

Does the Sneaker Have to Matter?

by Tom Bissell

Last winter, I received an interesting invitation. Would I, and my video-game-writing partner, Rob Auten, like to travel to Boston to spend a weekend playing a complete but not yet fully polished build of *BioShock Infinite*, the spiritual successor to *BioShock*, which is among the most beloved first-person shooters of all time? After our playthrough, we were told Ken Levine, the writer and creative director behind the *BioShock* franchise, wanted to have a chat, writer-to-writer-to-writer, about what we thought. Now, if you're at all interested in action video games, video-game writing, or video-game narrative, this was a little like being summoned to a screening of a 90 percent-edited version of *Citizen Kane* and having lunch with Orson Welles afterward.

Obviously, we went. I struggled with aspects of *BioShock Infinite's* opening. Rob loved it without a qualm. Rob struggled with aspects of its ending. I loved it without hesitation. We sat in Irrational Games's test lab for two hours, arguing over our interpretations of what the game meant, what it was trying to say, how we felt. Before long, reality set in: This is not what typically happens after playing a shooter.

The average action game doesn't much traffic in thematic grandiosity, but the *BioShock* games are different. They're tense (and sometimes silly) red-blooded shooters, yes, but they've got moody, restive brains. They're interested in what happens when a harpoon pins a dude to the wall, yes, but they're equally interested in the collision of racism and history, certainty and philosophy, nationalism and fate. They've also got an unparalleled sense of style, as if William Van Alen, Frederic Remington, H. R. Giger, and Duke Nukem were all banished to the same hive mind.

The first *BioShock* involved descending into an underwater city named Rapture, a kind of libertarian paradise run by the cruel, paranoid madman Andrew Ryan (imagine Ayn Rand without the sense of humor). *Infinite* takes you up into the sky, to Columbia, a flying city run by Zachary Comstock, a Mosaically bearded, Joseph Smith-like preacher. Like Rapture, Columbia is an authoritarian place, prey to a disquietingly plausible right-wing theocracy based on worship of the Founding Fathers. While there, you will fight robot George Washington and not laugh.

The day after we played *Infinite*, Ken met with Rob and me. At that point, I'd been "working in video games," in some capacity, for two years. Listening to Ken talk about his process, and his goals, I learned more in four hours than I did in the preceding 24 months.

Ken agreed to have another chat with me about *BioShock Infinite*, and much else, on the eve of its publication.

Bissell: As you know, a lot of people consider the first *BioShock* to be one of the signal games of this console generation. I'm curious as to what your feelings on the game are today.

Levine: Well, that's sort of a multitiered question. I mean, there's my feelings of it as a game. It's always hard, as a writer, to have a decent, objective sense of your own work. I try to be as objective as possible. I think it certainly was a special game, in the sense of the aesthetic. I think it delivered really well on that. From a story perspective, I think it had a really, really special moment – the Ryan thing. The Ryan thing, the Big Daddy-Little Sister attraction, and the world were probably the things that were most special about it.

From a gameplay perspective, it was an interesting game, if not a totally polished game. But it was trying to do different things. I would rather try something and not hit it 1,000 percent than do what the other guy is doing and hit it on the mark. It felt special at the time, when we were working on it. The team who did it – we'll always be bonded together because of that experience, because it was very personal and weird and

scary to work on. All of us are still scratching our heads. We don't really understand why it was as successful as it was.

Bissell: Well, you make games that have all the trappings of a blockbuster – in term of sparkle, budget, and scope – but if you look at all closely, you realize that what you're doing is actually quite strange and conceptually audacious. It's sort of like what Terrence Malick does, only video-game-ized. That's a risky line to walk. Are you conscious of that?

Levine: Objectively, what I do is strange, in the sense that if you looked at it and wrote a description of it – the themes and the setting and the time period – it would come across as rather strange. But probably no stranger than a lot of games. *Assassin's Creed* is really strange in its own way. Games generally are strange, let alone all the indie games, which are really strange.

Games are strange because we don't know what the form is yet. We're just figuring that out as we go along. So we have only strangeness, to some degree. I've been spending a lot of time this week trying to talk to some very mainstream press about the game, like Studio 360. The host was so game and so enthusiastic, and really was there and engaged. To some degree, though, because of his level of experience with games, it had to be strange for him, in the same way that it would be strange for me talking about wine or something. Because I don't drink a lot of wine.

I was showing the game to my mom the other day, and there are parts of it that she deeply appreciates. But keeping it in her head that it was a first-person view, that she was Booker, was a very complicated, weird bit of math for her to do. Not because she's dumb – she's incredibly smart –but because she just didn't grow up with that game literacy.

Bissell: When it comes to atmosphere, your games are extraordinary. It seems to me that a lot of narrative stuff in games is put to better use as atmosphere than as exposition. Do you agree that atmosphere in games is really its own kind of story? I mean, if the atmosphere's good, who gives a [...] what the story is? The player's already there.

Levine: When I was working on *Thief* with Doug Church, way, way back in the day, we always said that *vibe* was more important than *story*. I think that's the same thing as what you're saying. Put the player in an interesting world and make him feel like there's interesting things around the corner. That's way more important than specific details about what's going on.

There are gamers, certainly, who really dig into the details, and God love 'em, because they're the ones you get to sit down and talk with in depth about your game story. But people need a sense of what's going on, and it's our job as writers to make sure they have enough of a sense so it doesn't become a barrier. Just put them in a world with as much visual information as you can, without overwhelming them, and let them bathe in it.

Bissell: When we were in Boston, you mentioned that *Infinite* had been several other games before this one. I remember being so struck by that – the amount of abandoned work that entailed, the hell you must have gone through. Then I thought about the books I've written and how none of them turned out the way I envisioned them. You're bringing to game production a novelist's sense of revision, almost, but that must be hard when we're talking about throwing out not only your own hard work but that of 150 other people, too.

Levine: I get this question from journalists who aren't necessarily novelists. A novelist knows, basically, that what you're putting down on the page the first time is just prelude. It's just the way you get rolling. I was

listening to an interview with P.T. Anderson about *The Master*, and he was talking about the auditing scene, where Philip Seymour Hoffman keeps asking, “Do you hate yourself? Do you hate yourself?” Anderson said, before he had a movie, he just started writing that scene. He wanted to get two characters in a room talking.

That shows a real writer at work. How do you get something started? Get something interesting on the page, and then hopefully you work from there. When you’re starting that way, you don’t have any expectation that that’s what you’re going to be putting on the screen. Well, in that case it was, or at least a version of it was. But you have to understand that everything you do along the way is a tool toward achieving a product. If it fits in the box of what you’re trying to make, it stays. If it doesn’t, then you should happily throw it away.

Now, as the president of my studio, I think that’s probably easier for me to say, because I’m the one who decides what stays and what gets thrown away. But I certainly throw away my own stuff with abandon. If it’s not right, it goes. It’s not without cost, but I find that the people who are the most experienced at the studio tend to be the most comfortable with throwing stuff away.

Bissell: Here’s the weird thing, to me, about *BioShock*. It draws in first-person-shooter nuts who love to electrocute people and set them on fire. It also draws in the disaffected philosophy PhD candidate and gives him something to think about while running amok. A belief of mine is that shooters are made for naughty children, and we all like to become naughty children sometimes. When a shooter can take that mischievous core impulse and enrich it with something that feels genuinely thoughtful, well, that’s lightning in a bottle, isn’t it?

Levine: Look, I can’t say I’m a man of high taste. I’m a man of low taste. I like action movies and comic books – not that all comic books are of low taste. Not that all action movies are of low taste. I like things exploding. I like candy and cookies. I’m not a sophisticate in any way, shape, or form. My wife and I live the lives of 14-year-old kids; we just happen to be married and have enough disposable income that we don’t necessarily have a bedtime. If I could sit around and eat pizza and ice cream – and not fancy pizza – and watch *Lord of the Rings* and play video games, I’m a pretty happy guy.

Bissell: But you also wrote a video game in which Pinkertons and Wounded Knee are foundational aspects of the game story. Pinkertons! When I played *Infinite*, I heard the word “Pinkertons” and thought, *How many people know that’s something other than Weezer’s second album?* I was stunned that strikebreaking goons from U.S. labor history were suddenly muscling their way into my shooter.

Levine: I probably tuned into the Pinkertons watching *Deadwood*, which is another show of lowbrow/highbrow combination. It’s a very thoughtful, smart show that just happens to have a lot of gunfights.

Bissell: The underwater businessman philosopher Andrew Ryan was *BioShock*’s unforgettable villain. Now, in *Infinite*, we’ve got the equally memorable Comstock. Your villains feel very mythic to me, self-consciously so. Am I correct in assuming that traditional video game villainy doesn’t interest you at all?

Levine: I spend a lot of time – a lot of time – watching and rewatching scenes from movies that are particularly meaningful to me. And the best villains, the best scenes of any movie ever, are usually the ones where the villain and hero are in close proximity. The best scenes with the Joker in *The Dark Knight* are the scenes where the Joker and Batman are locked in a room together. It’s a romance, almost. If you look at Batman and the Joker, if you’re not seeing the Joker’s sort of in love with Batman, you’re missing the point of the scene.

There's danger that underlies everything, but there's this great dialogue going on at the same time. I've always loved villains, but I've never liked the mustache twirlers.

Bissell: In that sense, both *BioShock* and *Infinite* are about the messiness that results from supposedly ironclad philosophies. You have these worlds and these villains who are obsessed with order, and a player who makes it all go to hell. What attracts you to dramatizing totalist philosophies?

Levine: They're comforting. People who want answers want someone to come along and tell them, "This is what we're going to do, and it's going to be awesome. Don't worry. You sit back. I'll drive." We all want that in a lot of ways. There's so many times I've had people come in and say to me, "I'm going to handle all this." People who haven't earned my trust yet. I'm so desperate sometimes that I hand them that trust – and I almost always end up regretting it. But I go back each time, handing over that trust to people who haven't earned it yet, because it's so tempting. You want to let go.

Being an adult is realizing that there's no Mommy and Daddy. I think, to have these characters who fill that role of Mommy and Daddy – there's something very appealing about it. It takes so much of the burden away from you. But with that burden goes a lot of other things.

Bissell: You've said the heart of *Bioshock Infinite* is Elizabeth. Booker, the player's character, goes to the flying city of Columbia to rescue her. But neither Booker nor the player is intended to take care of or protect Elizabeth. Can you talk about how she came to you and how she changed over the course of development?

Levine: I'm not sure when we first realized we were going to have a partner for Booker. It evolved from a companion to a partner – that's the key thing. Because, generally, there are sidekicks in games. We realized Booker wasn't going to be silent, because we felt like we had already done that too many times, and it seemed odd to have a talking character with no one to talk to.

We started by saying that he had a companion, and she became more and more important every day: "What if she was the center of the story?" "What if she had all these powers?" And as we thought about Booker...it is his story to some degree, but it's very much her story, too. The more I wrote her, and the more [actor] Courtnee [Draper] brought her voice to it, the more we fell in love with her, the more we saw her in the world, and saw the things she was capable of doing, and saw her wonder and engagement in the world – her reactions to things. Generally you don't have that in a first-person shooter. Generally it's just a lot of AIs [non-playable characters empowered by artificial intelligence] running around really fast: "Here's your story starring your gun and a guy running sixty miles per hour." And so with Elizabeth we kept digging deeper and doubling down and doubling down and doubling down.

We saw an opportunity to actually build an emotional connection for the player, via this character of Booker, to this AI named Elizabeth. That was a challenge to take on, and an interesting one. There's a guy named Tim Austin in my office who was a programmer back in the day – way back in the day – and then he became a designer. He ended up as a designer-programmer on this project. Very early on, he was influential. He said, basically, "Elizabeth always has to be there as an assistant and never as a burden." Because people do not want a burden. If Microsoft Word woke you up at three in the morning and started crying and you had to feed it, you would stop using Microsoft Word. A relationship is different from an obligation. And I think, generally, AI companions are obligations, not relationships. We tried to make her as much of a relationship as possible. We kept pushing on ways she could help you, and the ways that you could empathize with her. That became the mission of the game. Every time we had Elizabeth doing something, it was always under that lens of: Is she a relationship or a burden?

Bissell: This reminds me of how weird, generally speaking, writing for games is. It's well known that you started as a screenwriter. After writing a game myself now, I've become convinced that the storytelling methods that a lot of Hollywood screenwriters swallow unreservedly – in particular, three-act structure – don't work at all for games. When you try to project that matrix of story conceptualization onto game narrative, it doesn't make any sense. That's my belief. I wonder how you feel.

Levine: I'm actually pretty old-school. I definitely rely on three-act structures for games. And I don't know if that's because it's a good thing to do or because it's just what I'm familiar with. *BioShock* has a definite three-act structure. The first act is you try to get to the submarine. The second act is your plan to get to Ryan, and that whole situation gets screwed up. That throws you into your third act, which is when the rules completely change, you find out who you are, and you go after Atlas.

Now, you could argue that three-act structure didn't serve that game well. Potentially, the third act wasn't really as strong as the first and second. But I've generally relied upon it, probably because I'm so familiar with it. So what is your approach? What do you do?

Bissell: Um, I assumed you were going to agree with me, so...now my world is thrown into disarray. I guess I would say that most of what I've learned about storytelling derives from novels and short stories. I cannot think of a novel or story, or a novelist or story writer, who thinks in terms of three-act structure. Literary storytelling is highly structured, of course, but you get a lot more freedom to dillydally, to dogleg, to divert, to pause. And games, due to their length and due to the fact that the player controls the pacing in so very many ways, seem to me highly similar to books, at least when it comes to how story gets processed on a neurological level. Again, though, these are the thoughts of a man whose world has been thrown into horrid disarray.

Levine: Look, I think you're right in a sense that you're dealing with a lot more time, the amount of detail, and the amount of interesting niggles you can put in. That's much more like a novel. And sometimes, because I'm so used to working on games and movies, I always feel like the clock is ticking in my head, in terms of getting the story forward.

Bissell: All the stuff I love most in game storytelling is never the big-picture stuff; it's the stuff that feels like curlicues, stuff that's just there because it's a game and because you can do it. Like the little movies you can watch all over the world in *Infinite*.

Levine: That's what I love, right? I love that you can keep adding details, keep adding detail in a way that in a movie – because in a movie, you basically have X number of frames at the end. If your movie's an hour and fifty minutes, you've got to use every frame of that. And if you know anything about films, you know one of the worst things – I'm sure you've had this experience learning about screenwriting and the structure of films – is you realize that if they show you that sneaker in the corner of the room, that sneaker's going to matter. They don't have any time for it not to matter. It has to matter. And that's depressing. Because you're like, "Oh, [man.] I guess that sneaker's going to come into play." Whereas if you don't know film, it's like, "Oh, a sneaker! Cool." Games are still in a place where you can say, "Oh, a sneaker! Cool."

Bissell: The sneaker doesn't have to matter.

Levine: It doesn't have to matter. It can be something very, very small. And I think that's why I love the form. It provides that sense of big, big narrative story – I'm allowed to have my Booker and Elizabeth going through

this story, and Comstock and all the things that are going to happen – but then there’s all these little places you can go that are like, “What? Where am I?”

Bissell: I’ve written about the future of narrative games here on Grantland, and one thing I’m hearing from friends within the industry is that they’re really worried that the meaty, single-player narrative games we all love – like, say, *BioShock Infinite* – are soon to be an endangered species, at least for a little while. That seems to be the prevailing wisdom. It depresses me.

Levine: I think it’s undeniable to say the forms in which people consume quality content change, the way they pay for it changes, and the places where they want to consume it change. Technology has been an amazingly creative and destructive force – it’s been a creatively destructive force. If you look at traditional TV shows, and people were worried about the end of the drama...remember that, a few years ago? I tend not to spend a lot of time being anxious about things. I tend to spend the time looking for opportunity. Because the Earth will turn. You can choose to try to stop it from turning, but it will turn. There are truths. The sun will go up and the sun will go down. And I think that you have to count on those truths. Quality matters. Focus on your craft.

For all I know, I’ll never get to work on another big \$60 title – or the equivalent of that. Maybe there will be no economy for that. Who knows? Maybe there will be. Maybe that’s entirely the future. Maybe it’s part the future. But I’m pretty confident that talented people will be able to work on quality products. I just don’t know exactly how.

Bissell: The ground is certainly shifting, though, right? And nobody seems to know where this tectonic plate is carrying us.

Levine: I don’t think I’ve ever seen a time where people are less certain. The more certainty somebody comes to you with, the more full of [it] they probably are.