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Accept your baptism, and die!

Redemption, Death and Baptism in *Bioshock Infinite*

Frank Bosman

Abstract

In 2013, self-described Christian and 'devout believer' Breen Malmberg requested and received a refund for the game *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) from Valve, on the basis of his objections to an unskippable scene in the game. In the offending scene, which occurs early in the game, the game forces the protagonist, Booker DeWitt, to undergo a Christian baptismal ritual. The ritual is mandatory for the player in order to proceed with the game. Malmberg characterized the choice as 'extreme blasphemy'. When the player decides to undergo the ritual, he is (almost) drowned in the process. That at least four of these 'baptismal' rituals, all with lethal consequences, occur in *Bioshock Infinite*, a game whose narrative context is critical of the religiously inspired exceptionalism of the United States of America, is highly interesting. Developer Irrational Games has succeeded not only in incorporating religious beliefs, rituals and criticisms in a highly-complex narrative, but also in inviting (or even: forcing) the player to participate in ritual behavior itself.

Keywords: *Bioshock Infinite*, Ken Levine, baptism, sacramentality, violence, gameenvironments

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Introduction

In 2013, a Christian video game player by the name of Breen Malmberg asked and (allegedly) received a refund from game platform Valve for his copy of the game *Bioshock Infinite* (2013). Malmberg's letter to Valve is quoted on *Kotaku.com*:

"I wish to return/exchange this game [*Bioshock Infinite*] for steam credit or refund on the grounds that I cannot play it (...) At the very beginning of the game there is a section of the game that is so offensive to my religious beliefs that I cannot proceed with it any further. (...) The player is forced to make a choice which amounts to extreme blasphemy in my religion (Christianity) in order to proceed any further - and I am therefore forced (in good conscience) to quit playing and not able to experience approx. 99% of the content in the game." (Hernandez 2013)

The section of *Bioshock Infinite* that offended Malmberg's religious sensibilities occurs directly after the start of the game. The game protagonist Booker DeWitt flies aboard a one-man mini rocket to the floating city of Columbia. But before DeWitt can enter the city, he has to undergo a baptism ritual performed by a man called Preacher Witting, a ritual that includes full-body submersion. It nearly drowns DeWitt, but it does allow him to enter the city. One of Hernandez's co-workers at *Kotaku.com*, Tina Amini, also expressed her reservations even though she does not consider herself to be a religious person:

"That was one of the few scenes in *Infinite* that I didn't necessarily enjoy. I'm not a religious person, so I didn't like being forced to think that baptism is a significant event." (Hernandez 2013)

Ken Levine, the director of *Bioshock Infinite*, told *Gamespot.com* that one of his own colleagues at Irrational Games wrote a letter of resignation after playing an unidentified part of the game, because he felt offended by the (religious) portrayal of

notions. These traces are identified as such, explained, analyzed and critically discussed in relation to the (original) religious and theological tradition(s).

The importance of this article's inquiry within the framework of the study of religion in video games can be situated in the significance of video games as cultural artifacts that articulate all kinds of existential notions and opinions, including religious and religiously inspired themes.

The Universe of Bioshock Infinite

Bioshock Infinite (2013) is a single-player, first-person, linear, single-ending action/adventure game with RPG elements, and is playable on multiple platforms (Windows, PS3/4, Xbox 360/One, OSX and Linux). The game's narrative contains allohistorical and retrofuturistic elements, meaning that it presents historical events as unfolding differently than they actually did (Hellekson 2011), while advanced technology is portrayed as it was imagined in earlier times (Guffey and Lemay 2014). The narrative also features a sharp distinction between story and discourse (Chatman 1978), and is heavily dependent on the concept of the multiverse. The multiverse is a hypothetical set of possible universes, which coexist alongside each other. While scientifically speaking it is only a hypothesis, this idea has been widely used in fiction, primarily in connection with human (moral) agency (choice). Every choice a human being makes results in numerous parallel universes, each corresponding with one possible outcome of his or her decision (Luokala 2014).

While *Bioshock Infinite's* use of the idea of the multiverse is consistent with the existence of our historical universe, in fact all possible worlds shown in the game deviate from ours. This means that all universes in *Bioshock Infinite* are allohistorical

in relation to ours. Because of the game's heavy use of flashbacks, parallel universes and other narrative devices, I will present the background story in chronological order, presupposing completion of the game.

The game narrative chronology starts in 1890, at the (historical) massacre of Wounded Knee on December 29 of that year. After being captured, between 150 and 300 Native Americans (men, women and children) are killed by the United States 7th Cavalry Regiment (Andersson 2008). *Bioshock Infinite* essentially revolves around the life of a (fictional) guilt-ridden cavalryman called Booker DeWitt after the battle at Wounded Knee. At some time in 1891 or 1892, Booker encounters the opportunity to participate in a baptism ceremony in the waters of an unknown river, presided over by the preacher Witting. From that moment on, *Bioshock Infinite* develops two different timelines: in 'reality 1' (R1), DeWitt accepts baptism, while in 'reality 2' (R2), he refuses at the last moment (see: diagram 1). The two timelines then proceed separately from each other, but they intertwine at a few decisive moments.

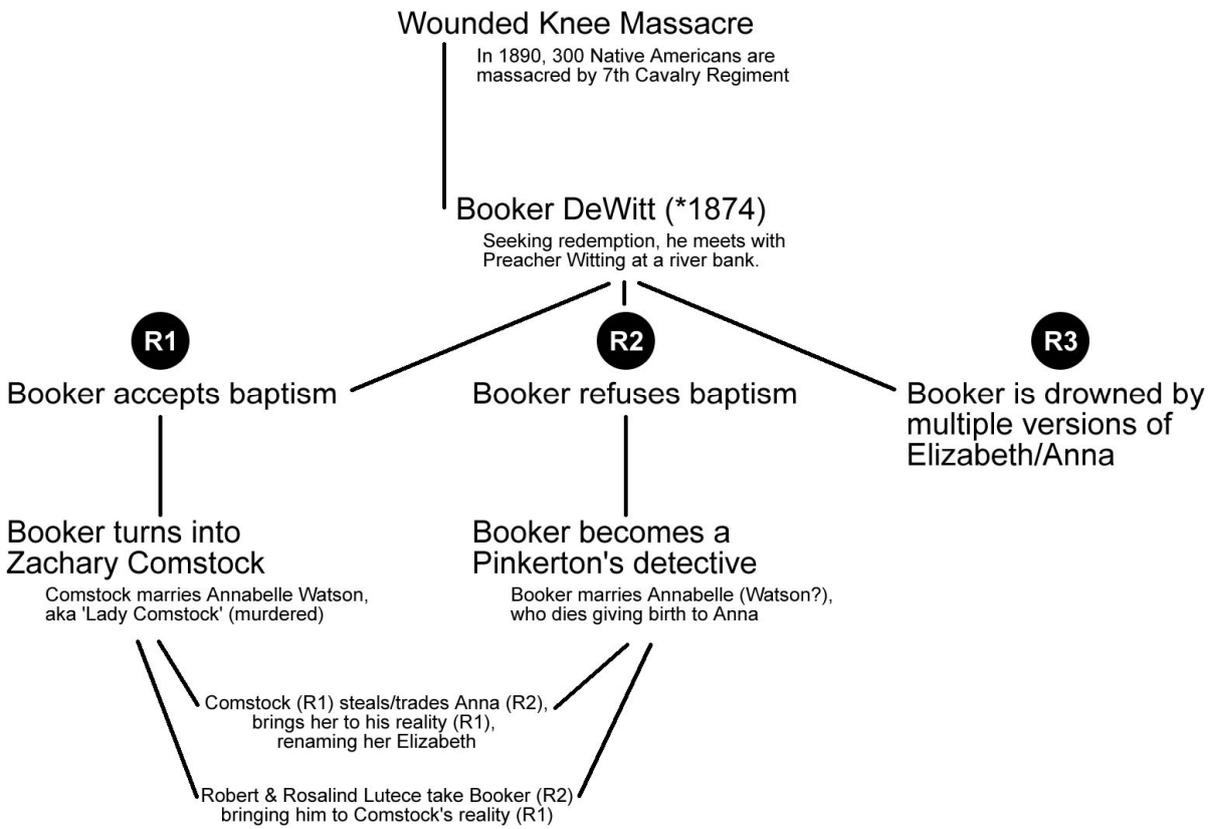


Figure 1. Timelines.

In R1, DeWitt embraces his new faith and transforms into a religious leader called Zachary Hale Comstock. In 1893, this self-proclaimed prophet manages to build a giant futuristic floating city called Columbia, designed by scientists Rosalind and Robert Lutece, and funded by the United States government. However, when Comstock uses Columbia's massive arsenal to free American hostages during the (historical) Boxer Rebellion (1899 –1901), and burns Peking to the ground in the process, the United States government distances itself from the project, and demands that Comstock relinquish the city. Comstock refuses, declares himself independent from the United States, and disappears with his city into the clouds.

In R2, after DeWitt refuses to be baptized, he joins the (historical) Pinkerton's National Detective Agency in 1892. A year later, his daughter Anna is born, but his wife Annabelle dies in childbirth. Still rent by guilt at his involvement in Wounded Knee and grieving for the loss of his wife, DeWitt starts drinking and gambling. Eventually, DeWitt (R2) is visited by the Lutece siblings from the other timeline (R1), through a mechanically created 'tear' in the divide between the two universes (Rosalind and Robert Lutece are actually one and the same person, but from different realities, who have mastered this extraordinary technique). The Luteces (R1) then abduct/buy Anna from DeWitt (R2) on behalf of Comstock (who is DeWitt in R1), who is unable to have children with his wife Annabelle Watson (aka 'The Lady Comstock'). DeWitt, unaware of the true nature of the incident, falls into a deep depression, and brands the letters 'A.D.' on his right hand, his abducted daughter's initials.

Nineteen years later, in 1912, Rosalind and Robert Lutece (R1) return to DeWitt (R2) to bring him to Comstock's reality (R1) so that he can reclaim his daughter, now called Elizabeth (aka 'The Lamb of Comstock'). The Lutece siblings have witnessed the atrocities that Comstock has committed with the help of Anna/Elizabeth's interdimensional powers, and now want DeWitt to stop Comstock's reality before it is too late.

Because of his transition from R2 to R1 through a tear, DeWitt suffers from a rare condition which causes him to create new memories from old ones. DeWitt now interprets the phrase 'Bring us the girl and wipe away the debt', originally used by Comstock/the Luteces to encourage him (R2) to sell Anna, as a mission given to him by the Luteces to rescue a girl named 'Elizabeth' from Comstock and bring her to them. DeWitt only discovers what has truly happened to him (R2)/Comstock (R1) and Anna (R2)/Elizabeth (R1) much later in the game.

American Exceptionalism and its Religious Dimensions

As indicated above, one of the main themes of *Bioshock Infinite* is its critique of American exceptionalism and this doctrine's accompanying religious overtones (Kain 2013, Mullaney 2013, Jackson 2014). In order to understand this critique fully, we have to examine American exceptionalism itself a little more closely.

'American exceptionalism' is the idea that the United States of America holds an exceptional position among the nations of the world (Madsen 1998, Zimmer 2013). According to Seymour Lipset (1998) the notion consists of three interrelated ideas: (1) the USA is different from the rest of the world because it was (and to a certain degree still is) the first 'new', that is truly democratic, nation; (2) the USA has a unique mission to remake the world in its own image; and (3) this history and mission gives the USA a superiority over all other nations.

Mark Liberman (2012) identifies three stages in the use and meaning of the term 'exceptionalism' in American history: (1) in the 1920s and 1930s, the term was used within an explicitly American Communist context to argue for a less far-reaching revolution in the USA; (2) in the 1950s, it was recycled by liberal historians to celebrate the greatness of the USA in broader terms; and (3) in more recent years, the notion has been reused by right-wing Republican political circles (for instance surrounding Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney) as part of a new wave of American patriotism.

The idea that America has a superior role in the world and in world history has a number of strongly religious connotations, especially the notion that America is a 'shining city upon a hill'. The phrase itself stems from a biblical story. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his listeners: 'You are the light of the world. A city on top of

a hill cannot be hidden’ (Matthew 5:14). The phrase entered American politics in 1630, when the famous Puritan leader John Winthrop gave a sermon (‘A Model of Christian Charity’) aboard the ship Arbella (Rosano 2003). Winthrop told the soon-to-be Massachusetts Bay colonists that their new community would be ‘as a city upon a hill’, to be seen by the whole world as an example of a new and truly Christian civilization. Many American politicians have used the phrase since, including John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Mitt Romney and (then Senator) Barack Obama.

Bioshock Infinite criticizes this mix of American nationalism and (Protestant) Christianity. It is no coincidence that Columbia’s triumph begins at the (historical) 1893 Chicago World Fair, which is often seen as one of the decisive moments in the rise of American exceptionalism. And the name of Comstock’s floating city – Columbia – is a clear reference to one of America’s famous female personifications associated with Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the ‘New World’ (Cortez 2016).

Comstock founds his own ecclesiastical organization, called ‘The Founders’ or ‘The Church of Comstock’. Comstock himself is addressed as ‘Father Comstock’ or simply as ‘the Prophet’. His wife is called ‘The Lady’, while ‘his’ daughter Elizabeth is venerated as ‘The Lamb’ or ‘The Lamb of Comstock’. The initials on DeWitt’s hand – A.D. – stand for the name of his daughter Anna DeWitt, but also refer to the Latin phrase *Agnus Dei*, ‘the Lamb of God’, a common Christian image for Jesus Christ.

The Founding Fathers George Washington (1732-1799), Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) are worshipped as the ‘Three Saintly Founders’, whose statues, paintings and depictions in stained-glass windows – can be found all across Columbia, and they can be recognized by their attributes: a sword, a key and a scroll respectively. Comstock’s vision of Columbia as ‘the New Eden’ and

know who Witting is at the time, and DeWitt has already forgotten). His prayer is rhythmical:

“And every year on this day of days, we recommit ourselves to our city, to our Prophet, Father Comstock. We recommit through sacrifice, and the giving of thanks, and by submerging ourselves in the sweet water of baptism. And lo, if the Prophet had struck down our enemies at Wounded Knee, and not railed against the Sodom beneath us, it would have been enough. If the Prophet had just railed against the Sodom beneath us, but not accepted the three golden gifts of the Founders, it would have been enough. If the Prophet had just accepted the three golden gifts of the Founders, and not prayed for our deliverance, it would have been enough. If the Prophet had only prayed for our deliverance, and not led us to this New Eden, it would have been enough. If the Prophet had just led us to this New Eden, and not purged the vipers of the Orient, it would have been enough. If the Prophet had just purged the vipers of the Orient, but not suffered the sacrifice of his beloved, it would have been enough. If the Prophet had just suffered the sacrifice of his beloved, but not expelled the Vox Populi, it would have been enough!”

The structure of Witting’s prayer strongly resembles that of the Jewish *Dayenu* prayer, said by pious Jews during Pesach (Gonen 2005). The *Dayenu* uses the same pattern as Witting’s prayer: ‘if He....it would have been enough’. And where the *Dayenu* praises the Lord for aiding his chosen people in their flight out of Egypt to the Promised Land, Witting’s version praises the extraordinary things Comstock has done in his quest to build and secure Columbia. Columbia is thus framed as both the ‘new Eden’ and the new ‘Promised Land’ where the ‘true’ believers can finally live in peace.

Levine told the interviewer of *Gamespot.com* that he did not have a religious upbringing (Makuch 2013), but the coincidence is too great to ignore. Levine was

raised in a Jewish family in New York. Not only the content and structure of Witting’s prayer hint at his Jewish heritage, the game *Bioshock Infinite* itself was released on March 26, the first day of Pesach in 2013.

When DeWitt breaks through the circle of believers standing before the preacher (as the gospel hymn *Will the circle be unbroken* continues to be sung), he asks the preacher to grant him access to the city. Witting replies: ‘Brother, the only way to Columbia is through rebirth in the sweet waters of baptism. Will you be cleansed, brother? (...) Hallelujah! Glory be! Reach out, brother!’ When DeWitt reluctantly accepts, Witting takes his hand, saying ‘I baptize you, in the name of our Prophet, in the name of our Founders, in the name of our Lord! And make him born again, in the bosom of Columbia!’

Witting fully submerges DeWitt, who struggles, for a couple of seconds. But when he emerges, Witting is not yet satisfied: ‘I don't know, brothers and sisters! But this one doesn't look clean to me.’ Witting then holds DeWitt under the water again, but this time for a longer period. The screen fades to black, suggesting that DeWitt has fainted or worse. After a few moments DeWitt opens his eyes again and finds himself on the outskirts of Columbia. There is now no sign of Witting, but there are believers praying before giant statues of the Three Sainly Founders. DeWitt is now able to enter the city.

Baptism #2: The Death of Comstock

The second baptism scene occurs in the nineteenth chapter, called ‘The hand of the Prophet’. While the other three baptism scenes can be clearly and easily identified as such, the second baptism scene requires some explanation.

After DeWitt has managed to free Elizabeth (although both are still unaware of their actual relationship), the two confront Comstock in his office. Comstock bewilders DeWitt with allusions to the fact that they are in fact the same person but from another parallel universe. Comstock's words do not make any sense to DeWitt and enrage him even more. When Comstock becomes violent towards 'his' daughter, DeWitt seizes him by the neck, leaving the old man powerless. While choking Comstock and smashing his skull on a small water basin standing on a socket, DeWitt shouts: 'She's your daughter, you son of a bitch! And you abandoned her! Was it worth it? Huh? Did you get what you wanted? Tell me! Tell me!'

Blood flows from the back of Comstock's head. In a weak voice, Comstock manages to utter his last words: 'It...is...finished'. DeWitt then stops choking Comstock and pushes his head – face down – into the water basin. DeWitt: 'Nothing is finished! You locked her up her whole life!' Elizabeth tries to stop DeWitt, but to no avail. When he regains control over his emotions, DeWitt realizes that Comstock has died.

The question is, can we qualify this scene as a 'baptism scene', as I am proposing? I think we can, but only in the context of the other three scenes and in the larger context of *Bioshock Infinite's* theme of sin, death and redemption. The little water basin on a socket in Comstock's office closely resembles a traditional baptismal font in a Protestant or Roman Catholic church, primarily used for baptizing infants by pouring some water onto their foreheads. Like DeWitt in the first baptism scene described above, Comstock is drowned in this 'baptismal water', with the important difference that DeWitt only passes out, whereas Comstock actually dies.

The second reference to baptism and the Christian tradition can be found in Comstock's last words: 'It is finished'. It is not a coincidence, I would argue, that these

are also the famous last words of Jesus on the cross, at least according to the Gospel of John. The translation 'completed' is sometimes used to translate the Greek *tetelestai* (for instance in the *Common English Bible* from 2011), but the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989), the *New American Standard Bible* (1995) and the older *American Standard Version* (1901) all have the traditional translation 'finished'.

The use of a baptismal font-like water basin and the reuse of Jesus' famous last words, in connection with the classical theology of the sacrament of baptism in the Christian tradition (as discussed above), and the fact that someone is drowned – as is the case in three out of four baptism scenes in the game – add up to the reasonable assumption that Comstock's death can also be classified as a kind of 'baptism scene'. We will return to this with additional arguments later in the article.

Baptism #3: Refusal of Baptism

The two last baptism scenes can be found in the twentieth chapter, 'Ending'. This chapter provides a long explanation of the true nature of all the events that occurred before and during the game, as Elizabeth/Anna narrates them to an astonished DeWitt.

During the explanation, DeWitt finds himself back at the riverbank after the events of Wounded Knee in 1891/1892. He is accompanied by Elizabeth/Anna, but no one seems to notice her except Witting. Elizabeth asks her father why he was at the riverbank. Witting is trying to persuade DeWitt to be baptized:

"Elizabeth: Why were you here?

Witting: Are you ready to have your past erased? Are you ready to have your sins cleansed? Are you ready to be born again? Take my hand.

DeWitt: No... no, I don't want to.

Elizabeth: But you already did, didn't you?
Witting: Are you ready to be born again?
DeWitt: I am."

Witting asks DeWitt three questions, all associated with the ritual of baptism: 'do you hate your sins?', 'do you hate your wickedness?' and 'do you want to clean the slate, leave behind all you were before, and be born again in the blood of the Lamb?' DeWitt answers 'yes' three times. But when the preacher wants to baptize him, DeWitt interrupts him:

"Witting: Jesus, wash this man clean... Father, make him born again... Lord--
DeWitt: No, no, no, wait, stop it! Stop it! No, get off me! Get off!"

DeWitt refuses his baptism at the hands of Witting, thus splitting off the second timeline (R2), the reality in which he becomes a Pinkerton detective and 'sells' his daughter Anna to Comstock, from the first (R1). Elizabeth comments on his refusal:

"Elizabeth: You didn't go through with it.
DeWitt: You think a dunk in the river's gonna change the things that I've done?"

Unfortunately, the game does not show the scene in which DeWitt accepts his baptism and turns into Comstock, although it can be easily deduced from Elizabeth's explanation that in at least one universe he did.

Baptism #4: The Drowning of DeWitt

The fourth and last baptism can also be found in the twentieth chapter ('Ending'), at the very end of the chapter and the game. A third timeline (R3) is introduced, in which DeWitt neither accepts (R1) nor refuses (R2) the baptism at the riverbank. In this third timeline, DeWitt finds himself back at the river, with Preacher Witting

praying close by. DeWitt is surrounded by multiple versions of his daughter from different parallel universes.

“Elizabeth 1: You chose to walk away.
Elizabeth 2: But in other oceans, you didn't. You took the baptism.
Elizabeth 3: You were born again as a different man.
Booker: Comstock.
Elizabeth 4: It all has to end.
Elizabeth: To never have started.
Elizabeth 5: Not just in this world.
Elizabeth: But in all of ours.
Booker: Smother him in the crib.
Ensemble: Smother, smother, smother before the choice is made.
Elizabeth 1: Before you are reborn.”

Then Witting asks DeWitt ‘what name shall you take my son?’ This is a reference to the habit in the Christian tradition of giving the person baptized a new name, symbolizing his new identity and renewed relationship with God. In the first timeline (R1), DeWitt did indeed take a new name after his baptism, Zachary Comstock. In the second timeline (R2), DeWitt refused his baptism at the last moment, and therefore kept his old name. However, something else happens in the third timeline (R3).

“Elizabeth 6: He's Zachary Comstock.
Elizabeth 7: He's Booker DeWitt.
Booker: No. I'm both.”

DeWitt’s daughters push him into the river and hold him underwater until he drowns. Without his existence, all Elizabeths cease to exist and they disappear one by one. Of course, this means that there is a huge time paradox in the storyline of *Bioshock Infinite*. If DeWitt dies before marrying his wife and fathering a daughter, neither Elizabeth (R1) nor Anna (R2) can exist. This means Elizabeth is not there to be

does not, however, include this element.

It is interesting to note that in all three instances, it is the same person who is drowned or nearly drowned, in respective order: DeWitt from reality two, DeWitt-turned-into-Comstock from reality one, and DeWitt before the splitting of the two timelines effectively creates a third reality. The baptizer-annex-‘executioner’ depends on the context: Preacher Witting (R2), DeWitt (R2) and DeWitt/Comstock’s daughters from multiple universes (R3). Essentially, the baptisms involve DeWitt killing himself or allowing others to kill him.

Secondly, in all four instances the cleansing of sins is (or is not) intended, received and/or perceived. When DeWitt tries to enter Columbia (baptism #1), the cleansing of sins is intended by Witting, but is not received nor perceived as such by DeWitt. The cleansing is not received by DeWitt because he is not aware that he is need of redemption. And because of his mental condition, he has forgotten what happened before.

At the ‘death of Comstock’ (baptism #2), the cleansing of sins is not intended by DeWitt or by Comstock, but at the same time it is realized by DeWitt in the act of killing his alter ego from a different parallel universe. At the ‘refusal of the baptism’ (baptism #3), the cleansing of sin is (again) intended by Witting, but is not realized by DeWitt, that is, not in reality 2. In reality 1, although it is not portrayed in the game, DeWitt does accept his baptism and becomes Comstock.

The final baptism (#4), ‘the drowning of DeWitt’, is the only baptism scene in which redemption is sought and realized. DeWitt allows his daughters to end his life, thus ending not only the Comstock storyline (R1) to unfold with all the devastating results

attached to this, but also the DeWitt storyline (R2) in which he sells his daughter to his alter ego from the other timeline.

Thirdly, baptism #3 leaves a very permanent mark on DeWitt. In reality 1, DeWitt accepts his baptism and becomes Comstock, whereas in reality 2, DeWitt refuses the baptism and becomes a drunk detective. The 'ineradicable mark' of the two realities can be found either in the rise of Comstock (R1), or in DeWitt's body (R2) when he brands the initials of his abducted child Anna DeWitt onto the back of his left hand, A.D. The letters A.D. also signify – at least in the Christian tradition – *anno Domino* ('the year of our Lord'), and *Agnus Dei* ('the Lamb of God'). In the Christian liturgy, the image of the Lamb of God is connected with the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, 'he who takes away the sins of the world'.

Bioshock Infinite's storyline revolves, among other things, around the theme of redemption. DeWitt wanders round in search of redemption for the atrocities he and his fellow soldiers committed against the Native Americans at Wounded Knee. When he meets Witting two years later, he is tempted to accept the preacher's offer of redemption. When he accepts (R1), the baptism indeed brings a potential form of redemption for DeWitt: as Comstock, he is able to undo what he did before. Unfortunately for DeWitt-turned-into-Comstock, his transformation does not result in true redemption. Instead, Comstock makes the burden of his moral faults even greater by constructing a kind of religious dictatorial regime in Columbia.

Refusing baptism (R2) means that DeWitt cannot find redemption. In fact, things go from bad to worse: his wife dies in labor, DeWitt starts drinking and gambling, and neglects his infant daughter to the point where he agrees to 'sell' the girl to Comstock. The slogan 'wipe away the debt, return the girl' has a cynical double

meaning: Comstock and the Luteces use it to soothe what is left of DeWitt's consciousness, and later on in the game, in a reversal of meaning, to return Elizabeth to her own parallel universe in order to prevent Comstock from taking over the world using her paranormal powers. DeWitt ultimately only finds redemption in death. He is able to atone for Wounded Knee, and for the two subsequent possible universes (R1 and R2) to come only when he is drowned in the river.

We could argue that the imagery of (Christian) baptism is only one part of the larger criticism, which the game directs at religiously inspired American exceptionalism. As DeWitt rhetorically asks Elizabeth at the end of the third baptism: "You think a dunk in the river's gonna change the things that I've done?" Comstock is the stereotypical religious zealot who speaks of truth, love and peace in the name of an all-loving God, but who at the same time commits all kinds of atrocities in the name of the same God in order to preserve and extend his own power and possessions. In other words, the whole idea of being cleansed of sin and finding redemption in Christian baptism is nothing but an empty attempt to unburden one's consciousness in the face of continuing violence against fellow humans.

At the same time, *Bioshock Infinite* takes the connection between sin, death and redemption that exists in Christian theology very seriously. DeWitt finds redemption through willing submission to the baptisms at the beginning (#1) and end of the game (#4), although the degree of 'willingness' is significantly greater in the last scene than in the first.

Whereas the third baptism - the refusal - seems to lead to new life, or rather to two different versions of this new life, in the end both versions are equally unattractive and miserable. Both timelines run 'dry', that is, they turn out 'badly', with DeWitt

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