

# Bioshock Infinite and Indigenous Tales: The Potential of Game Media in Expressing Australian Aboriginal Culture

Neo Xia

The University of Melbourne  
Parkville 3052 VIC  
[xiaoranx@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:xiaoranx@student.unimelb.edu.au)

## Keywords

Game medium, Bioshock Infinite, Indigenous history, Australian Aboriginal culture

## INTRODUCTION

The advantages of media representation have positioned electronic games as a new frontier for cultural dissemination. Within this context, the expression of Indigenous cultures is experiencing a fresh wave. Indigenous game developers worldwide are striving to convey Indigenous voices through this medium (Land, 2020). In Australia, a similar effort is evident. Given its history of Indigenous trauma, the country has a responsibility to explore various avenues to represent the voices of its Indigenous populations. The Digital Songlines (DSL) project is one such initiative in Australia that utilizes video game engines to share Indigenous knowledge. By creating a 3D gaming environment, it offers an apt platform for disseminating knowledge of Australian Aboriginal culture (Wyeld, Leavy & Carroll, 2007). However, Regrettably, the team responsible for creating the project has disbanded, and the links to its page are no longer active (Oppenheer, 2011).

There are numerous reasons for the discontinuation of a game project, but this study focuses on the phenomenon where a lack of balance between the game's representation of reality and its playability leads to a decline in public interest and engagement, ultimately rendering the project unsustainable (Majewski, 2015). This raises a critical question for game development: how to balance meaning, reality, and playability. Addressing this issue, this research introduces Casper Hartevelde's Triadic Game Design perspective, which emphasizes the harmonious balance of playability, reality, and meaning during the game development process. This approach ensures that while a game product has ample gameplay features, it also remains closely connected to the real-world themes it represents and successfully communicates its intended message (Hartevelde, 2011, P.279).

For this study, "BioShock Infinite" was chosen as the case study to apply and observe the Triadic Game Design theory in action. "BioShock Infinite" exemplifies how a video game can transform into a creative space, enabling players to experience identity politics both as authors and characters, thereby making gaming a medium of not only entertainment but also education (Mafe, 2015). Within the Triadic Game Design framework, playability is identified as a fundamental component crucial for creating engaging and immersive experiences. The theory highlights the vital role of

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

playability in captivating players, establishing it as a core element for the success of any game (Harteveld, 2011, p.68). In "BioShock Infinite," the game preserves the highly praised first-person shooter mechanics of its series, combining them with magical abilities. Innovatively, it introduces the character 'Elizabeth' as a near-constant companion throughout the journey, making the combat experiences in "BioShock Infinite" particularly intriguing through interactions with her (McCaffrey, 2013).

Concerning the 'Reality' element, "BioShock Infinite" addresses real historical and cultural issues through satirical depictions of the Indigenous experience. The game continues the environmental storytelling strengths of its predecessors, skillfully weaving the 'Reality' of historical events and cultural issues into its narrative. Upon arriving in the city of Columbia, suspended above the clouds, players encounter a world reflecting the harsh realities of racial discrimination, ironically depicted as a seemingly utopian society. The city, inspired by American exceptionalism, highlights the satirical theme of 'white supremacy' (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019). This setting prompts players to engage critically with the narrative, leading to skepticism and distaste towards the game's surface portrayal (Tarnowetzki, 2015). This sentiment intensifies in the 'Hall of Heroes', where Indigenous characters are malevolently portrayed, and the game's antagonist's atrocities against them are ostentatiously displayed. This distorted representation of Indigenous history in the context of satire deepens players' skepticism and reflection on the supremacist society, while also fostering sympathy and understanding for the stigmatized Indigenous community (Caselli, Stefano & Bonello, 2020). The satirical scene construction and narrative pacing effectively depict the stigmatization of Indigenous history, showcasing "BioShock Infinite's" efforts in Indigenous narrative.

In "BioShock Infinite", the expression on the 'Meaning' level is manifested through the deep intertwining of its core narrative and plot construction with the trauma of Indigenous peoples. The game reveals that the protagonist, Booker, and the antagonist, Comstock, are in fact the same individual from different parallel universes. This narrative twist, deeply rooted in the psychological impact of violence against Indigenous people, not only captivates players but also ignites a process of reflection. Booker's despair reflects his non-reflective engagement with his past, while Comstock's self-absolution and rewriting of history demonstrate a lack of critical self-reflection. The binary opposition between Booker and Comstock prompts players to engage in dialogical reflection, encouraging them to consider various perspectives and the moral complexities surrounding issues of racial violence (Mekler & Iacovides, 2018). "BioShock Infinite" goes beyond merely confronting the legacy of racial violence in American history; it cultivates reflection and empathy among players (Buinicki, 2016). By leveraging a powerful plot twist and revealing the game's ultimate mystery, it employs dramatic narrative shifts to deepen players' understanding of the Indigenous-related plotlines. This aspect is where "BioShock Infinite" achieves its value in the conveyance on the 'Meaning' level.

Through the case study of "BioShock Infinite," analyzed within the framework of Triadic Game Design theory, we can discern the unique value of the game in balancing playability, reality, and meaning. "BioShock Infinite" not only offers an engaging experience in terms of playability but also successfully integrates a profound exploration of Indigenous history and cultural issues on the level of reality, particularly through its use of satirical depictions and environmental storytelling techniques. Additionally, the game's performance on the level of meaning, especially through its deep narrative of Indigenous trauma and the complex relationship between characters like Booker and Comstock, demonstrates an exploration of dialogical reflection and moral complexity, guiding players towards deeper thinking and

emotional resonance. Therefore, as a classic case, "BioShock Infinite" highlights the significance of games as a medium for expressing Indigenous themes, simultaneously illustrating the necessity of achieving a triadic balance of playability, reality, and meaning when addressing such topics.

This study, limited by its scale and the current academic phase of the author, has not fully showcased some topics of exploratory value and research potential. In future research, there could be a further examination of the potential impact of Triadic Game Design theory on other games related to Indigenous themes. By applying the theory to more classic cases, it would be possible to summarize guiding experiences for the development of games centered on Australian Indigenous culture, thus forming a more comprehensive academic research matrix. If feasible, I aspire to delve deeper into these topics during my doctoral studies.

## **BIO**

I am a Master's student pursuing an Executive Master of Arts at the University of Melbourne and am currently on the path to obtaining a PhD in Game Studies. My prior research has primarily centered around the science fiction theme of cyberpunk, leading to publications on the sociology of cyberpunk. During my Master's studies, I have shifted my focus to the intersection of cyberpunk and transmedia storytelling, with an emphasis on the functional study of media.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

In this section, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Mahli-Ann Butt. It was she who provided me with the opportunity to participate in this conference. She also paved the way for me to pursue a PhD degree. I sincerely appreciate everything she has done for me.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Buinicki, M. T. (2016). Nostalgia and the Dystopia of History in 2K's Bioshock Infinite. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 49(5), 730.
- Caselli, S., Bonello Rutter Giappone, K., Schellekens, J., & Gualeni, S. (2020). Satire at play: A game studies approach to satire. In Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '20). Association for Computing Machinery. Article 87.
- Harteveld, C. (2011). *Triadic game design: Balancing reality, meaning and play*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Land, J. (2020). Indigenous video games. In L. Lopez (Ed.), *Race and Media: Critical Approaches* (pp. 92-100). New York University Press.
- Majewski, J. (2015). Cultural heritage in role-playing video games: A map of approaches. *Furnace*, 2, 24-36.
- Mafe, D. A. (2015). Race and the first-person shooter: Challenging the video gamer in BioShock Infinite. *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 30(2), 118.
- McCaffrey, R. (2013, March 22). BioShock Infinite PC Review. IGN. Retrieved from <https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/03/22/bioshock-infinite-pc-review>
- Mekler, E. D., Iacovides, I., & Bopp, J. A. (2018, October). "A Game that Makes You Question..." Exploring the Role of Reflection for the Player Experience. In Proceedings of the 2018 annual symposium on computer-human interaction in play (pp. 315-327).
- Wyeld, T. G., Leavy, B., Carroll, J., Gibbons, C., Ledwich, B., & Hills, J. (2007). The Ethics of Indigenous Storytelling: using the Torque Game Engine to Support Australian Aboriginal Cultural Heritage. In DiGRA Conference (pp. 261-268).
- Oppenneer, M. (2011). Digital Songlines project. Ethnos Project. Retrieved from <https://www.ethnosproject.org/digital-songlines-project/>
- Pérez-Latorre, Ó., & Oliva, M. (2019). Video games, dystopia, and neoliberalism:

The case of BioShock Infinite. *Games and Culture*, 14(7-8), 781-800.

Tarnowetzki, L. (2015). *Environmental Storytelling and BioShock Infinite: Moving from Game Design to Game Studies* [Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University].