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# Bioshock: Infinite as the Mirror of America?

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**Abstract:** Few mainstream computer games have caused such controversy as *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013). The third instalment of the *Bioshock* series is set in the fictional city of Columbia in an alternate history of the early twentieth century, which at first glance appears to be a perfect social utopia. After a while, however, the narrative begins to uncover the multilayered problems of society oppressed by a fraction of the white elite and religious fanaticism. The popularity of the game is not only due to the attractive audiovisual processing and complex game mechanics. It is primarily a story that uses an unprecedented amount of religious symbolism – especially Christian symbols, historical references, polysemic story elements, and a story based on the concepts of frontier myth and American exceptionalism. This work will deal with analysing these phenomena, especially those directly related to the religious and nationalistic topics in the United States.

## Keywords

*Bioshock*; Religion; Politics; Videogames; American Exceptionalism; The Frontier Myth.

**Abstract:** Málakterá mainstreamová počítačová hra vyvolala svým zasazením a příběhem takovou kontroverzi, jako *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013). Třetí díl série *Bioshock*, která po celém světě prodala přes 25 milionů kopií (z toho B:I 11 milionů), je zasazený do fiktivního města Columbia na počátku dvacátého století, které se na první pohled jeví jako dokonalá společenská utopie. Již po chvíli začne ovšem narativ odkrývat mnohovrstevné problémy společnosti utlačované zlomkem bílé elity a náboženským fanatismem. Obliba hry není dána jen přitažlivým audiovizuálním zpracováním a komplexními herními mechanikami. Jde především o příběhovou stránku užívající na produkt určený pro masové publikum až nebývalé množství náboženské symboliky – zejména křesťanské, dále historických odkazů a polysémických příběhových prvků. Tento článek se bude zabývat analýzou nábožensko-společenských fenoménů objevujících se ve hře. Zejména se zaměří na ty, které jsou přímo spojeny s náboženskými a nacionalistickými tématy ve Spojených státech.

## Klíčová slova

*Bioshock*; náboženství; politika; videohry; mýtus americké výjimečnosti; mýtus o hranici.

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- “Where am I?”
- “Heaven, friend, or as close as we’ll see ‘til judgement day.”

With these words, the white-clad monk introduces the main protagonist Booker DeWitt to the flying city of Columbia. In the middle of a room bathed in sunlight shining through stained glass stands a statue of a man whose face, adorned with a massive beard, reflects determination. On the inscription below him stands: “Zachary Hale Comstock, our Prophet”. The year is 1912, and Booker has only one goal. Find and bring the girl called Elizabeth and wipe away the debt. So the story of redemption, power, and free will but also racism, politics, and religion begins.

*Bioshock: Infinite* (2013) is a single-player first-person shooter with a linear story ending in a set way. It is a genre of action-adventure with RPG<sup>1</sup> elements. The game is playable on all major platforms of its time (Windows, PS3 / 4, Xbox 360 / One, OSX and Linux). The game’s narrative contains elements of retrofuturism and alternate history – it is based on historical events, which, however, have developed differently than in the real world, and it shows advanced technologies the way people from the period imagined them. The narrative depends heavily on the multiverse theory. The multiverse is a theory of the existence of many universes coexisting side by side. Although the term is a mere hypothesis in science, it is often used in popular culture, especially the science fiction genre, mainly in connection with the motive of human decision-making. The consequences of every human choice are reflected in one of these parallel universes.

*Bioshock: Infinite* is the third part of an economically and critically acclaimed series. The first two parts were set in the underwater city of Rapture, which was created as a refuge for the elite of its time (the 1960s)<sup>2</sup>. Although this paper deals with the analysis of only the third part of the series, it is impossible not to mention the two previous games. Due to their narrative differences and emphasis on non-religious components, an attempt to include the narrative of the entire game-world would be beyond the capacity and intention of this work. However, to introduce the context to readers with no previous knowledge of the series, it will be necessary to at least outline the foundations on which *Bioshock: Infinite* is based.

The first volume was developed by 2K Boston (later renamed to Irrational Games) and was released in 2007 for PC and consoles. The concept was created by a team around game veteran Ken Levin, the man behind *Bioshock*’s spiritual forerunner, the space sci-fi horror *System Shock* (1995).

<sup>1</sup> The player goes through a story with one or more characters and acts on behalf of these characters according to the given rules. Apart from the medium of video games, the genre is also popular as a board game (Dungeons and Dragons, Shadowrun, GURPS), or within the so-called larp (live action role-playing).

<sup>2</sup> BRITTANY KUHN, “The Architecture of Bioshock as Metaphor for Ayn Rand’s Objectivism”, *Gamevironments* 5 (2016): p. 155.

## Bioshock 1

The first *Bioshock* introduced several key elements that can be found in *Bioshock: Infinite*. The theme of social dystopia, originally intended as an ideal society, was based on the idea of objectivism, specifically on the works of American philosopher and writer Ayn Rand.

The game takes place in 1960 in the underwater city of Rapture, in which objectivist magnate Andrew Ryan (a reference to Ayn Rand) sought to create a thriving utopia for the social elites, which would be protected from the power of any state government. Especially after discovering the ADAM substance, which gave people superhuman abilities, the whole city flourished significantly. However, the player arrives in the city after the shortage of ADAM begins to affect its inhabitants fully. The whole society has disintegrated, and the main character finds himself in the submarine ruins inhabited by Splicers – once full members of society, but now beings irreversibly affected by addiction and the harmful effects of the ADAM substance and its withdrawal. The story is presented retrospectively, with sound recordings scattered throughout the game. In the beginning, the main character named Jack comes to Rapture by accident – after a plane crash, in which he is the sole survivor and is saved by swimming to a strange lighthouse in the middle of the sea.

The distinctive art deco style of the game, many innovative and unique game elements, a strong (and very authentically approached) theme, as well as the fusion of several game genres meant that both players and critics enthusiastically accepted the game, and a strong fan base was formed around it.

## Bioshock 2

The wait for the sequel was not long. In 2010, the second *Bioshock* was released. Again, it was set in the underwater Rapture, but this time the player's character is DELTA, the fourth attempt to create Big Daddy, a giant half-artificial sentinel of the city. The setting was preserved, but the development team changed, and almost no one from the original creators worked on the title. The sequel did not reach the qualities of its predecessor but still had decent sales. Thus, the path to the third *Bioshock* was open.

## Bioshock: Infinite

The third *Bioshock* emerged from the depths of the sea into the clouds. Another form of dystopia was created here. *Bioshock: Infinite* is a sci-fi video game with steampunk<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Steampunk is a retrofuturistic science fiction subgenre. It usually mixes old, Victorian visuals with modern technology. Futuristic elements are often achieved by inserting newer technologies into older ones, or by contrasting them. For example, the city of Columbia in *Bioshock: Infinite* floats

elements set in 1912 in the flying city of Columbia. Columbia was originally founded by self-proclaimed prophet Zachary Hale Comstock as a religious refuge for his followers. Physicist Rosalinda Lutece has discovered a way to make the city fly. Comstock then took advantage of this opportunity, broke away from America and turned Columbia into a floating, sovereign city-state. However, for the whole city, its maintenance workers live in slave conditions – Black people, Asians, the Irish, and other minorities. This apartheid-based state is based on observing religious commandments, the will of the prophet, and the idea of the exceptionalism of the United States.

*Bioshock: Infinite* emerges from the storyline of its predecessors but retains the iconic elements of the series, such as controlling supernatural abilities and retrospective storytelling with sound recordings in various locations. However, it adds a stronger plot and a helper character – Elizabeth, who accompanies the protagonist, Booker, most of the game.

The designers in the game used images from a wide range of American Christianity to create the game aesthetics, narratives, and world. Examples of these significant Christian motifs include preacher figures, priests, biblical stories, and Bible-like language. The player can hear chants and walk through church-like buildings. Baptism and rebirth motifs have an essential role here.

The centre of life in Columbia is religion. Power and government in Columbia take place entirely in the context of the city's official religion and come only from the founder of both the religion and the city, Zachary Hale Comstock. The city grew out of believers who followed Comstock's new pseudo-Christian religion. He established Columbia as a refuge for his followers and created a political structure that derived all its power from religion. Rules, laws, customs, and entertainment are tools filled with religious elements. In Columbia, politics and religion are entirely merged so that even the city's civic events are part of the official religion. For example, the city's Independence Day celebrations are considered religious holidays. In this city, all aspects of social life are determined by the religious hegemon and serve to maintain the status quo of Comstock's power.

The language of evangelical symbolism is transformed into an unusual setting – the predominant form of religiosity is directed at the Founding Fathers and the Prophet Comstock, who are depicted in statues or paintings as Christian saints. The history of the United States is mythical and emphasises the critical role of angels in the formation of a levitating city.

From the perspective of the main antagonist Comstock and his followers, the American nation is the alpha and omega of Columbian predominant religious ideology. It is defined as something created and ruled by the white man and singles out minorities as “alien hordes.” The American Civil War is seen as the most shameful betrayal of these principles because it deprived white people of a God-given right to dominate others. Here, the symbolic language is complemented by the racist rhetoric

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with a breakthrough in quantum mechanics, but still uses video playback technology in a way it was known in 1912.

of the Ku Klux Klan and other religious-political groups in US history who advocated the right to a white-only government.

The unsustainable situation of the United States after the Civil War required change, in the eyes of Comstock and his followers. They fled from the pluralistic (or at least less bigoted) territory of America to the clouds to form a society that would function according to their principles. However, the entire Exodus would not be complete until everything else had been wiped out. In the game, Comstock dreams of a Judgment Day, in which everything that does not follow the idea of white supremacy will be literally destroyed in a fire. This millennial expectation is a radicalised view that appears in the very foundations of the evangelical faith. It was transformed into a militant cult awaiting but also actively seeking the End Times.

The popularity of the game and its stable place at the highest ranks of various popularity charts is not only due to the attractive audiovisuals and complex game mechanics. It is primarily a story that uses an unprecedented amount of religious symbolism for a product intended for a mass audience – especially Christian, historical references and polysemic story elements. Although a large number of science fiction motifs appear throughout the work, these can only be taken as a kind of metaphor or tinsel designated to make the product more attractive to a potential customer. These motifs do not necessarily interfere with the story itself, which could take place in many other times and places, but it deals with the timeless questions – man’s role in society, authority and relationship to the transcendent and his representatives on earth.

This is not the first work to address *Bioshock: Infinite*, but it is one of the first to analyse the religious side of the game. Several scholars have already dealt with the political message, the concept of dystopia, systemic racism, or the ludological and narratological aspects of the game. However, only minor works have been created on the image of religion in the game.

Here I must mention the works of Frank Bosman<sup>4</sup>, Jan Wysocki<sup>5</sup> and Wildt and Aupers<sup>6</sup>, who dealt with the game from the position of religious studies. For others, such as Heidbrink<sup>7</sup>, the *Bioshock* series also appears, but only very marginally and in the company of many other games.

<sup>4</sup> FRANK BOSMAN, “The Lamb of Comstock: Dystopia and Religion in Video Games” [online], *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014): 162–182, available online at <https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/the-lamb-of-comstock-dystopia-and-religion-in-video-games>; FRANK BOSMAN, “Accept Your Baptism, and Die!: Redemption, Death and Baptism in Bioshock Infinite”, *Gamevironments* 6 (2017): p. 100–129.

<sup>5</sup> JAN WYSOCKI, “Critique with Limits—The Construction of American Religion in BioShock: Infinite”, *Religions* 9 (2018): p. 150[–164].

<sup>6</sup> LARS DE WILDT and STEF AUPERS, “Playing the Other: Role-Playing Religion in Videogames”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22 (5–6, 2018): 867–884, August 2018.

<sup>7</sup> SIMONE HEIDBRINK, TOBIAS KNOLL, and JAN WYSOCKI, “Theorizing Religion in Digital Games. Perspectives and Approaches”, *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (February 2014). Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, and Jan Wysocki, “Venturing into the Unknown’(?) Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming”, *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 7 (2015): 61–84.

A preliminary analysis of *Bioshock: Infinite* suggests that one of the predominant ways to develop narrative fidelity and cohesion is by applying the myth of American exceptionalism and the frontier myth to its narrative world. Myth is a form of a cultural narrative that Janice Hocker Rushing describes as the means by which cultures are defined. It refers to myth as a form of rhetorical reality that is not meant to serve as a copy of the world lived but is created by repeatedly telling fantastic and fictional stories.<sup>8</sup> Myth functions as a form of the cultural narrative that implicitly or explicitly defends moral decisions that unite or divide the community.<sup>9</sup> Some myths also serve as building blocks of national identity. This article examines how events, characters, themes, and myths from history are used, combined, and altered to create a specific image of religion for the mass audience of an ever-growing group of video game players.

The basis for understanding the specific elements in *Bioshock: Infinite* is to understand the context surrounding the development and release of the game. *Bioshock: Infinite* was created and published at a time when political perception among people aged 18–35 began to grow as politicians began to use alternative media sources to reach younger voters. These statistics suggest that the age group playing video games is more aware of the political news conveyed by these sources than others, but these people mostly do not want to be active in political life.

In parallel with these changes in political perception, the number of young individuals not associated with organised religion is increasing. Most of this growing part of the population has increased distrust of the mixing of religion with politics and the correlation of religious affiliation and certain social and political beliefs. The faith and its manifestations have played and continue to play an important role in American life, and in the past, they served as an advocate for many early colonists settling in America. Religious themes have been ubiquitous throughout most of American history, and the United States Constitution contains special protections for religious freedoms. However, while America remains the most religious industrialised nation in the world,<sup>10</sup> the number of younger Americans who profess religious affiliation is declining.<sup>11</sup> So while America remains a religious nation, most videogamers (people aged 18–30) are still apathetic to organised religion. Besides, an increasing number of individuals think that there is too much religious rhetoric in politics and believe that churches and religious institutions should not have a place in politics.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> WALTER R. FISHER, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument”, *Communication Monographs* 51 (March 1984): 1–22.

<sup>9</sup> JANICE HOCKER RUSHING, “Mythic Evolution of ‘The New Frontier’ in Mass Mediated Rhetoric”, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (September 1986): 265–96.

<sup>10</sup> CLAUDE FISHER, MICHAEL HOUT, et al., “Event Transcript: Religion Trends in the U.S.” [online], *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), August 2013, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/19/event-transcript-religion-trends-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>11</sup> FRANK NEWPORT, “This Easter, Smaller Percentage of Americans Are Christian” [online], *Gallup.com*, April 2009, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/117409/Easter-Smaller-Percentage-Americans-Christian.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> FISHER and HOUT, “Event Transcript”, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/19/event-transcript-religion-trends-in-the-u-s/>; NEWPORT, “This Easter, Smaller Percentage of Americans Are Chris-

While people aged 18–30 are among the fastest-growing demographics of those who do not belong to any church, there are several reasons for the decline in religious affiliation in the United States. The dissatisfaction with the perceived connection between religion and politics may have been caused by the fact that the view of religion has steadily deteriorated in public life. As a video game, *Bioshock: Infinite* has a unique voice in this regard, as it conveys political and religious topics to a group of people who do not usually intentionally seek them out. Also, *Bioshock: Infinite*, which is critical of the mixing of religion and politics, probably resonates with this group, which appears to be sceptical of both institutions.

This rise in apathy towards organised religion and the decrease in active political participation also corresponds to the emergence of the so-called Tea Party Movement, a right-wing conservative movement inspired by the Boston Tea Party Movement, a protest party against unfair commodity taxation in the second half of the 18th century. They are generally perceived as a movement with strong religious undertones. While the development of *Bioshock: Infinite* began in late 2007, the decision and some key narrative elements were not decided until 2009.

The popularity of the Tea Party Movement among conservatives has increased the religious rhetoric present in politics and at least partially supported the fusion of not only religious affiliation and conservative politics but also religious affiliation and deep patriotism.<sup>13</sup> Some voices from the Tea Party Movement justify some of their positions by quoting their desire to return to the Founding Constitution.<sup>14</sup> The movements gave the Founders who created the Constitution a mythical status.<sup>15</sup> Some even suggest divine inspiration when creating the document. This mythical state, combined with divine inspiration, gives the Constitution a sacred status. For these movements, the Constitution serves as the founding document of the United States of America and the basis of the myth of American exceptionalism. The fundamental mission here is to advocate the need to return to the basic principles that the Founding Fathers created to save the nation from destruction. These occasions surrounded the development of *Bioshock: Infinite* and influenced the messages contained in the game and their ability to resonate with the audience.

As video games are gradually becoming a medium with a greater focus on the story, creators are becoming more and more aware of the narrative potential to reflect the context of the real world in which games are created and published. Religious and political themes in *Bioshock: Infinite* focus strongly on the myth of American exceptionalism and the frontier myth. Myths frame political and social events rather than

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tion”, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/117409/Easter-Smaller-Percentage-Americans-Christian.aspx>.

<sup>13</sup> JARED GOLDSTEIN, “Can Popular Constitutionalism Survive the Tea Party Movement?”, *Northwestern University Law Review* 105 (January 2015): p. 1807–20.

<sup>14</sup> GOLDSTEIN, “Can Popular Constitutionalism Survive the Tea Party Movement?”, p. 1808.

<sup>15</sup> GOLDSTEIN, “Can Popular Constitutionalism Survive the Tea Party Movement?”, p. 1807–19.

empirical evidence.<sup>16</sup> Because myths are a form of cultural narrative, they can often be seen in narrative messages presented by the media of a given culture.<sup>17</sup> The media that culture creates (including video games) can reflect or help create the prevailing interpretations of the public.

## The myth of American exceptionalism

The myth of American exceptionalism is centred around the belief that America is a unique and superior nation with a special role in human history.<sup>18</sup> This belief is a critical element of the American national identity and an integral part of American politics. In general, the public relies on the rhetoric of American political leaders, which gives the outside world the appearance of order. The rhetoric of myth expresses this sense of order and understanding of the outside world.<sup>19</sup> The language used by political leaders to speak about these ideas and situations creates a link between the American public and the outside world, from which the public draws its understanding of the world around them. The rhetoric used by American political leaders shapes political reality and informs the way this political reality is understood. The language used in American politics also sets out the principles that define how America works in the world. These principles are expressed in the so-called Great American Ideals,<sup>20</sup> originating in the myth of American exceptionalism.

In this work, I will discuss the myth of American exceptionalism as identified by Jason Edwards, who cites three main components of this belief: “The United States is a special nation with a special destiny.” “The United States is qualitatively different from Europe” and “The United States can escape the trap of history.”<sup>21</sup> A closer look at these three components reveals various elements of the myth of American exceptionalism.

The belief that the United States is a special nation with a special destiny stems from colonial notions that God chose the United States to play a special role in history. This belief allows America to sincerely believe that its foreign and domestic political actions are being carried out with good intentions while believing that other

<sup>16</sup> RICHARD SLATTA, “Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier”, *European Journal of American Culture* 29 (July 2010): 81–92, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.29.2.81\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.29.2.81_1).

<sup>17</sup> JOSEPH M. VALENZANO and ERIKA ENGSTROM, “Cowboys, Angels, and Demons: American Exceptionalism and the Frontier myth in the CW’s Supernatural” [online], *Communication Quarterly* 62 (5, 2014): 552–568, available online at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01463373.2014.949388?journalCode=rcqu20>.

<sup>18</sup> MARY E. STUCKEY, “The Donner Party and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion”, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14 (January 2011): 229–260.

<sup>19</sup> JASON A. EDWARDS, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World: President Clinton’s Foreign Policy Rhetoric*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008, p. 2–7.

<sup>20</sup> EDWARDS, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, p. 3–5.

<sup>21</sup> EDWARDS, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, p. 6.



nations will want to imitate American policies.<sup>22</sup> The idea that the United States will be qualitatively different from Europe also comes from the colonial era. America was a place that the colonists considered virgin, pure, and where people could build a civilisation based on ideas, values, and principles different from the rest of the world.<sup>23</sup> These unique ideas, values, and principles served as the basis for the United States Constitution, which created the governmental structure necessary for America to become the largest Republican society in the world while breaking free from the corruption and mistakes of European policy. That allowed America to justify its difference from the rest of the world constantly. A third component of the myth of American excellence is the belief that the United States can escape the trap of history. The American Founders argued that the United States could escape the inevitable decline that all previous great civilisations have experienced, thanks to America's unique geographical location, the system of government, divine leadership, and destiny. This is also linked to the idea that America's exceptionalism is never fully realised. The myth of American exceptionalism stems more from the *potential* of what America *could be* than from what it *really is*. This promotes a sense of superiority and difference that justifies constant efforts to improve oneself and the rest of the world. It is believed, then, that this constant desire for improvement allows America to escape the inevitable fall that awaits all the great powers over time and often leads to challenges to an ideological return to some mythical golden age.<sup>24</sup>

The frontier myth is a fundamental myth of the United States. *Bioshock: Infinite* has its roots in the myth of American exceptionalism. The moral framework provides the basis for the many attitudes and ideologies that form the myth of American exceptionalism and that we can discover in the game. *Bioshock: Infinite* relies within the narrative world on the overlap of these myths, especially in the character of Comstock and the floating city of Columbia. Their use emphasises religious elements within the myth of American exceptionalism, which we will focus on below.

### Comstock as a Divine element

Just as the Puritans settled in the New World, Comstock founded Columbia and created the "New Eden" to create a new, ideal religious society. His mission is based on a divine mandate and is justified by the fabricated religious myth, which Comstock uses to support his claims to be a man associated with divinity. Through this divine authority, he seeks to enforce his moral framework to justify and expand his vision of a perfect society.

<sup>22</sup> EDWARDS, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> EDWARDS, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> EDWARDS, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, *passim*.

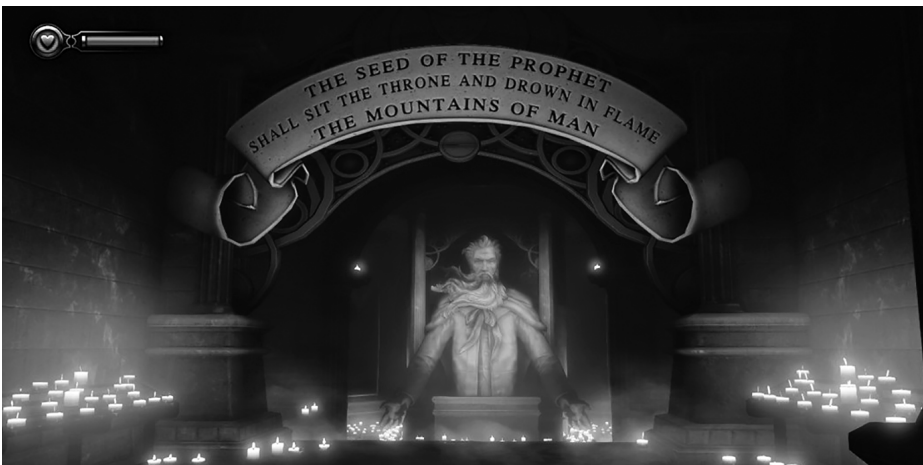
## A special nation, a special destiny

A part of the myth of American exceptionalism is born of the idea that the founding of America was directly led by God, who chose the United States to have a special place in human history. The same idea is at the heart of the divine claims of Comstock and Columbia, as is captured in one of the records of Comstock’s sermon:

*“And then, the Archangel showed a vision: a city, lighter than air. I asked her, ‘Why do you show this to me, Archangel? I’m not a strong man. I’m not a righteous man. I am not a holy man.’ And she told me the most remarkable thing: ‘You’re right, Prophet. But if grace is within the grasp of one such as you, how can anyone else not see it in themselves?’”<sup>25</sup>*

Comstock claims that Columbia is of divine origin. At the same time, he directly connects himself with the deity by being called a Prophet by an archangel. The divine origin of Columbia gives the city a purpose and a certain destiny. In another recording, Comstock describes Columbia as the “School of God.” He uses this term to justify his racist government. He gives examples of God’s cruelty to show how instructive he can be. By declaring that he has the same intentions as God, Comstock justifies his actions, lends them gravity, and creates the idea that everything that happens in Columbia does so with God’s sanctification. In one of his significant sermons, Comstock also suggests that the city is a herald of God’s wrath against the “Sodom down there.”

The divine fate of Columbia is also evident in one of the first paintings the player sees in the city concerning God’s judgment: “The seed of the Prophet’s seed shall sit the throne and drown in the flame the Mountains of Man.”

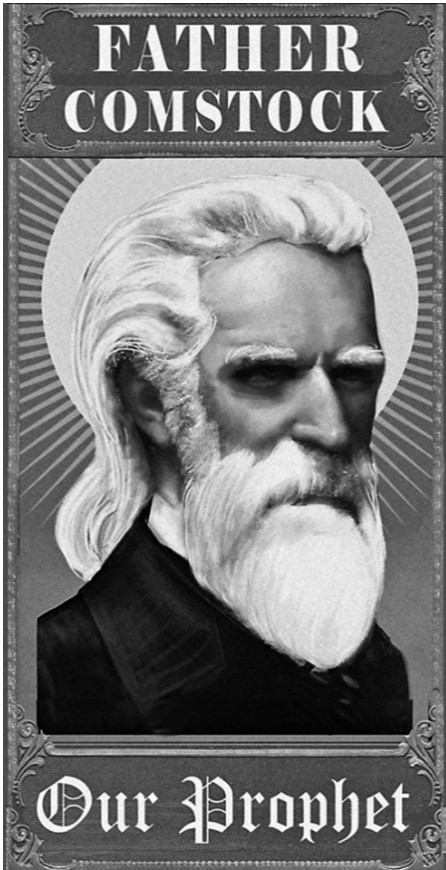


Propaganda: an example from the beginning of *Bioshock: Infinite*

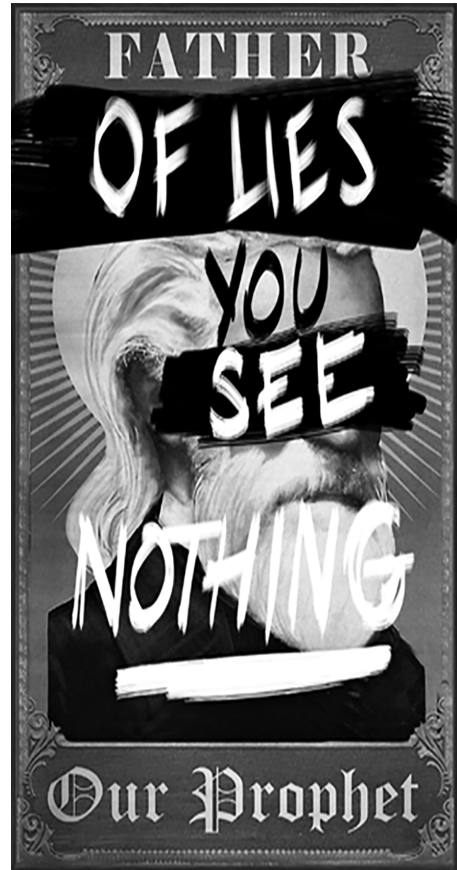
<sup>25</sup> Transcript available online at <https://Bioshock.fandom.com/wiki/Undeserving>.

The language is similar to the language of the King James Bible. The prophecy itself speaks of the future of the city when Comstock's descendants will fulfil the divine destiny of the city and destroy the world on earth (and in the multidimensional story, in one of the realities where an elderly Elizabeth rules Columbia, this will happen) This connection between Columbia's fate and the Comstock dynasty forms the basis of the moral framework that Comstock strives for. This framework functions exclusively as an extension of the religion that places Comstock at the centre of everything. His divinity is based on the belief that as a prophet, he regularly receives divine visions of the future. His position as a divine prophet is promoted throughout Columbia – on posters with the words “Father Comstock, our Prophet,” kinetoscopes with propaganda about the “Gift of Father Comstock's prophecy,” and praising his ability to see into the future.

The above-mentioned Seed of the Prophet is an essential motive within the whole religious system: the centre of his prophecy, the future of Columbia, Elizabeth – the



Columbian propaganda – an example from the game *Bioshock: Infinite*



Propaganda of Vox Populi using Z. H. Comstock's propaganda

Lamb. By tying the destiny of his family, whose claim to power is based on the proclamation of divinity, and the city's destiny, the idea of "a special nation, a special destiny" incorporates the idea of "a divine man, a divine destiny". Comstock uses this as the basis to justify its actions and the existence of Columbia.

Comstock's divinity is almost unconditionally accepted by the city's white citizens and equally unconditionally rejected by minority residents. When the player leaves the Comstock Church building and enters the city for the first time, he sees a majestic statue of Comstock. However, the citizens standing under it claim that even the statue "cannot capture his divinity". Apart from a few episodic characters, the only real opposition to the infallibility and divinity of Zachary Hale Comstock is the revolutionary, minority-driven Vox Populi movement. First, in a few places and after the outbreak of the Civil War, the player already openly finds the vandalised posters "Father Comstock, our Prophet", which now read "Father of lies, you see nothing!". Another poster says, "Tell us Prophet, did you see us coming?" Vox denies Comstock's divinity, which is however widely accepted by the white people of Columbia with his presentation of "divine man/nation, divine destiny."

### **The qualitative difference from the old world**

Although Booker and Elizabeth reveal Comstock's lies, these revelations do not reach the city's residents. Their belief in Columbia's divine mission thus remains intact, and the city is still perceived as qualitatively different from the old world. America is the old world here. Columbia withdrew from the "union" after the US Congress condemned the decimation of Beijing after the Boxer Rebellion. Because Columbia is ruled and founded by God, the United States' opposition to it cannot be tolerated. Comstock believed that the founding of America was also led by God, but America gradually turned away from its divine mission.

References to American roots appear in various forms throughout the city. The Founding Fathers have giant statues right in the Comstock Church, and citizens pray to them regularly. The Columbia flag contains 13 horizontal red and white stripes, with a white star in the middle on the blue coat of arms.

Despite all the references and similarities, Columbia is perceived by its white, privileged citizens as clearly better than America, the old world. This difference stems primarily from the idea that Columbia, not America, is the nation that genuinely follows God's path, and therefore God's destiny awaits it.

### **Escape from the trap of history**

Comstock believes that Columbia will be able to escape the so-called trap of history if it follows the divine path revealed to the city through Comstock's prophecy. "The seed of the prophet shall sit on the throne and drown in flame the Mountains



The flag and banner of Columbia, based on the visual of the US flag  
Columbia also celebrates every 6th July as its own Independence Day – an event of secession from the United States.

of Man.” Comstock believes the Archangel told him that the city would only exist as long as his descendants were in power. One of his main goals, therefore, is to secure his succession. However, he cannot have any offspring with Lady Comstock because using interdimensional tears has made him sterile. Therefore, he uses this machine to obtain a descendant from a parallel world. As the player finds out at the end of the story, Elizabeth is Booker’s daughter. She was abducted by Comstock (i.e. Booker from another reality) into his dimension as a toddler. Because Columbia’s future rests on this descendant, Comstock locks Elizabeth in a giant tower – a statue of an angel in the middle of the city – to hide her and then study and control her ability to open interdimensional tears-portals to parallel dimensions.

Comstock has also created the character of the “False Shepherd”, who will come and “lead the Lamb astray” to prevent any attempt by Booker DeWitt to save his daughter and disrupt the prophecy. He then killed anyone who knew the true origins of Elizabeth to prevent her from learning the truth, and to protect her carefully constructed myth of divinity.

In addition to the prophecy and the need for the Comstock Line, the people of Columbia believe that they have already achieved an ideal utopian society that, unlike all previous societies, is immune to degradation and decay. Part of “trying to escape the trap of history” in the myth of American exceptionalism is the idea that America has not yet reached true greatness but is constantly striving to improve to achieve it. On the other hand, Columbia already believes it has reached its peak and calls the

city “Heaven”. The fundamentalist society of the city is characterised by very polite, orderly and law-abiding people and practical observance of God’s orders involving racial segregation with a white society at the top.

In *Bioshock: Infinite*, however, the ideal society is an illusion. Comstock’s divinity is found to be of human origin during the game, and his divine mission is thwarted by the rebel group Vox Populi and Booker DeWitt. Once Booker gains weapons for the Vox Populi in one game mission, the movement begins its own intervention in the form of total civil war in the streets. Violently enforcing its ideology, seeking to eliminate the Founders, and destroying their way of life by recklessly killing the people of Columbia, the movement makes the city a burning ruin as an act of revenge for their mistreatment. Through this violence, Vox Populi proves that their mission is no better than Comstock’s. As a result, Booker must use violence against both sides during the game to protect Elizabeth, and in the end, Comstock, Columbia, and Vox are erased from existence through Booker’s voluntary sacrifice of his own life.

## The frontier myth

A significant extension of the myth of American exceptionalism is the frontier myth. It is a central element of American national identity; evolving since the times of the oldest colonists, it still continues to influence many aspects of political and social life.<sup>26</sup> The frontier myth, born of a desire to promote Western expansion, thus appears in American society to such an extent that it is an American “secular creation story”<sup>27</sup>. Slatta notes that this myth is still strong even though many of its motives have already been debunked, such as the image of the American cowboy as a harsh and self-sufficient lone wolf, when historical records show that community and reliance were necessary for survival in the Old West.<sup>28</sup> Through the prism of the frontier myth, the frontier does not appear to be an obstacle, but it is “something that should be explored and conquered through American expansion and intervention.”<sup>29</sup> The expansive behaviour depicted in the frontier myth thus serves as one of the logical manifestations of the accepted myth of American exceptionalism.<sup>30</sup> *Bioshock: Infinite* uses these myths extensively to portray characters and environments, thus inserting messages into the narrative world.

<sup>26</sup> MARK CRONLUND ANDERSON, “The Mythical Frontier, the Mexican Revolution, and the Press: An Imperial Subplot” [online], *UTP Journals: University of Toronto Press*, July 2007, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/abs/10.3138/cras.37.1.001>.

<sup>27</sup> ANDERSON, “The Mythical Frontier, the Mexican Revolution, and the Press: An Imperial Subplot”, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> SLATTA, “Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier”, p. 86–87.

<sup>29</sup> VALENZANO and ENGSTROM, “Cowboys, Angels, and Demons: American Exceptionalism and the Frontier myth in the CW’s Supernatural”, p. 552–568.

<sup>30</sup> VALENZANO and ENGSTROM, “Cowboys, Angels, and Demons: American Exceptionalism and the Frontier myth in the CW’s Supernatural”, p. 552–568.

Unlike American exceptionalism, which focuses on general values and ideologies, the frontier myth focuses on specific characters and environments embodying the ideologies and values embedded in the myth. The role of the frontier myth in the idea of founding America is crucial to these ideologies. Bercovitch argues that the frontier myth arose as a Puritan myth about the founding of the country in the early stages of settlement and the founding of America.<sup>31</sup> The Puritans settled in the New World to escape religious persecution in Europe and established the “New Israel” in a wilderness that was qualitatively different from the Old World.<sup>32</sup> The Puritan mission to America was ideologically rooted in Biblical stories, and their behaviour was interpreted according to Christian traditions. According to Bercovitch, these purely Puritan rather than general Christian interpretations established

*“a moral framework within which a certain complex of attitudes, assumptions and beliefs can be taken for granted as being not only proper, but right.”*<sup>33</sup>

This moral framework justified the attitudes and actions characteristic of the frontier myth.

In an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding Donner’s expedition<sup>34</sup>, Stuckey defined four characteristics of the frontier myth: (1) *erasure of indigenous peoples and other “non-whites”*; (2) *the triumph of American civilisation over the wild frontier*; (3) *the triumph of individual aggression to sustain the community*; and (4) *the imperative and value of social mobility in American democracy and the price of immobilisation*.<sup>35</sup> According to Rushing, these characteristics manifest themselves within the frontier myth through the dialectical opposition of the values of individualism and community.<sup>36</sup> From this conflict, other opposing values emanate from the various components of the myth. Rushing identifies two primary components of the frontier myth demonstrating this dialectical opposition: the cowboy and the frontier.<sup>37</sup>

A typical representative of the frontier myth, the cowboy embodies the conflict of individualism and community. He is depicted as a prototype of masculinity: brave, noble, ethical and romantic; a rugged individual, yet part of the community.<sup>38</sup> In order to fight the wild environment, he must be a harsh individualist. However, to settle and civilise frontiers, he must obey the community’s demands and work with them. The cowboy has to deal with the paradox of being alone in society. If he is not a rough individual, then he is not a hero; but if he does not respond to the needs of the com-

<sup>31</sup> SACVAN BERCOVITCH, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*, Oxon and New York: Routledge 1993, p. 38–41.

<sup>32</sup> BERCOVITCH, *The Rites of Assent*, p. 39–40.

<sup>33</sup> BERCOVITCH, *The Rites of Assent*, p. 39–41.

<sup>34</sup> It was a tragic story from the period of colonization of West America, portrayed in many books and movies. In the winter of 1846–47, an expedition of colonists heading to California was forced to spend the winter near the Sierra Nevada. 41 people died from exposure and hunger that winter. The rest survived, but in a very impoverished state.

<sup>35</sup> STUCKEY, “The Donner Party and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion”, p. 232–33.

<sup>36</sup> RUSHING, “Mythic Evolution...”, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> RUSHING, “Mythic Evolution...”, p. 15–17.

<sup>38</sup> RUSHING, “Mythic Evolution...”, p. 16.

munity, usually in the form of help from some threatening external factor, he cannot be good and ethical, which are other necessary qualities for a hero of the frontier.

The dialectical opposition of the individual and the community is also present in the nature of the frontier itself. A frontier is a place unknown and endless, eventually conquered and transformed into something familiar. The contrast between civilisation and the wilderness is an integral part of the frontier.<sup>39</sup>

The conflict between the savagery of the untamed frontier and the civilisation carried by the settlers further expresses the dialectical opposition of individualism versus community, as the settlers struggle to survive and conquer this new frontier in a specifically American way.<sup>40</sup> This expansive behaviour also functions as a result of American exceptionalism. America's inherent supremacy justifies the intervention and conquest of non-American frontiers and non-white territories to spread American values.<sup>41</sup>

The frontier myth is widespread in social and political life in America.<sup>42</sup> Its elements are represented in *Bioshock: Infinite* through its characters and the narrative world. The iconic character of the frontier myth cowboy is represented throughout the game by visual references, the use of specific language, and other representations associated with the narrative world. The elimination of indigenous and non-white citizens is depicted negatively throughout Columbia. The very presence of Columbia in the sky represents the conquering of the untouched frontier. The use of individual aggression in the service of the community is present in the contrasting depictions of Comstock and Booker. The move to democracy can be seen through Booker's constant pressure and the threats of the Vox Populi movement to Comstock's government and the white people of Columbia.

## Elimination of non-whites

In the frontier myth, the expansion and conquering of the untamed frontier are accompanied by eliminating the indigenous population and non-whites. One of the more significant aspects of the moral framework of Comstock's society is the separation and dehumanisation of not only people of colour but also the "unsatisfactory" nationalities of white people (especially the Irish). Like all other aspects of Columbian society, this one is justified by religion. While Columbia initially acts as a heavenly paradise, the city's uncompromising racism becomes apparent very early in the game. The character of a Black woman Daisy Fitzroy describes her experience on the sound recording in this way:

<sup>39</sup> RUSHING, "Mythic Evolution...", p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> RUSHING, "Mythic Evolution...", p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> RUSHING, "Mythic Evolution...", p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> ANDERSON, "The Mythical Frontier, the Mexican Revolution, and the Press", p. 1–2.



*“When I first seen Columbia, that sky was the brightest, bluest sky that there ever was. Seemed like Heaven. Then your eyes adjusted to the light, and you see that sea of white faces looking hard back at you.”<sup>43</sup>*

Initially, Comstock intended for Columbia to be inhabited only by “deserving” white people, but in the end, he decided to use people of colour and the Irish to do all the manual work needed to run the city.

The exclusion of people of colour from Columbian society is reflected in forced labour in the form of all demanding manual activities in Columbia. The vast majority of these works belong to the industrial empire of factory owner Jeremiah Fink. Fink’s workers are forced to live in Finktown, a dirty ghetto that has been hit by uncontrollable industrial pollution, ravaged by famine, exposed to sunlight and suffering from a lack of medical care. These gloomy conditions are not attributed to Fink and the way he treats his workers, but they are blamed on the ghetto inhabitants themselves and serve as a demonstration of their inferior, animalistic nature. By characterising minorities as less civilised and less human than white people, inhumane behaviour towards them is justified.

The city is highly segregated and separates white people from people of colour as much as possible. Examples of segregation being part of the official order are scattered throughout Columbia. The motto of the local police force is “We protect our faith, property and racial purity.” Emphasising racial purity and equating it with faith and property demonstrates its importance and commitment to its protection.

In the first third of the game, a pseudo-secret society called the Brotherhood of the Raven appears. It is dedicated to maintaining racial purity in Columbia. Its members



Columbia City Racist Propaganda – an example from *Bioshock: Infinite*

<sup>43</sup> Transcript available at: <https://bioshock.fandom.com/wiki/Heaven>.

wear robes with pointed hoods strikingly reminiscent of the American Ku Klux Klan (they are not white but purple; however, the resemblance is obvious). They have a giant statue of John Wilkes Booth in the great hall of their residence. Several paintings depicting the assassination of President Lincoln are hung around it.

Servants' rooms and corridors in buildings throughout Columbia have signs for minorities on the walls that remind them how to behave around their masters and warn them that the only time they should be seen is when they serve them.

Moreover, explicitly racist messages are present in the voxophones<sup>44</sup> found in Columbia<sup>45</sup>. The city presents a fully segregated society in politics and practice. This segregation is justified and perceived as correct through the moral framework of the Columbian religion.

There are several recordings of Comstock's sermons that show the use of religion to morally justify the different treatment of people of colour:

*“To tax the black more than the white, is that not cruel? To forbid the mixing of the races, is that not cruel? To give the vote to the white man, and deny it to the yellow, the black, the red – is that not cruel? Hm. But is it not cruel to banish your children from a perfect garden? Or drown your flock under an ocean of water? Cruelty can be instructive, and what is Columbia, if not the schoolhouse of the Lord?”*<sup>46</sup>

Here Comstock compares his actions with those of God. He preaches hierarchy and responsibility towards other races based on a given, created law.

*“What exactly was the ‘Great Emancipator’ [Lincoln] 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. And what have they done with their freedom? Why, go to Finkton, and you shall find out. No animal is born free, except the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation.”*<sup>47</sup>

Comstock again defends people of colour's subordination by appealing the divine mandate created by an unbreakable order and comparing them to animals. Thus, he justifies his supremacist behaviour. The extensibility of the white race, presented here on the people of Columbia, is a characteristic element of the frontier myth.

## The cowboy character

A cowboy is a prototype of a male character within the frontier myth – brave, noble, honest and romantic.<sup>48</sup> A “frontier hero” is a tough individual who responds to

<sup>44</sup> An observation device designed to project moving images in an endless loop. In the real world, this is an invention created in laboratories of Thomas Alva Edison.

In the world of B: I it is used for propaganda, art presentation, or as advertising (for example, on cigarettes for kids).

<sup>45</sup> They are called, for example, ‘Solving the Irish Problem’ or ‘Columbia Sterilizes the Weak and Inadaptable’.

<sup>46</sup> Transcript available at [https://Bioshock.fandom.com/wiki/His\\_Design\\_for\\_Cruelty](https://Bioshock.fandom.com/wiki/His_Design_for_Cruelty).

<sup>47</sup> Transcript available at [https://Bioshock.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Lie\\_of\\_the\\_Emancipator](https://Bioshock.fandom.com/wiki/The_Lie_of_the_Emancipator).

<sup>48</sup> RUSHING, “Mythic Evolution...”, p. 15.

the needs of his community by fighting external threatening forces.<sup>49</sup> This exclusively American hero serves as a reminder of the myth of American exceptionalism. *BioShock: Infinite* takes this picture and puts the cowboy as the player's character and the game's main protagonist.

Visually, the cowboy is represented in several ways. As the player's character, Booker is rarely seen in his entirety. We only see his face in water reflections and official game materials. The only thing that can be seen for almost the entire game is the hands, usually holding a weapon. In the few situations where we see Booker in his entirety, we can see that he is wearing well-worn clothes, a handkerchief around his neck, a pistol holster, and a face with stubble and a few scars. Another cowboy represented in the game, Preston E. Downs, appears only indirectly – through an abandoned travelling theatre with a Wild West scene and sound recordings. However, in various places, we can come across his hats – black, leather cowboy hats with bullet belts instead of ribbons and large knives.

However, the archetype of a cowboy also represents the language the protagonist speaks. Booker, dubbed by Troy Baker<sup>50</sup>, has a strong, harsh voice. He often answers briefly and simply but appropriately and with understanding. Booker is not portrayed as unnecessarily violent or a conflict-seeking man; on the contrary, he often tries to avoid unnecessary fights with those he claims to have “no dispute with”. However, when it comes to protecting Elizabeth, or a direct threat to himself, he is not afraid to fight. After several fights, Elizabeth remarks at Booker's address that he “knows how to behave in battle”.

Booker is a perfect example of a cowboy hero, which is reflected in his strong sense of service to the community. His desire to defend Elizabeth caused him not only to fight all the forces of the city's Founders and Vox Populi but especially to sacrifice his life to prevent Comstock from existing at the end of the game. Once Booker realises that he is the source of the evil that threatens Elizabeth, he longs to save her at the cost of his life. This satisfies another of the main characteristics of the cowboy in the frontier myth.

### **Individual aggression as a service to the community**

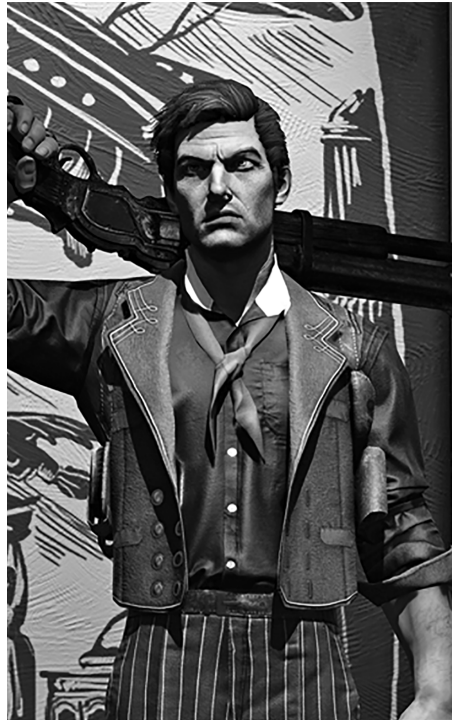
Another characteristic of the frontier myth is civilising the untamed frontier. However, to be civilised, the community must be protected from various external threats. The heroic cowboy must thus use individual aggression against external threats, usually manifested by physical violence, to satisfy the community's needs. However, aggression can also be used against the community. At the frontier, everyone has to take

<sup>49</sup> RUSHING, “Mythic Evolution...”, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> American actor and singer, whose portfolio includes characters from many popular video games and animated series. He has appeared in the series Call of Duty, Brothers in Arms, Metal Gear Solid, Batman, and Far Cry.



Booker DeWitt from the game cover



Booker DeWitt – model used in the game

care of the survival of others for their own good, so an individual's aggression against the community can have catastrophic consequences.

In *Bioshock: Infinite*, Booker and Comstock represent two completely opposite characters, manifesting themselves in individual aggression in different ways. Comstock manifests here as a corrupted form, Booker heroic.

Comstock uses individual aggression to increase and maintain his power and control. In addition to dehumanising all people of colour, he orders his executive forces to direct and systematically liquidate all members of Vox Populi, a group of insurgents created by his oppression.

In addition, as we know from Lady Comstock's sound recording, Comstock murdered more than 40 of his political and personal rivals.

On the contrary, Booker's behaviour within the game narrative can be considered heroic. Throughout the game, Booker selflessly protects Elisabeth from all the dangers they both face. It usually manifests itself in the killing of everything and everyone, however. During the game, we can see the inner evolution of Booker's character from a man whose job is to save the girl and take her to New York to someone who would be willing to sacrifice himself to keep her safe. This selfless individual aggression culminates in his own death after he discovers that he is Comstock from another reality and lets Elisabeth drown him before being baptised.

## Spreading democracy

The last of the above-mentioned parts of the frontier myth is the tendency to spread democracy. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, the spread of democracy is shown in the nature of Comstock's authority in Columbia and the threat to that authority, thanks to Booker DeWitt and Vox Populi. These threats illustrate the inevitable spread of democracy within the frontier myth.

Comstock first rose to his position as a ruler of Columbia through successful petitions to the United States Congress, which later financed the city's construction. According to Comstock, the creation of Columbia and its divine origin was inspired by the revelation of the Archangel of Columbia<sup>51</sup>. Thanks to this connection with the divine principle, Comstock eventually created a theocratic state in which he was called the only sovereign authority.

After the Boxer Rebellion<sup>52</sup>, Comstock used Columbia for retaliatory action. The United States condemned the event, and Comstock broke away from the States and declared independence. Columbia, formed initially as an American colony, uses the American icons of the "Founding Fathers" – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin – to give the impression that Comstock's form of government was the same as the one the Founders intended. However, the real form of this government is the antithesis of a democratic government and functions as a totalitarian religious monarchy. No religion other than Comstock's Church is tolerated in Columbia, and anyone who opposes the authority of the city ruler is removed.

The United States government initially presented Columbia as a showcase of democracy and goodwill for the world, but Comstock transformed the city into the exact opposite of what can be found in the frontier myth.

## Summary

*Bioshock: Infinite* creates the character of the specifically American cowboy hero Booker DeWitt. This rugged individualist uses physical violence to protect his daughter from the Founders led by Zachary Hale Comstock and the anti-government movement Vox Populi and ensure her safety. The frontier myth functions as a founding myth of a levitating city. Through claims to the divine mandate, Comstock creates a seemingly ideal society deeply influenced by the religious conception of the myth of American exceptionalism. This myth manifests itself through strong interventionist rhetoric and practices based on the ideas of a divine mission. As a divine interven-

<sup>51</sup> The female personification of the United States. Her most iconic depiction can be seen in the form of the Statue of Liberty in New York.

<sup>52</sup> A historical event. The conflict of 1899-1901 between China and the Colonial Powers. China's goal was to prevent the growing influence of European powers in its country. The result of the conflict was the victory of the West.

tionist, Comstock forcibly collides with Booker's harsh individualism, which results in his elimination.

*Bioshock: Infinite* represents a narrative world where religious interventionist politics serves as a metaphor for a disease in the heart of America that only the power of secular libertarianism can cure. By presenting Zachary Hale Comstock's vision of Pure America, the game overturns and modifies the interpretation of American exceptionalism and the application of divine myth to American origin and destiny through the prism of divine interventionism. In almost all cases, religion in *Bioshock: Infinite* is portrayed, if not as dangerous and inhumane, then at least as unusual and strange. The player is confronted with the followers of a charismatic leader actively proclaiming ultranationalism and the superiority of the white race, an idea that he legitimises through God's will. The Prophet Comstock is portrayed as a bigot and cruel antagonist sending his followers to fight the player's character. Both the Prophet and the Founders are proponents of views that are perceived as unethical by the majority of society. Therefore, the player's struggle against his enemies is also a struggle against these values, which run against the cultural ideals on which *Bioshock: Infinite* was created (liberal, multicultural). In the game world, Comstock's religion cannot be separated from his racist ideology. So the question arises as to whether and how the game criticises religion, and if so, why is such criticism in the game?

Religion in general and American Evangelical Christianity in particular were used to create the fictional religion that incorporates a racist narrative and represents the enemies that the player must fight. The initial interpretation of religion in the game may be that Evangelicalism serves here as a catalyst for racism. However, such an interpretation would be too limited. By analysing motifs and elements in the game, we must also ask an equally important question – what topics did the designers not put into the game?

There are a remarkable number of religious elements in the game. Baptism, prayer, a priest, chants, candles, angels, prophetic visions, the punishment of sinners – these elements confirm that the player is playing a game that relies heavily on religious themes. Even though they appear here at almost every step, it is no less interesting to perceive *what Bioshock: Infinite* lacks. The two most important parts of American Evangelicalism are the Bible and the symbol of the cross.<sup>53</sup> There is not a single dialogue, note, clue, or another narrative indicator in the game that explicitly mentions the Bible. The only clues in the game can be found at the beginning of the game in the Welcome Center, but even these do not contain parts from the Bible; only their language resembles excerpts from the King James Bible. The only biblical reference is in Comstock's last words before his death – “It is finished.”

The same applies to the symbol of the cross. The only thing that reminds it at least a little is the symbols of the stylised golden dagger embroidered on the hoods of the pseudo-KKK in about a quarter of the game.

<sup>53</sup> BARRY HANKINS, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement*, Lanham, Boulder et al.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2008, *passim*.

Another important element intentionally not included in the game is the figure of Jesus Christ. The whole evangelical community stands on the life, words, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The experience of being born again at baptism is directly linked to the acceptance of Jesus as the only saviour. In *Bioshock: Infinite*, however, baptism is associated with only a vague mention of God. Expressions such as Christ or Jesus are replaced in the game by Comstock, the Founding Fathers, the Lamb (Elizabeth), or a vague divine figure. In the story itself, however, the messianic motif of self-sacrifice is included in the character of Booker Dewitt.

## But why?

Creating computer games is an extremely expensive business. Over the years, the cost of creating games has risen significantly. Video games are the fastest-growing entertainment medium with annual revenue estimates of around \$90 billion worldwide, of which \$27 billion are in North America alone.<sup>54</sup> Although accurate data is not available, *Bioshock: Infinite*'s creation has cost around \$100 million.<sup>55</sup> Mass market games often cost more than \$50 million and are made up of teams of hundreds of people responsible for making the final product.<sup>56</sup> The *Bioshock: Infinite* team consisted of about 200 people.<sup>57</sup>

With these numbers, it is important to realise that the studio and publisher financing the development will do their maximum to ensure that the resulting income from the game exceeds the money invested. In development, creators must consider what appeals to players and critics, as well as how to sell the game to as many people as possible. The higher the costs, the greater the target audience, consisting of people with different tastes and political and religious views.

In the case of *Bioshock: Infinite*, it is essential to mention the long and problematic development, which explains how critical the economic success of the game was for the studio. The publisher Take-Two had very high expectations, and some commentators speculate that the number of eleven million copies sold did not meet the publisher's expectations, which could be one of the reasons why the entire development studio was closed in 2014.<sup>58</sup> From this perspective, it seems reasonable that

<sup>54</sup> "2018 Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends & Data - The Ultimate List" [online], *WePC.com*, May 2018, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/>.

<sup>55</sup> "2018 Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends & Data..." [online], <https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/>.

<sup>56</sup> SUPERANNUATION, "How Much Does It Cost To Make A Big Video Game?" [online], 2014, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://kotaku.com/how-much-does-it-cost-to-make-a-big-video-game-1501413649>.

<sup>57</sup> CHRIS PLANTE, "The Final Years of Irrational Games, According to Those Who Were There", [online], Polygon, March 2014, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://www.polygon.com/2014/3/6/5474722/why-did-irrational-close-bioshock-infinite>.

<sup>58</sup> LEIGH ALEXANDER, "Irrational Games, Journalism, and Airing Dirty Laundry" [online], *Gamasutra.com*, February 2014, accessed June 2021, available online at [http://gamasutra.com/view/news/211139/Irrational\\_Games\\_journalism\\_and\\_airing\\_dirty\\_laundry.php](http://gamasutra.com/view/news/211139/Irrational_Games_journalism_and_airing_dirty_laundry.php); Matthew Handrahan, "Bio-

during the five years of development, the people responsible for *Bioshock: Infinite* have sought to increase the likelihood of success by avoiding content that could negatively affect potential customers. The Protestant population in America is large; about a quarter of Americans consider themselves as Born Again Christians, and from an economic point of view, the creators could not afford to ignore this part of the population.<sup>59</sup>

An analysis of the construction of religion in *Bioshock: Infinite* shows that although Christian, specifically evangelical symbols are used in the game, Christianity itself does not suffer from the negative criticism directly. Most of the game's religious images revolve around Comstock's character and aspects of his movement, perceived by the majority of society as a dangerous, non-mainstream religion. However, the game does not present any direct criticism of an evangelical family that attends Mass every Sunday, is potentially a member of one of the mega-churches, listens to Christian pop, stands for conservative family values, and has a personal relationship with Jesus. The main elements of faith here remain unaffected by the negative and stereotypical depiction of religion. If Evangelical motifs appear in the game, they are usually presented in such a way as to show that Comstock and his followers have abused them. Mainstream conservative Evangelicals playing the game will undoubtedly notice that even topics such as baptism, prayer, and God are not the target of ridicule. Instead, they will see Comstock's followers as convenient enemies that need to be stopped from their plan to destroy the world.

On the other hand, a metropolitan, liberal player will find their points of interest as well. Liberal criticism and the fear of American Christianity allegedly nurturing racism and nationalism may also find their place in playing *Bioshock: Infinite*. The chauvinist and xenophobic society of Columbia can be seen as a mirror of contemporary America by a person who does not trust religious conservatism.

The only other existing system of beliefs that appears in the game is Buddhism. At one point in the game, Booker and Elizabeth meet a Chinese woman praying in a small hidden shrine. Buddhism is not given a significant role here, but the game treats it with respect.

*Bioshock: Infinite* refrains from being critical of religion as such. However, it is also reluctant to take a stronger position in the political debate. In the late part of the game, a revolution of oppressed workers takes place.<sup>60</sup> However, the revolt against

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shock Infinite Reaches 11 Million Sales" [online], *GamesIndustry.biz*, June 2015, accessed June 2021, available online at <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2015-06-01-bioshock-infinite-has-sold-11-million-units>.

<sup>59</sup> HANKINS, *American Evangelicals*, *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> ED SMITH, "The Politics of 'BioShock Infinite' Are All the Worse When Revisited in a Heated Election Year" [online], *Vice* (blog), October 2016, accessed June 2021, available online at [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/exkvvk/the-politics-of-bioshockinfinite-are-all-the-worse-when-seen-in-a-heated-election-year-130](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/exkvvk/the-politics-of-bioshockinfinite-are-all-the-worse-when-seen-in-a-heated-election-year-130); Alexander, "Irrational Games, Journalism, and Airing Dirty Laundry", [http://gamasutra.com/view/news/211139/Irrational\\_Games\\_journalism\\_and\\_airing\\_dirty\\_laundry.php](http://gamasutra.com/view/news/211139/Irrational_Games_journalism_and_airing_dirty_laundry.php).



racist oppression is portrayed just as negatively as racist oppression itself – through the devastating civil war, which stands in opposition to religious fanaticism with its secular conception of the world, purges, and the installation of a new order. The fight against racism here is a fight against oppression. As soon as Vox Populi starts to win in one of the alternative realities, we find that Daisy Fitzroy’s government is as cruel as Comstock’s.<sup>61</sup> In other words, the game tries to convey the view that the oppressed is worse than the oppressive. Religion is simply another one of the cultural dimensions in the game. However, it is designed to avoid any conflict with potential audiences.

In *Bioshock: Infinite*, we can see an example of how a big publisher tries to tailor its products to suit the stereotypes perceived by the majority of society. At first glance, the play seems to criticise a certain aspect of American culture and religion. However, unlike commenting on the contemporary social problems of Evangelicalism or Christianity in general, it offers the phenomenon of new religious movements in a form recognisable in social discourse for years – as something deviant and potentially dangerous.

As such, *Bioshock: Infinite* is not an attack on conservatives or tea parties. Instead, it aims to draw attention to political groups that mimic the behaviours and attitudes of Columbia and Comstock, respectively, and show how dangerous the ideologies behind these behaviours and attitudes are.

Computer games are still seen as an inferior medium in a large part of (even academic) society. However, the development of games, their expansion and the number of genres prove that video games are an independent medium that can influence and affect the consumer in the same way, if not more, than books or other passively enjoyable media. The mere number of 25 million copies of the *Bioshock* series, one of the many series in the current market that can reach the masses, proves (and some well-established departments in the West are proof of that) that an analysis of this ever-growing medium makes sense. The virtual environment is fast becoming the largest cultural space – a great example is the game *Fortnite*, another one from a plethora of “shooter” genres. However, “live” concerts of professional musicians also take place in its environment, watched by millions of people in real-time (12.3 million people watched DJ Travis Scott’s concert at once!<sup>62</sup>). It will be interesting to see in the future where academic research in video games will go.

<sup>61</sup> ALEXANDER, “Irrational Games, Journalism, and Airing Dirty Laundry”, [http://gamasutra.com/view/news/211139/Irrational\\_Games\\_journalism\\_and\\_airing\\_dirty\\_laundry.php](http://gamasutra.com/view/news/211139/Irrational_Games_journalism_and_airing_dirty_laundry.php); Smith, “The Politics of ‘BioShock Infinite’...”, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/exkvk/the-politics-of-bioshockinfinite-are-all-the-worse-when-seen-in-a-heated-election-year-130](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/exkvk/the-politics-of-bioshockinfinite-are-all-the-worse-when-seen-in-a-heated-election-year-130); Óliver Pérez-Latorre and Mercè Oliva, “Video Games, Dystopia, and Neoliberalism: The Case of BioShock Infinite”, *Games and Culture* 14 (7–8, 2017): 781–800.

<sup>62</sup> ANTHONY HA, “Fortnite Hosted a Psychedelic Travis Scott Concert and 12.3M People Watched”, *TechCrunch* (blog), [online], accessed May 2020, available online at <https://social.techcrunch.com/2020/04/24/fortnite-hosted-a-psychedelic-travis-scott-concert-and-12-3m-people-watched/>.

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