

American Exceptionalism,

God, and the False Shepard.

A look into 2K Games's 2013 hit first person shooter "BioShock Infinite" and how it explores an alternate timeline of the United States of America and American fanatical religiousism.

By Donavyn C Martinez

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Introduction

“And the Lord saw the wickedness of man was great and he repented that he had made man on the earth. Rain, Forty-days and Forty-nights of the stuff, and he left not a thing that walked alive. You see my friends, even God is entitled to a do-over, and what is Columbia if not another ark, for another time.” – Zachary Hale Comstock, Bioshock Infinite 2013.

Let's think back to 2013 for a moment, what happened that year? I can assure you there was no worldwide pandemic that would never happen, I remember the world wasn't on fire, and the air was still crisp. Most importantly of all, February 21st American scientists used a 3D printer to create a living lab-grown ear from colla-... Wait.... *Shifting note cards* This isn't it....

August 12th, 2010 a trailer was released, it opens with an underwater diorama of a set piece as we look through the eyes of a man that is being picked up and thrown out a window by a machine man hybrid. We (the viewer) are thrust into a blooming city in the clouds. Plummeling to his death the man screams and grabs onto a passing air balloon. While holding on, the balloon passes a sign that states “Burden NOT Columbia with your chaff!”. The man loses grip and falls but is then saved out of thin air, being seemingly held afloat by divine intervention, when suddenly he sees that not the Lord is holding him, but rather a woman. As the woman pulls the man to safety with some sort of levitation power, the woman reaches out and tries to grab his hand when suddenly she is ripped away by the earlier above-mentioned automaton. We flash to black as we see the man fall. The trailer ends with an old war memorial esque plaque...”Bioshock Infinite.”

I was twelve years old when this trailer came out and I still replay it. So much can be asked, why is there a seemingly advanced robot man trying to kill us? Why is there a flying city above farmland below? Whats with the random seemingly wonder woman esque heroin, signage that is declining a starving babe but taking the other baby? These questions and more will be answered as we dive deeper. First, we need to explain what this trailer is for.

BioShock Infinite is a first-person shooter released on March 26th, 2013. It follows Booker DeWitt a member or a newly disgraced member of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, a troubled man burdened with mountains of gambling debts. Booker then turns to taking on a job from a mysterious benefactor tasking him to find a certain girl and taking her to them so they may “wipe away“ his debt in return for the girl. The game begins with Booker in a boat with two others that are taking him to a lighthouse for unknown reasons.

The False Shepard assaults the city of God

Booker proceeds to ascend the light house, finding who can be assumed to be the dead lighthouse keeper who has a note that states “Don’t fail us” However Booker is not deterred. He reaches the top of the lighthouse and finds what is seemingly an elevator with a barber chair behind a door that has a lock attached with three bells, each of which has an insignia. A scroll, a key, and a sword. (This will be important for later) After inputting a nearby code for the bells, the door opens, and Booker sits. Suddenly the chair locks him in and a pod is built around him like an escape pod from a science fiction movie and he is shot into the sky, screaming and yelling in fear, the music gets high pitched as the pod ascends. Piercing the sky, the pod arrives to the desired height and the dark coastal lighthouse landscape is replaced by a idyllic floating city, it is known as Columbia and soon we will meet the leader of this floating city.

Booker still in the pod is dropped off at what looks like a well with running water and allot of candles. As he proceeds you (the player) realize this is a church, where many other followers are congregated all heading towards the center. All are dressed in white and further in you can hear a religious leader preaching, but for players who are keen enough to look around can find a “voxaphone”. This device is essentially a tape recorder but uses LP records instead of tape, in said voxaphone you can find a recording by “Zachary Hale Comstock”. In the recording he explains that the idea of Columbia came to him in a dream, a heavenly paradise for the divine deserving. As the city was developed, Comstock assembled a congregation of devoted followers, and developed a heavily Christian-esque mythos that focused on him. The “Angel Columbia” visited him in his sleep and came to him with a vision for the city.

After Booker is finished listening, he can proceed to the main area where there is a sermon happening. Booker pushes past and demands to get past the priest giving the sermon so he may get out of the church and into the city. The priest declines and states that Booker must follow the rules and be reborn through a baptism. Reaching out Booker begrudgingly agrees, and the baptism begins as the priest begins the sacrament.

It is important to note! The priest states *“I baptize you in the name of our Prophet, In the name of our Founders, and in the name of our Lord!”* This shows that the religion being practiced while seemingly Christian based on the looks (The church like area and people wearing traditional Christian outfits) is quite different from traditional Christianity due to there being the statement of a founder in the baptism which is odd, since in a catholic Christian baptism it is usually stated “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

So having figures that aren’t divine in a core aspect of the religion is blasphemous. What I mean is having a human man being God is in the bible as against it’s rules. As seen in the Old

Testament Numbers 23:19a “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”

Sinners turned Saints and Cowards turned Heroes.

Later after the Baptism, Booker awakens in front of three gargantuan statues of the “Founders” which we consider in real life the founding fathers (Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington.) However, in BioShock Infinite these are the saints of the religion. These figures are the reason for the scroll, key, and sword from earlier in the game, but why are these figures so important? According to Comstock it was seen by the angel Columbia that the founding fathers of the United States were saints, who were meant to set to establish America above all other nations. This is where we begin to see a prominent example of the idea of American Exceptionalism. This is the idea that the United States is either Columbia is seen as the divine and righteous place that with the help of God will become a bastion and the “True America” in the world. Due to this ideology everyone who follows Comstock’s ideas are considered “the Founders.”

“And when the angel Columbia gave unto The Founders the tools to build the new eden, they did so without hesitation. For Eighty-Five years, they prepared the way of the lord. But when the great Apostate came, he brought War with him and the fields of Eden were soaked with the blood of brothers. The only Emancipation he had to offer, was death.” -Zachary Hale Comstock

American Exceptionalism is the idea of the United States is distinctive while compared to other nations, when used this idea can synergize extremely well to lead to the idea of manifest destiny.

So, when Bioshock explores this idea it explores it heavily! Later in the game there is mention of the wounded knee massacre which was a real-world event but in the game is called the battle of wounded knee. In real life, on December 29th, 1890 “the United States Army eliminated 150-300 Lakota Indians... in the area of Wounded Knee Creek in southwestern South Dakota” (Myles Hudson, Britannica)

This horrible event is considered an extremely horribly racist and sad event. While in BioShock, the event is known as the Battle of Wounded Knee, this is because Comstock uses this battle as a sign that the “white elite divine founders” are the proper man. In this retelling of the “battle” in the “Hall of Heroes” which is a museum that Comstock had commissioned to further enforce his agenda. In the false narrative it is stated that the heroic Army was sent to put down “savage Indians” and that Comstock commanded the men to fight them off.

Extremely similarly to the real-world event the United States used the idea of Manifest Destiny (The belief that American settlers were destined to expand across North America) Americans in the 1800’s believed that the massacre at wounded knee was just something that simply just “happened” but nothing worse than a hiccup in the world. This is because nationalism was also very strong at this time, when combined with religion it can lead to dangerous events. The U.S. painted it’s self as this righteous hero that won the day for the homeland, but the reality is the entire event could’ve been avoided by just talking.

“The Lord forgives everything. But I'm just a prophet... so I don't have to.

Amen.” - Zachary Hale Comstock

This is also seen in BioShock, since this is a state funded museum not all facts on plaques are fact. As stated previously “Comstock led a valiant charge”, the reality is that Comstock was

nowhere near being in a leadership role, and rather was a simple savage scalping helpless native Americans. Another statement that is incorrect is Comstock's statement that the natives were "savage" and that there was even a battle at all. There was little resistance according to another veteran that was in the very massacre. However, due to the fact that the Army disliked sharing with the natives they decided to eliminate them all together. So, Comstock decides to reconstruct the event to benefit his narrative. Finally, and most importantly the entire persona that Comstock was a strong, righteous American, fighter during this was a sham. This is where it begins to get a little confusing.

Being reborn in time...literally.

Comstock is Booker... What I mean is Comstock is Booker in another life, or vice versa Booker is Comstock in another life or should I say another timeline. So, in BioShock Infinite the idea of different timelines is very prominent. This is primarily seen with Comstock and Booker most importantly during Wounded Knee and the subsequent baptism. During wounded knee Booker (who would become Comstock depending on the timeline) is 16 years old and illegal in the war. Due to his young mind being so appalled and one of the most brutal of the members in the battle. He is disturbed and seeks absolution; he elects to attend church and confess his sins. A priest then asks if he would like to be baptized so he can be washed of his sins. Now! There are two distinct timelines that are important here: One where he accepts and one where he declines. If Booker declines, he lives with his guilt, unwashed of sin, and joins the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and doesn't know about Columbia until the game begins. The alternative timeline sees Booker accepting and becoming baptized, deciding that what he did at wounded knee was right since he washed away the sin, and furthermore become a born-again Christian that has visions.

Another important point to make is how Comstock knows Booker. In the Booker timeline (non-baptize) Booker has a daughter named Anna Dewitt, she is sold in exchange for clearing Booker's debt. After however in repentance Booker brands his right hand with AD. Booker is then transported into the Comstock (Baptism) timeline. Comstock knows that Booker will come to get the girl due to the job, but Comstock also knows that Booker has that branding thus leading to Comstock telling all of his flock which is basically all of the city that the "false shepard" has the letters AD on his right hand. Due to this all of the populace is on the lookout.

But how does Comstock have such dominion over his flock? While being a proficient preacher, the "Word from God" actually wasn't from God. Rather from an earthly god, a scientific god. Near the end of the game, we determine how Comstock is able to prophesize these events that seem unthinkable. It's through the work of two people... or should I say one. Rosalind Lutece is a scientist in the game that the players meet multiple times throughout, almost always accompanied by her seemingly twin brother Robert Lutece. These individuals are quantum physicists that have written studies on the ideas of alternate universes, while experimenting with atoms Rosalind was able to maintain the atom in midair this idea is later repurposed to allow the floating city of Columbia to float, she calls this idea the "Lutece Field". But more importantly a religious figure is very interested in her work.

Comstock begins to fund her work and research into the idea of the field, as she continued, she noticed that the atoms moved a certain way. Almost in a coded manner, this is when she begins communication with another thing or perhaps even another person. As she continued using the atoms to move in a way to communicate Rosalind realizes this other person is actually her but in an alternative reality where she is a male named Robert. She tells Comstock of her findings and

asks if she can use this to perhaps access the alternate reality. After years she finally figures out how to open tears where viewers can see into other realities thus pleasing Comstock.

***“Love the Prophet, cause he loves the Sinner, Love the Sinner,
Because he is you. Without the Sinner, what need is there for a
redeemer? Without Sin, what grace has forgiveness?” – Lady
Comstock***

Comstock uses this ability to see other realities to make “prophecies” further ensuring his almost divine nature to his followers. Since this is the case Comstock has any person who works on the project or even knows of the project sworn to secrecy or they are put to death. So overall Comstock is hollow shell of a man who is seemingly not god nor his messenger and rather a liar that can play to peoples hopes in return for undying devoutness to him.

Near the edge, in the fields of Lighthouses

So here we are, at the end. After breaking down who, how, and why Comstock is a frivolous religious figure that condemned other races and ethnicities solely because of his own personal tragedies.

At the end of the game finally meets Comstock in person along with Elizabeth, turns out she is Comstock's daughter, and he wishes for her to take over his place as heir to Columbia and attack the United States?

“The seed of the Prophet shall sit the throne and drown in flame the mountains of man.” -Zachary Hale Comstock

But why! Well Comstock believes that since the U.S. government forced him to eliminate the native peoples. The United States deserves the same treatment and deserves to be eliminated in a cleansing. The problem here however is that Comstock was never forced to kill the Sioux, rather he joined at the illegal age of 16 to fight by his own freewill. He is quite literally turning himself from a savage warrior that he saw the native people as, into this tired and god tested victim and putting the blame on someone else entirely. By being baptized and further becoming born again he sees that the United states rather than being courageous as it once was, he now sees it as this evil figure of supremacy even though the entire game there is imagery of the founders eliminating the now confused creations that they didn't think of when making the constitution.

Finally enraged Booker decides to slam Comstock's head into the baptismal pool and drown him in the water killing him. Finally giving Comstock the absolution, he deserved. Elizabeth opens a tear as Booker's nose begins to bleed.

Booker wakes up and is standing in a field of lighthouses with Elizabeth she says that there are so many alternate timelines where the entire journey could've been so different. But also, Elizabeth realizes that there will always be the chance that Booker turns into Comstock, thus this gives Booker the choice to kill himself and Comstock in the same timeline to make sure that all

other timelines don't have either. Sealing all the pain and destruction in one timeline. The game ends as Booker dips his head into the baptismal pool.

This ending had me going crazy for days years ago. I had no idea why that had to happen, but now as a refined adult man that sits and ponders in my study with my glass of bourbon, and cigar. I now understand the point of this ending, by having this be the ending it gives the player the idea of what Comstock was thinking. You plow through the entire game killing so many people thinking that you're the hero! You saved the girl and killed all those evil people. When in reality you didn't have to do any of that, at any point you can stop playing and just not kill those people, there are points in the game where enemies surrender, and the player can just walk past. But if we were going for the true Booker experience he would've scalped that man akin to past experiences. At the end of the game you are to find absolution, wash away your sins after killing all those people who were just defending their benevolent lord.

You are the savage and you reaped. You are what Comstock was, only thing is you aren't as well versed with the bible.

Conclusion

Bioshock ends on a very strong note. It poses a very thought-provoking idea that the player is literally a product of what they were defeating. The realization that Comstock was attempting to recreate his narrative to be heroic and having reasoning is the same thing the player is meant to think. For Comstock he used religion and the idea that the United States had the importance to be the most powerful place on earth to justify his actions. While the player uses the reasoning of "oh well I'm playing a premade video game *I can't make any actual decisions.*" Either way, this

game definitely plays amazingly and provokes the thinking of religious zealots and how nationalism can be combined to make a powerful villain and moreover an amazing story.

“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...” – Daisy Fitzroy

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