

BIO SHOCK

For JMC, MC, both MEs, B and MN.

Nicolas Courcier, Mehdi El Kanafi and Raphaël Lucas

Foreword by Greg Zeschuk

BioShock. From Rapture to Columbia
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This educational publication created by Third Éditions is a tribute to the popular video game series *BioShock*.

The authors aim to tell a piece of the *BioShock* games’ story in this unique collection by deciphering the inspirations, context and content of these elements through reflections and original analyses.

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Cover art is inspired by the artwork in the *BioShock* video game series.

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FROM RAPTURE TO COLUMBIA



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FROM RAPTURE TO COLUMBIA

Foreword by Greg Zeschuk,
BioWare Studio Co-Founder

I grew up playing role-playing games and had the great fortune to begin my personal gaming quest in the late 1970s, when gaming really began. Over the years I continued to play almost every RPG that came out in an effort to remain informed on every new feature and approach used by the most modern games of the time. I also had the great fortune to be one of the founders of BioWare, and had the chance to work on a number of successful role-playing games. It's fair to say I have a bit of a passion for a well-made game.

So when I was asked to write a few words of introduction for one of my favorite games of all time, *BioShock*, I jumped at the chance. I felt I could share how the game really impacted me, and how it advanced the art of gaming.

In *BioShock*, like most games, the first few moments are an experience of exploration: learning the controls, learning how to explore the environment, and eventually achieving a certain level of comfort in your knowledge of how the world worked. *BioShock* was one of those rare games where that comfort never appeared. As a player I was always on edge, uncertain what to expect next, but I was also mesmerized by the world woven by the Irrational team.

BioShock was the one of first examples of what I would call environmental storytelling. Rather than hitting the player over the head with the narrative arc (like we tended to do at BioWare), *BioShock* embedded the story in its world, like breadcrumbs to follow. And, if you watched really carefully you would find subtle clues of what happened in Rapture. The more you searched, the more you learned about yourself, about Rapture, and of course about Andrew Ryan.

As gamers we're conditioned to anticipate boss fights with a level of grim enthusiasm. It seemed like Andrew Ryan was the big boss that we were going to battle, and the grand narrative carefully set up the encounter, but what you discovered as a player was completely different. The phrase "a man chooses, a slave obeys" has stuck with me ever since. And that is all I'll say about what I think is one of the most powerful moments I've experienced in a game. I'd expect that if you're reading this book, you've played *BioShock*, and in the rare case you haven't you need to play it immediately to understand the nature of man.

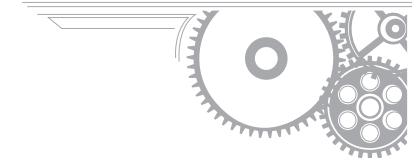
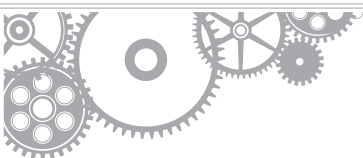
Greg Zeschuk

Greg Zeschuk was born in 1969. In 1995, he co-founded BioWare with Ray Muzyka. The two worked on *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*. After the publisher Electronic Arts purchased BioWare in 2012, the two founders left their positions and turned to various other professional ventures. Zeschuk's passion for beer, shared among all the writers of this work, led him to start a blog and show about the topic.

BIO SHOCK

FROM RAPTURE TO COLUMBIA

Preface



THE *BioShock* saga indisputably bears the mark of its creators. The team from the U.S. developer Irrational Games was led by Ken Levine, who made a name for himself with his first game, *System Shock 2*. The similarity between the two titles is no coincidence. Above all, it shows a connection between the sources of inspiration that drove their creations. The trademark word, *Shock*, seen again in the *BioShock Collection*, draws ties between games with extremely detailed gameplay. Behind the controller, the player has a wide variety of tools at his disposal, and is free to use them at his convenience. His playing technique depends directly on his own hopes and desires. Does he want to be strong and forceful? Or maybe a little more subtle? Does he expect to use reflection and anticipation as he moves forward? All of this is of course possible, because the range of actions is so open—despite the apparent simplicity of the first-person shooter (FPS) genre. The *Shock* identity is built and develops in an extremely detailed universe. It is coherent and credible, and offers a perfect environment for this open gameplay. While it is high quality, the established universe never actually defines the game. It accompanies it, envelops it, but remains a backdrop that could be swapped out for another. Finally, each part of the *Shock* saga sets itself apart with its mature, intelligent approach, which leads receptive players to carefully reflect on mankind and its dreams.

While this technical and artistic touch is effectively expressed through the various titles, it's also shown through the game's ability to progress and adapt over time. Although a fingerprint of the Irrational Games philosophy is found in all their games, *System Shock 2*, *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite* are distinguishable from one another. *System Shock* explores science fiction, trapping the player on a spacecraft, while *BioShock* enchants us with biopunk and Art Deco. Without a doubt, in a perfect world—without the pressure of an editor wanting to make a profit from a well-known name, or the weight of expectations from the fans of Irrational Games' previous game—the third installment, *BioShock Infinite*, taking place in the floating city of Columbia, would be called *InfiniteShock*.

In this *Shock* game, the *BioShock* saga first paved a path for its own diptych. It should be noted that narrative FPS games taking place in an underwater city are few and far between. Although they are part of a wider world of thought, they managed to introduce and complete a brilliant narrative arc setting their own standards. *BioShock* has its own identity, which is visual first and foremost. Green is a central color, and the humidity is so palpable that players trying the game feel claustrophobic. This saga is passionate in and of itself, and deserves our attention.

Sit back and let yourself be carried away into this adventure. Taking place in 1960, the game puts you in the role of Jack, a survivor from a plane crash in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. By chance, he discovers the underwater city of Rapture. Built by Andrew Ryan with the goal of creating a utopian society where the best minds of the 20th century would be fully free to practice their art and science, Rapture became the theater of a short-lived dream.

Next, settle into this canon, which will lift you through the clouds to Columbia, the floating city, held by the iron fist of the Prophet Comstock. We are now in 1912, playing the role of private investigator Booker DeWitt. You must find young Elizabeth, who possesses incredible powers that can create links to other dimensions.

Nicolas Courcier and Mehdi El Kanafi

Fascinated by print media since childhood, Nicolas Courcier and Mehdi El Kanafi wasted no time in launching their first magazine, *Console Syndrome*, in 2004. After five issues with distribution limited to the Toulouse region of France, they decided to found a publishing house under the same name. One year later, their small business was acquired by another leading publisher of works about video games. In their four years in the world of publishing, Nicolas and Mehdi published more than twenty works on major video game series, and wrote several of those works themselves: *Metal Gear Solid*, *Hideo Kojima's Magnum Opus*, *Resident Evil*, *Of Zombies and Men*, and *The Legend of Final Fantasy VII* and *IX*. Since 2015, they have continued their editorial focus on analyzing major video game series at a new publishing house that they founded together: Third.

Raphaël Lucas

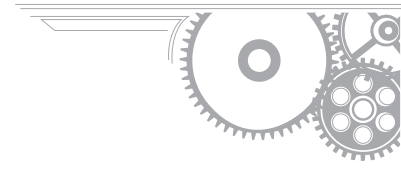
Raphaël has over fifteen years of experience in the world of video game writing. A reader of *Tilt* and a fan of a renowned French video game journalist AHL, he first pursued a university education. After obtaining a master's degree in history from the University of Paris 1, he then became a freelancer for *PC Team* before working for *Gameplay RPG* and *PlayMag*. In October 2004, he joined the group Future France and worked for *Joypad*, *PlayStation Magazine*, *Consoles +* and *Joystick*, not to mention a few other contributions to film magazines. Today, he writes for *Jeux Vidéo Magazine* as well as the magazine *The Game*. He is also the co-author of *The Legend of Final Fantasy IX*.

BIO SHOCK

FROM RAPTURE TO COLUMBIA

Introduction: A Genre Under Construction

No Gods or Kings. Only Man. – Rapture's motto



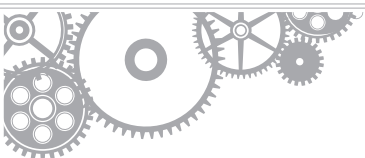
THE first installment of *BioShock* and its continuing saga weren't born out of nothing. Ken Levine's works are successors of earlier games and systems of thought. As such, the games can only be fully understood by looking back in history. This calls for a step back in time...

FROM PCS TO CONSOLES

After years marked by total abstruseness, the early 2000s saw the transition of PC games to the world of consoles. In market terms, game consoles had reached a general-public status, ensuring high popularity—but the PC market put up strong resistance, in particular by selling downloadable games through stores such as Steam.

Numerous PC-based developers, such as Warren Spector (*Deus Ex*, *Epic Mickey*), Peter Molyneux (*Populous*, *Fable*), and of course Ken Levine, began developing for consoles. In the same vein, numerous genres that were typically destined for PC gaming began migrating to consoles. This change certainly had numerous causes, one being Microsoft's arrival on the console market with Xbox (with architecture close to a PC). In addition, typical inconveniences in PC development were eliminated (games no longer had to be designed for a wide variety of configurations, as a console by nature has a stable internal architecture). Finally, there was the question of pirating—even though it exists on consoles, it is much more common on PCs. As a result, major developers such as Valve Corporation (*Portal 2*), BioWare (*Mass Effect*) and Bethesda Softworks (*Fallout 4* and *Skyrim*) entered the market, and the general mentality changed.

Game genres that were very popular on PCs invaded consoles, though they had to adapt. *BioShock* is a perfect example of this phenomenon, as it was developed both for PCs and consoles from the beginning. The first challenge when such an FPS game transitions from PC to console lies in adapting its maneuvers to the console controller. Headshot junkies will tell you that nothing beats the precision of a mouse. For this reason, console FPS games had to change to allow for different gameplay that is less based on the player's dexterity. We saw the arrivals of viewfinder assistance, a high impact tolerance and lower precision standards. In the same vein, game interfaces and even inventory management became simplified. With *BioShock*, Irrational Games chose to give up the complexity of the *System Shock 2* interface,



instead getting closer to an experience for the general public that was less complicated and obscure for non-experts. From a more technical standpoint, FPS games, which were once the standard for PC technology, often drain resources and use the latest graphics cards. They, too, had to adapt to a console transition. A game like *Crysis 2*, for example, still looks better on a PC but had to create visual and technical consistency between all versions. Despite the disappointment of the most avid PC players, we must admit that sales numbers reassured publishers in their hopes of migrating to consoles.

The results came quickly. After just a few years, FPS games are now just as big of a genre on consoles as they are on PCs. They have even gained a large following on consoles; *Call of Duty* is just one example that easily proves this. *BioShock* earned its stripes both on consoles and PCs. Even though Irrational Games continued supporting the PC market, *BioShock Infinite* was released for consoles at the same time. A whole game philosophy has developed on consoles, and although some games (MMORPGs, RTS games and highly complex simulations such as *Flight Simulator*) remain isolated in the world of PCs, there's no doubt that the publishers are working on all fronts to appropriately adapt them to the console market. *Final Fantasy XI* (2002) by Square Enix remains an attempt to migrate MMORPGs to consoles; on the other hand, *R.U.S.E.* (Ubisoft, 2010) succeeded in offering a console-based RTS game.

A NARRATIVE FPS

At its core, the first-person shooter (FPS) genre is a subjective-view game style in which the player must fight waves of enemies with a firearm. Games such as *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*, *Quake*, *Unreal Tournament* and *Duke Nukem* made FPS the leading genre in the industry. The strength of this style lies in its immersive abilities. The point of view used simulates the given character's field of vision and throws the player right in the heart of the action. Game genres were created by a handful of pioneers, but their definition and categorization has been distorted by the sheer number of games. FPS games follow this general rule. The immersive style created by the first-person view in action games primarily served to set the scene for battles. However, certain games quickly distinguished themselves by bringing more unique themes to the genre and using this subjective representation to better tell a story. *Deus Ex*, *Metroid Prime*, *King Kong* and *Half-Life* are examples from this group of games that use projection into the action to enhance narration. Although *BioShock* is still a shooter game, like its abovementioned predecessors, it also falls into the narrative FPS category.

How can a story be told from a subjective viewpoint? The first games that attempted to answer this question had to resolve certain issues. First, when the entire interactive part takes place in a subjective view, it becomes challenging to use cutscenes to move the story along. Video games have always had an eye on movies, which serve as a model that they continuously strive to follow. In a movie, the director has total control of what he wants to show the audience; in a video game, this guarantee doesn't exist. Developers must therefore skillfully manipulate the player's movements and attention, while also granting him freedom



for interaction. Narrative FPS games therefore juggle with the platform's own constraints rather than trying to mimic a movie.

In an FPS game, the fast-paced action is a key characteristic that often defines the genre. Most of the time, the player must overcome never-ending waves of enemies. The challenge, therefore, lies in introducing plot information in the middle of an onslaught of attacks. Imposing non-interactive cutscenes would interrupt the action and certainly break the flow of the adventure. Instead of taking control away from the player, Ken Levine chose to give *BioShock* a theatrical introduction. Through tricks such as lighting and sound, the game leads the player to look in the right place at the right time, without taking the control away from him. Levine drew inspiration from the theater to use powerful visual and audio effects to attract the player's attention, without ever making him give up control. Otherwise, Levine insists that he hates cutscenes and games that overuse them. As a player, he finds them so invasive that he frequently skips over them. He believes that cutscenes leave the player passive, and prevent him from compiling the information communicated through the medium—or, at least, make it less effective than if the player himself discovered the information by searching a level. Confirming these viewpoints, Levine says that he learned much more through *City 17* (the city where the adventure in *Half-Life 2* takes place) than in the entire universe of the *Final Fantasy* games, a saga that overuses cutscenes. For the Irrational Games team, the player's control of his avatar is a fundamental aspect that must be preserved. In *BioShock*, the player can always turn away from the action... at the risk of permanently changing the effects of the introduction and their own understanding of the story. But what would happen if the player decided to kill a character that was important to the story? To resolve this issue, Levine limited interaction with non-player characters that are critical to the plot by placing them out of the protagonist's reach (behind a window, out of sight speaking over a radio, etc.). This is an effective strategy for preserving a certain level of consistency while also giving the player complete control of his avatar at all times, with no risk of compromising plot advancement and understanding of the storyline. In *BioShock*, the only time that Levine takes back the player's control of his avatar is during a critical, very symbolic sequence: the scene where the protagonist meets Andrew Ryan. Until then, it is Frank Fontaine, under the pseudonym Atlas, that controls Jack—and, by extension, the player—through the request "Would you kindly." Ken Levine deliberately chose to take control of the character away from the player for the moment when Ryan is introduced. This sequence is not playable, as the decision to kill Ryan does not lie with the player but rather with Fontaine, who continues pulling the strings for this moment in the adventure. Levine states that when Ryan decides to let himself be killed, he is in fact addressing the ultimate insult to the player (as he cannot react) by confirming that he would have controlled his destiny to the end. After this scene, the player finally regains control of the character and can make his own decisions. Fontaine's mental control has finally stopped. Ken Levine wanted to make the player understand retrospectively that he had been manipulated the whole time, before giving him the opportunity to truly control his fate.