reality. Finally, I bring these considerations together by examining the game's larger narrative and discursive elements, both in terms of the main story and particularly in relation to the game's final twist. This final revelation prompts players to reevaluate previous aspects of the game and overall connects its concerns with specific aspects of US history to a discussion of history and narrative more generally.

2. Video Games as Narratively Liminal Texts

The still relatively new field of game studies has varyingly discussed how video games can (and cannot) be studied as a kind of narrative, a text, a medium, a simulation, a set of rules, an activity akin to play (*ludus*), a cultural artifact, etc. This early formalistic debate of what video games 'are' has generated much contention and is often summarized as the so-called ludology vs. narratology debate.² Rather than repeating these arguments here, I want to transcend this divide by sidelining formalistic concerns about video games and instead focus on how *BioShock Infinite* can be studied as *one* particular kind of game from the methodological point of view of literary and cultural studies. This understanding is thus not meant to provide an answer to the question of how video games, in general, can be studied—a question to which, partly due to video games' diversity, there can be many equally productive answers—but to provide an approach to elicit particularly interesting insights from one particular game (and, potentially, similar ones).

This point of view understands video games such as *BioShock Infinite* as narratively liminal texts, that is, as a kind of text that fuses the symbolic form of play (*ludus*) with that of narrative.³ While video games are clearly played according to certain rules, with which their recipients have to engage in order for

the text to 'work,' many video games also try to tell a story during that process, remediating storytelling insights from media such as films and novels but also adapting well-known techniques to this specific (interactive) medium. In order to adequately analyze such a text, the narratological concept of the storyworld helps to understand how a game like *BioShock Infinite* functions narratively and creates meaning(s). David Herman defines storyworlds as the "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate ... as they work to comprehend a narrative" (9). Referring primarily to novels, his use of the term highlights the role of readers "trying to make sense of a narrative" as they "attempt to reconstruct not just what happened ... but also the surrounding context or environment" (Herman 13) that embed "existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved" (Herman 14). It is highly productive to make use of this concept for the process of narratively engaging with video games as well, since more than 'narrative,' thinking of the storyworld of a text emphasizes the process of creating an understanding of how the story, characters, setting, etc. of a text come together on the side of the audience. As players engage with a video game, what is presented to them triggers a mental process of (re)creating what they (visually and aurally) witness as the storyworld of the game. In this sense, I understand players of a game as that game's audience as well, even if, of course, they are physically much more actively involved in the text than readers of a novel or viewers of a film might be.⁴

This methodological shift towards the storyworld also allows for a deeper analysis of two particularly important elements of video games: interactivity and space. As an interactive medium, video games necessitate a (physical) player 'input' in order to function as a text; an effort that Espen Aarseth calls "nontrivial" (1) in order to distinguish it from how we physically engage with most novels or films. In many games, this interactivity also creates narrative nonlinearity—specific choices that players can make in a game can lead to different narrative outcomes later on and, overall, to different playing experiences.

Focusing on the storyworld that is created in the process of playing a game allows for more flexibility in understanding how games produce narratives and how, in turn, players engage with them, generally emphasizing the role players (or other kinds of readers) assume in the experience of text.⁵ However, since, in terms of its main plot, *BioShock Infinite* works rather linearly (cf. also Buinicki 733-34), I cannot focus on possible choices players could make in terms of affecting the plot's outcome; instead, I concentrate on the agency players have in their exploration of the game's narrative background.

As a second aspect, in their storytelling, many video games focus particularly on the exploration and construction of space (cf., e.g., Jenkins). In fact, the active exploration of and interaction with a fictional world can often take on an important part of many games' narrative and gameplay, and some games might feature optional areas/spaces that players can but do not have to explore, tying this aspect back to narrative nonlinearity (Jenkins 121-22; Murray 79-80). Storyworlds, already in their name, place more emphasis on this spatial construction of narratives—Herman similarly mentions that the term “suggest[s] something of the world-creating power of narrative” (14). By highlighting the process of exploring a world and actively reconstructing what players experience as a storyworld, these spatial elements of ludic storytelling can more neatly be taken into consideration, pointing to the narrative significance that the engagement with space can have in video games. This focus particularly on the narrative background of the world presented to players is thus also similar to Shoshana Magnet's term ‘gamescape,’ which looks towards “the way in which landscape in video games is actively constructed within a particular ideological framework” (142).

In addition to highlighting the importance of space and player interaction in video games, looking at how players re(construct) a storyworld also takes ‘ludic’ aspects of games into consideration, i.e., their gameplay. Specifically, when analyzing a video game via the concept of the storyworld, I do not, of course, simply reconstruct how a player might go through that particular process, as that would entail a rather descriptive approach. Instead, it is particularly

significant how *BioShock Infinite* influences, encourages, hinders, complicates, etc. that process of creating a storyworld through its narrative, discursive, and ludic elements. In other words, the specific gameplay of a video game equally influences the way a storyworld is created and the meanings that are thus engendered. Still, in *BioShock Infinite*'s case, as I hope to demonstrate, it is primarily narrative elements that establish the game's engagement with nationalism, rather than its gameplay, which is why I focus on the former.⁶ In this sense, analyzing a game's narrative through a focus on the storyworld takes into account all elements constituting that game's effort at telling a story—its narrative discourse, its mise-en-scène, its visual and audio elements, etc.

Finally, such a focus on how *BioShock Infinite* works narratively is also well-suited to exploring how it engages with questions of imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. In video games like *Sid Meier's Colonization* (1994) or *Empire: Total War* (2009), which deal with these topics more directly, it seems intuitive to focus on the main narrative setup and the gameplay in order to examine the ways in which, for instance, colonialist ideologies are ingrained in the rules of the game and might become naturalized and go unnoticed as part of the gameplay (cf. Mukherjee). For *BioShock Infinite*, however, the more intriguing aspect is how these questions figure both in the way it tells its story and in how it depicts the world that players are thrust into as part of its spatial storytelling. As I am going to show, while the entire game is set in Columbia and thus only deals with an alternate version of the United States, Columbia's history and the world it presents are imbued with imperialist, colonialist, and nationalist elements.⁷ In the way it depicts the city with exaggerated elements of a highly patriotic and nationalistic version of the US around the turn of the 20th century and ultimately exposes Columbia as a society that fanatically discriminates against, subjugates, and oppresses racial minorities, it relates to historical US involvements in imperialism and colonialism. This subtext of the game becomes particularly visible in how it engages with questions of nationality and nationalism. In line with postcolonial thinking on the connections

of nationalism and colonialism, Columbia's rulers use "nationalism to maintain [their] own power" and "[take] over the hegemonic control of the imperial power" (Ashcroft al. Griffiths, and Tiffin 151). Invoking nationalism within Columbia's society works very much according to constructing an "imagined political community" (Anderson 6), crucially by way of excluding certain members of society from that community—through oppression and exploitation primarily on the grounds of race and class. These efforts are hardly at the forefront of *BioShock Infinite's* gameplay or plot, but they distinctly characterize the narrative background of the world in which the events are set, which is why an approach focusing on how that world is mentally reconstructed by players seems well-suited to analyzing the game's engagement with nationalism.

3. Exploring Columbia

To better understand some of the intricacies of the game's setting, a brief plot summary is in order. As mentioned before, *BioShock Infinite* is set in the floating city of Columbia. Throughout the game, players take control of the story's protagonist Booker DeWitt, from whose perspective they explore the city. Booker is a former Pinkerton agent who now works as a private investigator and searches for a woman named Elizabeth, whom he is meant to rescue from Columbia, as she is being held captive in a tower by Columbia's ruler and the game's antagonist, Zachary Hale Comstock. Comstock quickly notices Booker's presence in Columbia, denounces him as the 'false shepherd' whose arrival he has foreseen in a vision, and then sends a variety of Columbia's soldiers and war machinery to defeat Booker. Booker then fights against these enemies and advances through Columbia's different areas (or levels). In addition, exploring the world and its different environments takes up a relatively large amount of the game, since there are a number of optional areas in which Booker can find various items as well as additional background information on the history of Columbia, its different locations, and many of its inhabitants. The game's story thus first

revolves around finding Elizabeth, but later on, after having accomplished that, shifts its focus towards trying to end Comstock's oppressive rule over Columbia and, in the meantime, finding out more about the mysterious past of all three main characters. One central part of these findings is the revelation that Booker and Comstock are actually the same person, but from different alternate universes, a twist I discuss more extensively later.

Although Comstock stylizes Columbia as a utopian society in his speeches and writings, the game ultimately exposes the city as characterized by sharp contrasts and binary oppositions (cf. also Peaty 198-99): While many of its upper-class citizens do enjoy a luxurious lifestyle and are depicted as content with the city's rulers, beneath the surface—and in later areas—players also gain glimpses of the city's underbelly, of working- and lower-class citizens living in poverty in the city's slums. Comstock's utopian vision of Columbia as a city for people willing to achieve the American dream has instead turned into a dystopian nightmare for the vast majority of those citizens that the city's rulers have cast as ethnic others, something that is gradually revealed to players as they venture deeper into Columbia.

Visually, the way Columbia is initially presented to Booker—and thus to the game's players—reinforces Comstock's utopian vision for the city. The city appears in an exceedingly positive light: When players first see Columbia, the floating city is portrayed as a spectacle—a city whose buildings and streets magically float in the air on airships, with zeppelins flying around, bridges connecting individual islands, large statues adorning the scenery, and everything surrounded by clouds. Color plays an important symbolic role in the overall portrayal of Columbia, with these early parts of the city all appearing very colorful and bright, the light symbolically expressing the positivity and optimism that Columbia seems to exude. Likewise, when players leave the first area and open a set of doors to step out onto the streets of Columbia, the sunlight briefly seems to blind Booker, but then gives way to a utopian scene, with doves flying away into the distance, where we see more islands suspended in the



sky, bright buildings, giant statues, and so-called skylines on which goods and people are transported, all underscored by peaceful music and pervasively colored in shades of white, blue, and light red. This impression is equally strengthened by many of the posters and other signs throughout the game, for instance when Columbia is early on proclaimed as “this new Eden, a last chance for redemption,” which—along with countless other biblical and Christian references—also firmly establishes the Puritan idea of Columbia as a ‘city upon a hill’ (or, in this case, even higher than that, in the skies). In fact, religion plays a crucial role in Columbia’s society and in how it is connected to nationalism (cf., among others, Bosman; Heidbrink al.) How Columbia sees itself thus corresponds to similar self-images of the US shaped by the ‘myth of the Promised Land,’ “one of the most prevalent of America’s national mythical narratives” (Paul 140). Finally, this positive first impression of Columbia is accentuated by the parades and the fair taking place when Booker arrives in the city, as it celebrates the anniversary of its secession from the US. The parades, replete with the accompanying patriotic music, fireworks, and colorful displays, thus all combine to showcase the city’s wealth, ubiquity of goods, and technological superiority, mirroring real-life exhibitions like the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 (also known as the Chicago World’s Fair).

As players witness this setting by actively moving their player avatar around the city and exploring different parts of it, the early outwardly positive presentation of Columbia is also quickly complicated by signs that not everything is so utopian underneath. In terms of the playing process, the most (visually) apparent elements with which players reconstruct the storyworld are thus subtly contradicted by additional information they can glean from exploring areas and carefully listening to the city’s residents, already forming part of the game’s narrative background. While a lot of the main story of *BioShock Infinite* as it concerns Booker and Elizabeth is presented to players in dialogue, the (hi)story and society of Columbia is narrated and presented more subtly through the player’s exploration of the world. That world, in turn, is characterized by divisions and contrasts, an ambivalence prevalent throughout the entirety of the game. Just when Booker takes his first steps onto the pristine streets of Columbia in all their bright and colorful glory, he also walks past a number of citizens and can overhear, for instance, a conversation in which a man complains: “Yesterday I had to take a gondola. Rubbing elbows with all sorts,” pointing both to inconveniences in transportation and, more importantly, to a class disdain for people of “all sorts.” Another pair of citizens can be overheard to have an argument, during which one warns the other to “keep an eye on that kind of talk,” to which the other replies: “Oh, don’t turn

into some Finkton radical on me, John. I do not want to be some character out of *I Married a Vox Populi*, now do I?" This is an early hint towards dissent within Columbia's society, foreshadowing the eruption of a full-scale civil war between Columbia's ruling elite, The Founders, and a populist uprising, the Vox Populi. Additionally, the game's intertextual reference to the 1949 film *I Married a Communist* (also the title of a 1998 novel by Philip Roth) clearly aligns the Vox Populi's interests with communist ideas, giving power to the people and criticizing the US capitalist society. Significantly, the conversations between these people are scripted events that occur if Booker walks close enough by them, but they do not have to be listened to in their entirety, and depending on how quickly or inattentively players move through the city, many of them might not be heard at all. On a narrative level, these gameplay decisions constitute the major agential acts players have in actively affecting their reconstruction of the game's storyworld. Additionally, the subtlety with which these occurrences become part of the storyworld adds to painting a more complex picture of Columbia early on, where the visual marvel of the city's buildings is contrasted with some of the narrative developments players can glimpse from its citizens.

As the game's story progresses, these contradictions within the city are exposed to be clearly demarcated along racial and class lines. Early on, this becomes most apparent at the culmination of the parade scene, when the grand prize of the raffle is the possibility to throw the first baseball at an 'interracial' couple in what amounts to Columbia's equivalent of a public stoning. The couple is booed and mocked by the audience, and on stage they are framed by a mock-wedding ceremony that references established racist stereotypes of African Americans as monkeys. This is clearly a spectacle and a pleasurable show for Columbia's citizens, but even though it still uses the bright colors and the generally 'not-too-realistic' look of the game's characters, it is a haunting image for players. It exposes Columbia as a society that takes pleasure in inflicting violence on an 'interracial' couple, a union against which so-called 'anti-miscegenation laws' existed long into the twentieth century

in the actual US, only nationally overturned in 1967 by the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (Moran 6). In this sense, the entire sequence exposes "Columbia's militant white-supremacist ideologies" (Peaty 199). However, later in the game, such explicit scenes are rather rare, since the main story elements instead concern Booker and Elizabeth, but not so much the surrounding Columbian society. Rather, this scene of the public stoning serves as an end of the early exploration of Columbia and initially getting to know its society, as only and directly after this scene do players begin having to fight against Comstock's forces, which forms the main gameplay from then on, with exploration remaining an optional side element.

However, these racial and class divisions are all the more prominent in the narrative background of the game, becoming apparent through visual propaganda throughout the city, in the way certain environments are depicted, and by how this ideology has taken effect in the minds of Columbia's citizens. They all hint at the Founders' rule over Columbia being an oppressive regime that stays in power through violence, fearmongering, Othering, and the subjugation of minorities. Visually, this becomes apparent through the numerous posters and other pieces of propaganda found throughout the city. Some of these are about Comstock specifically and establish a cult of personality surrounding the self-proclaimed prophet: In the temple in which Booker first arrives, it becomes apparent that Comstock is worshipped alongside the Founding Fathers as a messiah, since, as writing above a painted church window has it, "the Prophet shall lead the people to the new Eden." His image is plastered throughout the city, usually showing his face along with the words "Father Comstock" and "Our Prophet." Indeed, throughout the game, he is often referred to as Father Comstock, which points to his self-stylization as the patriarchal head of a family, a vision of Columbia's society that casts it as a tight-knit, homogeneous community.

Many other propaganda posters focus more directly on Columbia's society and feed into feelings of paranoia and division. Some tell citizens, for instance, to "arm thyself against the foreigners & anarchists" and that it is their "holy



duty to guard against the foreign hordes.” The latter poster distinctly combines nationalism and religion by depicting George Washington, with the Liberty Bell and the Ten Commandments, holding off immigrants of various racial stereotypes. Remarkably, while the poster includes a variety of stereotypes of different ethnic groups, among them Chinese, Arabs, and Native Americans, it depicts all of them closely huddled together, using the same colors for all of their portrayals to overall distinguish them from Washington, who stands for the white Columbians. The poster thus ignores their national differences and instead combines them into a foreign ‘mass,’ clearly establishing an ‘us vs. them’ mentality, which proposes to understand all nonwhite people as enemies that do not belong in Columbia. Another of these posters shows a presumably white woman next to the words “Her eyes ... so blue! Her skin ... so white! ... or *are* they? We must *all* be vigilant to ensure the purity of our people!” The poster thus refers to the phenomenon of ‘passing’ as another race, which points to the actual constructedness of race, “represent[ing] race to be a fiction of identity” (Wald 8), but which also encourages a kind of paranoia among its citizens, casting divisions between them by suspecting each other of not being ‘racially pure.’ Such a fear also goes back to US history, in which the so-called ‘one-drop rule’ “designated as ‘black’ any person seen as possessing even a single ‘drop’ of ‘black blood’” (Wald 11), which had crucial

legal consequences for Americans suspected of trying to ‘pass’ as white. Overall, many of these posters are clearly racist and peddle ideas of white supremacy, casting nonwhite minorities as inferior Others. At the same time, they try to incite the white population against them and attempt to create a unified society of whites by neglecting and subjugating minorities, speaking to the nationalist tendencies of Columbia’s rulers in imagining a unified, racially ‘pure’ community. For players, while some of these posters appear repeatedly throughout the city, others are only found in specific optional areas, thus constituting a kind of narrative ‘reward’ for actively exploring the environment by adding some ‘backstory’ and more richly portraying the setting of the city. Exactly how many of these elements players uncover from the city’s surroundings depends on how they choose to explore it, which then affects how players recreate the storyworld in terms of Columbia’s society—the basic implication of its nationalistic tendencies is always evident, but the more intricate understanding depends on players’ choices in exploration.⁸

The racism that suffuses Columbia’s society also becomes subtly visible on a visual level through the game’s environments. In the early level of “Battleship Bay,” which comprises a large artificial beach, players see, for the first time, a number of nonwhite citizens, all of whom are employed as workers or servants for white Columbians, scrubbing the floorboards or cleaning the bathrooms. There are a number

of posters in the workers' quarters as well, which remind them, for instance, to "always address patrons as 'Sir' and 'Madam.'" The poster shows a white couple dressed in white and blue on the right and two servants with a tray and a broom on the left as silhouettes, completely in black, again establishing a strict binary with clear connotations of positive (light) and negative (dark) for two different ethnic (and class) groups of the city. Moreover, players walk past segregated bathrooms, with one labeled "Colored & Irish Washroom," which also hints at the few white workers they can see being Irish. When Elizabeth sees these, she asks Booker why there are two separate bathrooms. Booker simply replies: "There just is," to which Elizabeth adds that this seems like an "unnecessary complication" to her. This scene showcases the game's awareness of race as a social construct and alludes to a time when Irish Americans in the US were not considered 'white' either (cf. Ignatiev). Booker's "there just is" along with Elizabeth's subsequent evaluation point to the arbitrariness along which racial lines are drawn, highlighting their injustice but also, at the same time, firmly establishing that Columbia is tightly structured by them. Furthermore, seeing a number of nonwhite workers in this area also emphasizes the fact that, so far, all of the wealthy citizens that players encountered have been white. After all, as a fantastic/science-fiction game, it was not immediately clear that nonwhite people would exist in this world at all. While they do exist, in the early, wealthier areas of the city, nonwhite characters are only encountered as servants and workers active 'behind the scenes' of the pristine images Columbia likes to present. In this sense, their presence makes the whiteness that characterizes Columbia more visible, questioning the assumed normativity of whiteness, which mirrors Richard Dyer's point that a way to "see the structures, tropes and perceptual habits of whiteness, to see past the illusion of infinite variety, to recognise white *qua* white, is when nonwhite (and above all black) people are also represented" (13).⁹

Columbia's racial divisions are furthermore not just witnessed as a doctrine propagated by the Founders but also seen as an ideology at work in the minds of its citizens. Apart from

listening to a number of so-called voxophones—recordings by some of Columbia's citizens that can be found throughout the city—this can again be deduced by overhearing conversations between citizens. For instance, on the Battleship Bay beach, a group of women talk about a friend of them having had lunch with a mechanic who "makes a good living," which one of the women disapprovingly comments on: "An Irishman can make a good living but that doesn't mean I want to have lunch with one." This exchange establishes an understanding of class that is not just about money, categorizing a mechanic as lower-class regardless of how wealthy he might be, and instead also connects class with questions of lifestyle and power—"the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result" (Zweig 19). Moreover, the conversation also interweaves racism with classism by equating the lower-class mechanic with being Irish, the negative association of which seems to be a given to these citizens—as these two lines of discrimination intersect. Being Irish, for most Columbians, would automatically mark somebody as lower class, regardless of his or her actual income (cf. Anthias on the intersectionality of race and class in particular). On the other hand, the game also shows glimpses of resistance to this prevailing racism, for instance when Booker goes through a house that appears to belong to sympathizers of the Vox Populi, where a poster states that "Until the Negro is equal none of us are equal." While it seems unusual for people to have such a poster in their house, it also speaks to the game's investment in telling parts of its story in this visual way.

The early (primarily visual) impression of Columbia as a utopia thus is subtly contradicted throughout the game by exploring and looking more closely at the setting, yet that contrast finds its culmination in later parts of the game, when Booker and Elizabeth venture into the poorer areas of the city. In the working-class district of Finkton, players constantly hear a variety of propaganda messages by Jeremiah Fink, who owns all of the factories in the city, as public announcements, many of which try to justify the exploitation of workers, for instance by proclaiming:

The most common complaint I hear from the working man is that they are ... unhappy ... with their lot. "Why torment yourself?" I ask. The ox cannot become a lion. And why would you want to? Who wants all those responsibilities and worry? You do your job, you eat your food, you go to sleep. Simplicity is beauty.

These and many other speeches by Fink demonstrate his ideology of grouping people into different orders, casting the ruling elite as 'lions' and the working masses as 'oxen' and 'cows,' who do not amount to more and should be happy with their lot. His credo of not "torment[ing] yourself" argues against an idea of the American dream for these lower-class workers, against the possibility of climbing up the social ladder, urging them to accept the exploitation of the status quo, symbolically figured in the working animal of the ox. The different announcements are heard by players as they go around Finkton, and along with Fink's upbeat tone, their over-the-top content works to expose the Founders' underlying (hyper)capitalist ideology through satire. This point is further accentuated when players enter Finkton Proper and witness what amounts to a 'labor auction,' in which work that needs to be done is sold to the worker who claims that they can do it in the smallest amount of time. When the auction is over, a man left without a job can be heard screaming: "My family's gotta

eat! We need work!" The scene establishes the inhumanity of Fink's system, which does not see the (predominantly black and Irish) working-class citizens as human beings but simply as laborers to perform tasks.

Eventually, players arrive in Shantytown, the poorest district of Columbia, which they reach by taking a long elevator down from Finkton into Shantytown, symbolically climbing down the social ladder to the lowest rung of Columbia. The game presents this district very differently from all previous parts of the city: The bright colors from 'above' give way to a very bleak depiction of the streets and buildings, with brown colors dominating the surroundings. The streets are lined by dark, dirty factories, many vacated houses with broken windows, water leaking in different places, other parts burning and smoke rising, and writings on the walls such as "My family is starving. We need food." For the first time in Columbia, the majority of the people Booker and Elizabeth meet are black. Likewise, the patriotic music of the parade has been replaced by much quieter, darker tunes, with audible background noises of trashcans being kicked, bottles being broken, and trains running by. In short, the visual depiction of this part of Columbia appears as the polar opposite of the opulent areas visited particularly at the beginning of the game. When they arrive in Shantytown, players can overhear a character identified as Brother Love preaching to a group of people:



This is what they want, brothers ... To keep you so hungry you can't speak but to beg ... To keep you so ignorant you can't think of solutions to all your problems ... To keep you chasin' that almighty silver eagle, so you can buy everything they're sellin' to keep you down, brothas ... But Daisy Fitzroy says there's another way ... Another way comin' real soon ...

His speech spells out the tenets of the Founders' cruel ideology that players have been witnessing and explicitly points to 'another way' to fight this capitalist ideology, the impending socialist-populist revolution led by a black woman, Daisy Fitzroy. A bit later, the extreme poverty they witness here prompts Elizabeth to say: "I don't understand why some people are treated like men, and others like animals." For players that have so far explored most of the optional areas of the game and spent some time taking in the narrative background, the answer to Elizabeth's implied question is quite simple, as it is exactly the ideology players have gradually witnessed so far that works to categorize people into differently valued groups, primarily based on class and race. Elizabeth's specific phrasing—"humans" and "animals"—makes the divide that Columbia's society casts between its members explicit, and her choice of words also echoes Fink's propaganda.

Overall, Columbia's initial visual presentation tries to establish it as a utopia, yet there are also immediate cracks and fissures visible in that display. These contradictions become clearer as the game progresses, eventually revealing a city built on the oppression and subjugation of poorer citizens and ethnic minorities. While discussing this ideology is also a significant theme in the game's main story, it is actually exposed more thoroughly in the way the game uses its setting to tell a story about Columbia and its society. The effect of seeing this ideology at work becomes much stronger by first having players immersed in the fiction of Columbia as a utopia and then gradually peeling away that image, rather than if the game had immediately started to criticize a society that, at that point, players would not have known. Fittingly, after Shantytown, players visit Emporia, the richest part of the city, after

these areas have been partly destroyed by the ongoing civil war. After Shantytown, players can never fully go back to the early pristine image and idea of Columbia, metaphorically mirroring what players have learned about the city and its society through the narrative background.

4. Columbia's (Alternate) History

BioShock Infinite's setting and the picture of a society it paints thus also relate to questions of nationalist ideologies, even as the city is clearly fictional and a fantastic deviation from actual US history. Nevertheless, the game engages in alternate history exactly because it wants to relate to American history, which is why the way it depicts its own city's past and how it infuses it with elements of US history merits a closer look.

BioShock Infinite's principal deviation from US history concerns, of course, the existence of Columbia itself. Again, these elements of the city's history are not prominently presented to players, but rather, their reconstruction depends on players' willingness to explore the narrative background provided in the game. As they can piece together from different voxophones, kinetoscopes, and various writings, in the game's fictional history, Columbia was founded by Comstock in 1893 after securing funding from the US Congress. The floating Columbia toured multiple US cities and was a major attraction during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. However, over the years, Comstock sought more independence from the mainland US, and eventually, in 1902, Columbia seceded from the union. Soon after, the first resistance against Comstock's oppressive rule began to form under the leadership of Daisy Fitzroy as the Vox Populi; when players visit the city ten years later, this conflict is about to culminate in a revolution. Yet in order to work as an alternate history, while the game naturally has to deviate from its players' common understanding of 'history,' it also has to include enough elements in order to make it recognizable as relating to known historical events (cf. also Singles 48-56). For the storyworld players construct while playing, the references to US history might encourage them to generally assume parallels between

US history and Columbian history, and to be particularly receptive to explicit deviations from the reality they know. Hence, there are a number of elements that, at times, refer to US history accurately or, at other times, reference certain details but present them in a vastly different light. For instance, one of the first sights when Booker arrives at Columbia is how people adore the Founding Fathers of the US, with worshippers gathered around three large statues depicting “Father Franklin,” “Father Washington,” and “Father Jefferson.” The Founding Fathers themselves are, thus, historically correct, yet how they are religiously and fanatically worshipped is a clear exaggeration—which nonetheless can also be read as commentary on the contemporary veneration of the Founding Fathers particularly in more conservative or nationalist circles. As Gavriel Rosenfeld points out about alternate histories in general: “[W]hen we speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in the past, we are really expressing our feelings about the present” (92-93).

Another significant deviation from historical events concerns the figure of Abraham Lincoln—in an ironic and somewhat macabre twist, in Columbia, it is not Lincoln whom conservatives adore but John Wilkes Booth, his assassin. He is worshipped particularly by the so-called Fraternal Order of the Raven, whose appearance in the game is reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. Their beliefs are visually displayed in a statue in the courtyard of their headquarters, where Comstock is seen fighting the so-called serpent of nations, which is depicted with stereotypically racist caricatures of black, Asian, and Jewish men. Lincoln, in turn, is vilified by Comstock as “the Emancipator” or “the Apostate” for his role in abolishing slavery. Comstock’s crude beliefs become apparent in a voxophone:

What exactly was the ‘Great Emancipator’ emancipating the Negro from? From his daily bread. From the nobility of honest work. From wealthy patrons who sponsored them from cradle to grave. From clothing and shelter. ... No animal is born free, except the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation.

(*BioShock Infinite*)

Comstock’s crass racism puts him firmly in line with anti-abolitionist and pro-slavery forces in the US, misrepresenting history by praising the alleged merits of the slavery system and completely neglecting the violence, exploitation, and lack of freedom that actually characterized it. In the context of the overall way in which the game depicts Columbian society, this deviation from history serves to again showcase the racism that characterizes the city, in such a crude and obvious way for players knowing about Lincoln and Booth that its satire becomes even more apparent than in the previous, more subtle elements characterizing the game’s setting.

However, the most important encounter with both Columbia’s own history and its relation to US history occurs in the Hall of Heroes, a kind of museum that features (interactive) exhibitions of the Boxer Rebellion and the so-called Battle at Wounded Knee, two pivotal events for Columbia’s history. As the exhibit shows, in the game’s version of US history, Columbia intervened in the Boxer Rebellion in 1901 by firing on Chinese citizens, ending the rebellion and revealing that the city also functions as a heavily-armed gigantic airship. It is this event that prompts the US government to question Comstock’s rule over Columbia, which leads to the city’s eventual secession. More important than their mere existence in Columbia’s history, however, is how both the Boxer Rebellion and Wounded Knee are depicted in the Hall of Heroes, showcasing how the city’s rulers officially want these events to be remembered. In both exhibits, the ethnic Others—Chinese and Native Americans, respectively—are portrayed as the sole aggressors, as savage warriors depicted through familiar stereotypes, whom the Columbian forces heroically defeated. In the Wounded Knee exhibition, the Native Americans are portrayed in dark and red colors and as hiding in bushes, trying to heighten the idea that they represent danger, and we see them attacking and capturing a white woman. The background music and the loud shouts and chants by Native Americans add to the tension in this area, further fueling the depiction that they are aggressive and war-hungry. In reality, Wounded Knee was also sometimes, and initially, misrepresented as

a battle in US official history (Buinicki 729-30), and twenty-nine Medals of Honors were issued to soldiers participating in it (Valandra 34). Today, it is clearly labeled as a massacre, but this somewhat complicated history is mirrored in how Comstock unquestioningly portrays the event as a noble battle. The depiction highlights the heroism of the white soldiers, and of Comstock in particular, about which Cornelius Slate, a soldier and old friend of Booker who participated in the massacre, complains; according to Slate, Comstock did not even take part in any of these 'battles.' In this sense, the game also builds on players' knowledge of the actual history of Wounded Knee, since they then immediately notice the clear deviation that this representation constitutes.¹⁰

The Hall of Heroes as a location in Columbia is thus particularly significant because it explicitly discusses the *writing* of history—by the victors—and how it can potentially be misused to justify ideologies of nationalism, nativism, and jingoism.¹¹ Through the disparaging comments of Slate, we learn that this is a deviation not just from the players' reality but also from the diegetic reality of the game's world. Comstock thus clearly misrepresents history, as Slate speaks of "the history that does not fit in their books." No voice is given to the oppressed, powerless, and wronged parties in these depictions; rather, these exhibits constitute a white man's idealized fantasy (understanding) of history. In its many references to historical realities, such as the allusions to the founding of the US Republic, Jim Crow laws, and the civil rights movement mentioned above, *BioShock Infinite* thus models its fantastic world after our historical one, an inclusion of 'realist' elements typical of the fantastic mode (cf. Koenen 42). As Marcus Schulzke notes about dystopian worlds in particular, "even those game worlds and virtual worlds that are ostensibly much different from the real world tend to reproduce the institutions and ideologies of the real world in new settings" (316). Hence, Columbia appears not as a decontextualized fantasy world but, rather, as a postmodern bricolage built from references to historical reality. In turn, by referencing and then deviating from US history so distinctly, these elements also work to activate audiences

in more carefully evaluating the knowledge they gain about Columbia, having to be wary of the unreliability of these depictions in terms of the storyworld that players construct.

5. Narrative and Narrative Instability

Finally, the significance of Columbia as a society and of its history becomes entangled and most visible in connection with the narrative events of the game. These can be further divided into two larger aspects—one is the story itself, the events that transpire throughout the game, the other concerns the discursive telling of these events, as the game features a twist towards its end and thus engages in narrative instability.¹² Overall, this neatly brings together the game's efforts to expose Columbia's inherent ideology and blur simplistic binaries.

The narrative events in the game unfold on two main levels—one concerns Booker's, Elizabeth's, and Comstock's fates, the other focuses on the city of Columbia itself. Whereas the former constitutes the main story that is clearly foregrounded by the game through various dialogues, what happens to Columbia as Booker ventures through its different areas is often told more subtly in the background, in line with how the setting is established, as previously discussed. At critical junctions, however, these two aspects of the narrative overlap. Most significantly, in Booker's quest to escape the city with Elizabeth on an airship, they help arm the Vox Populi, leading to an intensification of the civil war they wage against the Founders, which the Vox eventually win as they take over the more affluent districts of the city. After having been in Shantytown, Booker and Elizabeth travel to Emporia, the city's wealthiest district, after it has already been taken over by the Vox. In these levels, players witness the destruction the Vox have wrecked upon the city and how the upper-class citizens have either been killed or are frantically trying to flee Columbia.

Significantly, these events ultimately serve to demonstrate the similarities between the Founders' oppressive regime and the revolt by the Vox Populi—the violence against ethnic minorities and the lower class that players

witnessed earlier is replaced by violence against the upper class, committed by the Vox. While many aspects of the game's story can be read as supporting the socialist revolt that the Vox plan, these areas depict the bloody side of such a revolution, instead of reverting to a representation in more stereotypical and binary terms. On a gameplay level, the waves of enemies Booker had to fight up until Shantytown are now replaced by Vox fighters, with their appearance slightly changed but the basic gameplay elements of fighting them staying exactly the same, which symbolically highlights their similarity. Another hint towards that parallelism is how the propaganda announcements by Fink have been replaced by Daisy Fitzroy's speeches to the masses. Her speeches point out that she is clearly aware of the fissures and contradictions in the Founders' ideology, as she tries to educate the people on how exactly they have been subjugated. However, the way these speeches are presented—basically taking over exactly the same position as Fink's, and one shown while Fitzroy's face is superimposed on a building, mirroring the personality cult around Comstock—highlights the parallels between Fitzroy and Fink/Comstock, in that a power-hungry individual has taken over a political movement. When Booker and Elizabeth later witness the scalps of some of Comstock's lieutenants being publicly displayed, it prompts Elizabeth to claim that "Fitzroy's no better than Comstock," (*BioShock Infinite*) again complicating binary and static portrayals of heroes and villains.

Booker's role in this revolt is crucial, and it becomes even more important after the final twist of the game, when players, along with Booker and Elizabeth, realize that multiple alternate universes exist in their world and that they have traveled to some of them thanks to Elizabeth's supernatural powers. Towards the end of the game, these revelations are presented to players in what I understand as narrative instability, since these scenes fundamentally destabilize the audience's process of reconstructing the storyworld of the game. Eventually, Booker and Elizabeth realize that, due to the existence of multiple universes, they can only decisively stop Comstock if they prevent him from being born in the first place, since he otherwise continues

to exist in parallel universes. Accordingly, Elizabeth brings Booker to a place where he was baptized long ago, after having participated in the Wounded Knee Massacre, in order to be 'born again.' However, as Booker tells Elizabeth, he did not go through with the baptism at the very last second. This culminates in the most important revelation of the game's story: The Booker whom we have played so far was indeed not baptized; however, the Booker who, in a parallel universe, was baptized then found new meaning in his life, became deeply religious, and consequently founded Columbia—and then changed his name to Zachary Hale Comstock. The protagonist Booker and the antagonist Comstock are thus one and the same person, but from different parallel universes. Elizabeth, who was believed to be Comstock's daughter throughout the game, is thus also revealed as Booker's daughter. These revelations challenge the storyworld players had constructed so far, turning it unstable, as significant events and characters' identities have to be updated with new information. Even more so than with the paralleling of Fink/Comstock and Fitzroy, the revelation that the main protagonist and antagonist are actually the same person further strengthens the game's efforts to complicate clear binaries. The (partially) good deeds by Booker that players witness throughout the game are thus counterbalanced by his potential, in another universe, to commit all the acts of discrimination and oppression pointed out so far as well—as Martin T. Buinicki phrases it, through these revelations, "DeWitt and the player learn they have been fighting themselves all along" (734).

In a larger context, this revelation also speaks to the constructedness of worlds, of narrative, and of history. Metatextually, the different parallel universes that Booker and Elizabeth can travel to function as different narratives as well, since they both emphasize the process of narratively creating a world. Going back to the depiction of Wounded Knee in the Hall of Heroes, this twist also casts Slate's criticism of Comstock's revision of history in a slightly different light. For Slate, the historical misrepresentation in the exhibits focuses centrally on Comstock's own involvement in Wounded Knee—he is enraged

that Comstock uses this part of history to stylize himself as a war hero when, in Slate's opinion, he did not even participate in it. Yet with the knowledge of the game's twist, players realize that this central part of Slate's criticism is not actually valid—Comstock was at Wounded Knee, but he was still known as Booker DeWitt back then. While overall, this is still clearly a misrepresentation of history that does grave injustice to the actual victims of Wounded Knee, it also points to the complications of representing history 'accurately' in the first place, and it establishes this issue as going beyond simply being right or wrong (cf. Ankersmit 196-97). Being able to travel between parallel universes complicates a distinction between 'the past' and 'history,' as it is at times unclear what the exact past events in a given universe are, making it more difficult to ascertain if a specific history refers to events that happened in this or in a parallel world. As Karen Hellekson argues about alternate histories in general, texts like *BioShock Infinite* thus prompt readers/players to "rethink their world and how it has become what it is. They are a critique of the metaphors we use to discuss history. And they foreground the 'constructedness' of history and the role narrative plays in this construction" (5).

In *BioShock Infinite*, then, setting, history, and narrative work together to make the city's nationalist ideology visible and to question the ways in which it tries to present itself. The game's setting works to gradually help players overcome the false consciousness of Comstock's dominant ideology, to realize that the utopian society he tries to present is actually marked by stark injustices and inequalities. Similarly, the game's narrative developments work towards deconstructing binary oppositions between good and evil or heroes and villains, instead eventually showing a number of characters and events in different lights. Through the narrative twist at the end of the game, this blurring and complication works not just in terms of one specific event or one particular society but is instead transferred to history and narrative itself, highlighting their constructedness and cautioning players not to believe in binary understandings of truth or reality.

From a postcolonial point of view, the game does not fully succeed in its project of deconstructing nationalist and colonialist ideologies and showing a successful revolution against an oppressive regime, mainly because it is, after all, presented and played from the perspective of the colonizing subject, a white male, and because it stresses individualism. It is not, in this sense, an instance of 'writing back' or 'counter discourse' (cf. Thieme 1). While the way the game exposes Daisy Fitzroy as, ultimately, succumbing to power herself and becoming almost as ruthless a leader as Comstock or Fink is important for complicating stable dichotomies of good and evil, her narrative treatment in the game's story is still troublesome, since she is the main representative and voice of the oppressed. After Fitzroy kills Fink and is about to also kill his son, it is actually Elizabeth who stabs her and thus saves the child. In these later parts, Fitzroy is presented as overly radical and violent, encouraging players to lose sympathy by showing her about to murder a child, thus demonstrating how a revolution can be taken too far (cf. Elmore 99-100). Still, if minorities are oppressed as much as they are in Columbia, Fitzroy's resorting to violence is also presented as one of the only options to end that oppression, and in this context, her final scene shows how Elizabeth, a white woman, literally backstabs and kills Fitzroy, a black woman, preventing her from rising to power. With the perspective constrained to white points of view and the major nonwhite character killed off, *BioShock Infinite* fails to truly depict a deconstruction of nationalistic and imperialistic ideologies. Yet the game itself is also more ambiguous in these efforts, since it does not, in the end, present Booker's involvement in the history of Columbia as a kind of 'white savior' narrative (cf. Hughey). Instead, the final scenes of the game suggest that in order to 'correct' the course of history, to end Comstock's oppressive hegemonic rule over Columbia, Booker/Comstock, the white male hegemon, has to be killed, so that the splitting of the worlds after his baptism never occurs. Accordingly, Elizabeth drowns him in the baptismal waters, suggesting that, at least in the universe we witness as players, this prevents Comstock from ever existing. In addition, it is

significant how the game sets up the overall engagement with Columbia's nationalistic ideology, by putting players in the position of the 'unmarked' powerful norm and gradually making Booker see the discrimination and oppression characterizing Columbian society, representing a way out of ideological indoctrination.

6. Conclusion

Overall, while *BioShock Infinite* might, at first glance, not engage with questions of colonialism or imperialism in its outward plot or gameplay, the analysis of its setting, history, and later narrative complications has hopefully shown how it deals with nationalism in more 'covert' and subtle ways, which can heighten the effect on players as they recreate a storyworld of what they witness. The game's cultural work thus lies particularly in providing a fantastic vessel through which nationalistic and oppressive tendencies in US society can be depicted in an exaggerated way, in turn prompting a reflection on US history along similar lines. In its efforts to make Columbia's ideology visible, to question clear-cut binaries, and to point to the constructedness of narratives and history, *BioShock Infinite* is effective precisely because it is a game, a text that has to be played and interacted with. Even though it features an ultimately quite linear main story, with relatively few narrative or gameplay decisions to be made, the way it has players actively explore the city of Columbia and tells a large part of its story spatially, making different reconstructions of the storyworld possible, demonstrates how the (inter)active engagement with a ludic text can also lead to an active rethinking of what is represented, and of how that representation works.

Notes

1. As a kind of alternate history, *BioShock Infinite* also shares many themes with its predecessor, the 2007 *BioShock*. Cf. Lizardi for a discussion of all games of the *BioShock* series as alternate histories, and cf. Schmeink for an analysis of *BioShock* in particular.

2. For a summary of this debate, cf., for instance, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al 189-204; and for examples of scholarship from these different approaches, cf. particularly Wardrip-

Fruin and Harrigan.

3. Calling a video game a kind of text might be controversial in the context of the ludology-narratology debate as well; here, I understand the term 'text' in its broadest cultural-studies sense, referring to a large range of genres, media, or, even more generally, "any organized set of discourses (and meanings)" (Lewis 403). My understanding of video games as 'narratively liminal,' in turn, owes to discussions within the research network "Narrative Liminality and/in the Formation of American Modernities", funded by the German Research Foundation.

4. Accordingly, this focus on storyworlds is also related to possible-worlds theory in narratology (cf. Ryan), as Herman equally notes: "[W]hen interpreting fictional narratives, recipients relocate to an alternative possible world, with a number of factors determining the accessibility relations between the fictional and the factual world" (15).

5. In postclassical narratology, this focus on reception, on the "interactions between narratives and recipients," is part of "cognitive approaches" to narrative (Sommer 152). In literary theory, reader-response criticism (e.g. in the work of Stanley Fish or Wolfgang Iser) puts a similar emphasis on the reader of a text.

6. Still, a number of gameplay elements could, of course, productively be read as relating to nationalistic and related discourses as well, such as the game's individualistic focus on one single person fighting against masses of enemies, the omnipresence of weapons, the different ways in which the player character's abilities can be augmented, etc. For related analyses of these gameplay aspects in the first *BioShock* game, cf. Packer 215-21; van den Berg 19-22.

7. In fact, the name 'Columbia' already hints at this nationalist impulse as well, as it references the figure of Columbia, who personifies the United States and who David Hackett Fischer traces back to the "goddess of liberty," having become an "American image of liberty and freedom" (234).

8. This aspect of choice in exploration works similarly in *BioShock* as well—cf., e.g., Tulloch; Schubert, "Objectivism."

9. This extends to Booker's whiteness as well—as the whole game is presented from his perspective, players only rarely get an idea of how he looks. Since all they see at the beginning of Columbia are other white people, they might, however, also assume Booker to be white, in line with Columbia's rulers' attempts at establishing whiteness as the 'norm.' This implicit assumption becomes more noticeable when players encounter nonwhite characters in these levels, and it is also made explicit by a few glimpses of seeing Booker in a mirror and by the nickname we learn he was given during Wounded Knee, 'the white injun.'

10. Presuming such knowledge also works similarly for the many anachronistic songs that are featured in Columbia. Cf. Ivănescu for a longer analysis of musical elements in *BioShock Infinite*, including these anachronisms.

11. In this case, *BioShock Infinite* presents a particularly crass example of the dangers of using the (mis)representation of history to support a specific ideology, which, of course, has been academically discussed with much more nuance and complexity. Nevertheless, this particular episode still relates to questions and problems raised in historiography, particularly in terms of the intermingling of history and narrative: cf. Jameson's dictum that "history is not a text, not a narrative, ... but ... it is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (35) and, particularly, White 142-68; Ankersmit.

12. For a more general understanding of narrative instability, cf. Schubert, "Lose Yourself."

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