# "A Choice is Better than None, Mr. DeWitt. No Matter What the Outcome": Remix and Genre Play in BioShock Infinite

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*The rhetorics of videogames share much with the rhetorics of remix: both meld, repurpose, and reinvent media for new purposes and audiences. In examining BioShock Infinite in terms of what Dustin Edwards refers to as genre remix, a multifaceted tension arises. Infinite's story on choice and decision-making clashes with its remixed steampunk genre. Throughout the game, the narrative calls attention to this juxtaposition, forming a playable message about player agency and control in videogames as a medium--a meta-argument made through remixing the genres at hand. The game's rules and coding are indifferent to player choice, but the player's interpretation is where decision comes alive, where the narrative produces meaning, and where remix challenges perception.*

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As the emerging media juggernaut in late twentieth and into the twenty-first century, videogames are a natural remix in and of themselves—assemblages of images, sound, movement, and algorithm. They are vast databases of prescribed code, categorized and organized to be consumed through the stipulations of rule sets. In this way, they are not too different from many other forms of media. The experience of a book, music album, or game truly comes to fruition through each individual's experience and interpretation. The rhetorics of videogames share much in common with the rhetorics of remix: both meld, repurpose, and reinvent media for new rhetorical purposes and for new audiences. Scott Church defines remix "as a communicative practice, a frame that illuminates the rhetorical dimensions, persuasive possibilities, and cultural implications of remixed artifacts,"[1] something videogames clearly fit into. However, the ability of a videogame to perform complex and meaningful remixes is largely unexplored in rhetorical studies, but by examining a sample game, *BioShock Infinite*, in terms of what Dustin Edwards refers to as genre remix,[2] a multifaceted tension arises. The tensions between *Infinite*'s narrative on choice and decisions clashes with its remixed steampunk genre. Through this process, a larger argument about player choice in videogames is created through the act of playing the game's story and completing its objectives.

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[1] Scott H. Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and Xtine Burrough, in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43
[2] Dustin W. Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically: Toward A Typology of Transformative Work." *Computers and Composition* 39 (2016): 47.

Edwards argues that remix forms a typology consisting of multiple parts, one of which is what he calls "genre play."[3] Drawing on Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action," Edwards puts forth that:

> Genre play can be defined as constructing a text that blends, repurposes, or otherwise moves in and out of genre expectations. Signaled by phrases such as "remixing the book," "remixing the essay," or "remixing traditional scholarship," genre play refers to the ways in which rhetors playfully re-conceptualize reified norms, working both within and against those socially constituted ways of doing and knowing. As Carolyn Miller (1984) famously noted, genres are best understood as forms of social action—meaning that the emphasis for studying genres should be on typified *use* rather than particular forms.[4]

The typified use of genre creates a particular expectation, and by remixing any given genre, rhetors can disrupt, subvert, and repurpose the expectations of an audience to draw attention to a particular message. *Infinite* has two functioning genres it remixes—that of the first-person shooter video-game, and that of its steampunk setting. Each of these remixes brings the player's attention to the rhetorical purpose of the game, a commentary on the value of player choice and agency in video-games.

**Video Games as Storytelling Platforms**

To understand how genre remix works in a game like *Infinite,* it is first necessary to understand how games work as narrative platforms. There are games which feature no or very limited narrative. In fact, narrative is a *potential* feature of games, rather than a necessity. It is easiest to visualize games as part of a spectrum. On one side of this spectrum are games that feature no narrative framing at all (like *Tetris*, Alexey Pajitnov, 1984). Some games, like *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1985-current) or *Angry Birds* (Rovio, 2009-current), feature compact, simple narrative elements hinting at plot, but ultimately these narrative elements only act as a short explanation for the play actions – a very basic story to justify or explain the game mechanics. (Why is Mario going to the castle? To rescue the princess.) These kinds of games are still close to the narrativeless end of the game spectrum. On the other side of this spectrum, there are games which can be called interactive fiction, in which players act as directors and storytellers in games (e.g. Quantic Dream's 2010 *Heavy Rain).* The majority of games fall towards the middle of this spectrum, functioning with two systems: playable space and cut-scenes.

Cut-scenes, reminiscent of film scenes, are moments of a game in which players watch scenes onscreen without the possibility of input. Players cannot change, influence, or affect the events that are happening. Hybrid cut-scenes do exist, in which players can input very simple reactions to on-screen events or select dialogue options in a discussion, but these are less common than traditional game cut-scenes… After a cut-scene has run its course, games typically shift back to the playable space, where the player can once again interact with the game and influence what's happening in the game. *Infinite* transitions between cut-scenes and playable space consistently. The game follows a formulaic pattern, consisting of battle-focused play spaces where players fight their way to checkpoints and are rewarded with a cut-scene that develops the plot.

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[3] Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically," 47.
[4] Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically," 50.

## First Person Remix

Game narrative, in this formulaic method, is a remix process. Shifting between short movies and playable environments, games are taking the old and blending it with the new, creating a gamespace that carries both the advantages and disadvantages of both. Although not referring to videogames, Eduardo Navas notes that "Remix, itself, has no form, but is quick to take on any shape and medium. . .. Remix is meta—always unoriginal. At the same time, when implemented effectively, it can become a tool of autonomy."[5] This remix gives players both the narrative structure of film, as well as the freedom of play needed to complete a videogame, although it is not without fault. The combination of free and structured story telling platforms is a major point of tension in *Infinite*, due to the themes and genre of the story itself.

    *Infinite* is the third installation of the *BioShock* franchise, featuring the steampunk ideologies of decision, choice, and cost. Developed by Irrational Games and headed by Ken Levine, *BioShock* is a critically acclaimed series of games, but *Infinite* is more accurately described as a successor rather than a sequel to its predecessors, the canonical *BioShock* and *BioShock 2*. Considered some of the greatest games ever created, the original and its sequel crafted the radical and iconic setting of Rapture, a dystopian city constructed fathoms under the sea, in ruins after its destructive civil war during an alternative history's 1960s. However, *Infinite* takes to the skies of a fictional 1912, where the recently seceded city of Columbia floats through the clouds, thanks to a mysterious scientific breakthrough. The physicist Rosalind Lutece discovered and manipulated the secrets of quantum physics to unlock parallel universes, allowing inter-universal movement and time travel. The city itself floats above the clouds due to Lutece's discoveries—it floats through "quantum levitation." While any visitor to the city of Columbia is immediately filled with awe, it takes very little time for a player to realize the initially wondrous world they have entered is a complicated, destructive, and violent fishbowl of blatant racism and dangerous nationalism, fueled by propaganda, secrecy, and fear.

    The player navigates this world using Booker DeWitt, a former Pinkerton agent, with only a phrase, "get the girl and wipe away the debt," to guide the player. In reading the narrative of *Infinite,* players explore the freedoms and limitations of choice and redemption through Booker's actions and the player's reactions.

    A story about the ethics of choice and the value of freedom to make choices is at odds with a digital representative model which directly limits the player's ability to perform those same actions. The tension is increased when we consider the actions the player must take to experience the game itself. *Infinite*'s narrative implies an endless number of choices exist for any moment. But the player can't help but notice that the game is in a cut-scene when a main character proclaims "All that's left is the choosing" of paths. This crucial theme of the game is made "when the player is more spectator than agent . . . it appears that all a player can do is watch as the game makes choices for them. It may have infinite in the title, but it appears finite in its options."[6] *Infinite's* main themes reveal a complicated dialogue on decisions and the costs of choice, key themes of steampunk fictions. But because of the remixed elements of the game, the interplay between these themes are repurposed to deliberately subvert the player's expectations of agency and control

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[5] Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling*. (Wien: Springer, 2012), 4.
[6] Matthew Wysocki and Betsy Brey, "'All That's Left Is the Choosing': BioShock Infinite and the Constants and Variables of Control," in *The Play versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*, ed. Matthew Kapell (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 146.

within the game, drawing emphasis to the medium of videogame stories and forming the argument that player agency is not as crucial to narrative success as many players assume.

## The Rhetorics of Steampunk

The rhetorics of the remixed videogame genre are multiplied when we take the setting's genre into consideration as well. *Infinite* takes place in a steampunk styled setting. As a genre, steampunk should be a shock to our sensibilities. It should challenge our decisions of what we consider "right" or "progress," and imagine the boundless possibilities that make up decisions—both what is done, what the consequences were, and most interestingly, what could have been done. At its core, steampunk is about potentialities, the permanent and numerous "what if" questions so many choose to ignore, reaching back to the industrial era. Steampunk authors believe the choices made by humanity during this pivotal time both created and destroyed; technology surged ahead, but steampunk allows readers to examine the costs of those decisions.

In *A Clockwork Rhetoric*, David Beard writes:

> Steampunk promises the possibility to reimagine relationships between gender, race, and technology, it inculcates values that bind steampunks together. As a rhetoric, it generates a utopian *nostalgia* or *memory*, rather than a utopian *vision*, and so cannot guide new sociopolitical relationships. Steampunk defines how we wish things might have been, instead of how we can work for change in the future.[7]

Interestingly, the trend in videogame settings leans more towards heavy fantasy settings, deeply sci-fi scenarios, or attempts at simulations of real world histories. There are, of course, a number of steampunk videogames, but despite the rising popularity of steampunk and its wide possibilities for the past, games tend towards less idealized world states and settings. *Infinite* is far from an idealized world, however, despite its appearance and steampunk aesthetics. Technically, to properly subgenre the game, it is not a steampunk game; as steampunk refers to alternative histories spawning from a moment in history where steam engine technology was developed and the combustible engine never did. *Infinite* does have combustible engines, but they are very rare and not considered useful. Power is derived from a vague explanation of quantum mechanics, but "quantum mechanics punk" doesn't have the same ring to it.

*Infinite* may not at first strike a player as steampunk; it lacks some of the more exaggerated aesthetics associated with steampunk, but due to its thematic focus, industrialized setting and time-period, and mixture of under-developed and impossible technologies simultaneously existing, *Infinite* is more steampunk than it first appears. But because of how the game remixes the steampunk genre, the disruptive setting feeds into the larger rhetorics about choice in videogames.

Barry Brummett notes that steampunk "makes use of public memory through its appropriation of images of the past, but it changes those memories in its rhetorical applications,[8] and the city of Colombia is a disturbing example of something typically considered aesthetically pleasing. And indeed, at first glance, Colombia is a place of extreme beauty: a city literally floating through the bright blue sky, with huge gleaming statues and greenspaces galore. Different parts of the city float separately, meeting and separating with interchangeable bridges, with timed regularity of a bus

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[7] David Beard, "A Rhetoric of Steam," in *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk,* ed. Barry Brummett (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), xvi.
[8] Barry Brummett, "Jumping Scale in Steampunk One Gear Makes You Larger, One Duct Makes You Small," in *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk*, ed. Barry Brummett (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 80.

schedule. Citizens even complain when two pieces of town are late connecting to another. There are also zeppelins, air busses, and sky tracks available for travel, used by the smiling citizens. The city streets are meticulously clean, the trees and flowers well-watered, and the majority of buildings feature gleaming neoclassical architecture. Everything is orderly, calm, shining on the surface. These idealized images combine the gears and mechanics we expect from a steampunk setting and gracefully float them through the heavens. It is remarkable and awe-inspiring—at first. After playing the game, the setting does little but inspire horror in its players, though. It does this through subverting the genre expectations of a superficially idealized past and bringing forth reality.

Colombia is a city divided, figuratively and literally. The city is deeply and aggressively segregated. Separate drinking fountains and restrooms for white people and people of color are standard. Racist propaganda against African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Jewish-Americans are prominent. It becomes clear through exploring the city that minority groups are brought to Colombia as slaves or indentured servants to staff heavily industrial factory jobs. These factory jobs are in an entirely separated part of Colombia, a district called Finkton. This district is literally a separate piece of Colombia, keeping in mind the fact that the city floats in several pieces through the sky, joined with connecting bridges. Finkton is different, however, since it does not have a connecting bridge. The only ways to access Finkton are through the industrial shipping docks. Containing slums, factories, workhouses, and Colombia's prison, Finkton's worn, dirty industrialism is a sharp contrast to the uncanny streets of Colombia "proper." Finkton meets some of the aesthetic terms of steampunk, with its clock towers, factories, and heavily mechanized setting, but the segregated setting reinforces the thematic steampunk elements of the game.

The effect of such rhetorically molds the city itself into steampunk monster, a hydra with too many heads to count, each shifting, moving, regenerating the status quo. According to Brummett, steampunk technologies tend towards the manicure or the gigantic; the entire city is an example of what he calls "jump-scale," to a fascinating extent:

> When the Steampunk images truly jump scale upward, the rhetorical effect is clear. The human characters are swallowed up in the belly of the beast, and it is a mechanical beast. Steampunk pushes one's face into its mechanicals; when the mechanicals are gigantic, then Steampunk inserts the human into the aesthetics of Steampunk. The control, the power, the precision of Steampunk is thus ascribed to the state, and the individual is consumed by it.[9]

As Booker, the player must fight the systems of political power which keep the city afloat (again, quite literally) and by doing so, the player sees individuals in Columbia—the 99% to the 1%; the white supremacist government to the antifascist revolutionaries gathering in Finkton; Booker to the player themselves—are all devoured by this jump-scale monster and the social issues its very presence embodies. This attention to issues of appalling racial inequity, class warfare and economic oppression, and the dangers of extreme American nationalism within *Infinite* are unusual for a steampunk story. Beard notes that the opportunity to rewrite and recreate the history of social and political problems, ones that haunt us into the twenty-first century, is present in steampunk but rarely pursued,[10] a notable failure of the genre. The fact that *Infinite* focuses on these issues as a major breaking point for storyline is crucial to the kind of genre play we see in in the game, revealing the enormous social atrocities facing the fictional fascist city into an all too familiar light here in 2017.

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[9] Brummett, "Jumping Scale," 91.
[10] Beard, "A Rhetoric of Steam," xxvii.

**Genre Play: Choice and Consequences**

More than anything else, *Infinite* is a game about choice and the themes of guilt, redemption, and cost, yet simultaneously eliminating agencies of change and control. When navigating the narrative in Colombia, a player steers Booker between cut-scenes by exploring the playable space. Within constraints of the game's rules, many different individual play styles are allowed, but ultimately, the game offers no meaningful choice for cut-scenes. Regardless of your choices in *Infinite*, the outcomes are the same. This is clearly illustrated in the now infamous Raffle Square Stoning scene.

Upon completing his journey to Colombia, the player finds Booker emerged in a carnival-like environment. It's an annual fair celebrating Colombia's secession from the United States. Red, white, and blue flags stylized off the American flag (but only containing one star, naturally) fly everywhere. A homogeneously white, wealthy, and able-bodied crowd wanders the fair, viewing scientific exhibits, playing carnival games, and eating traditional carnival food. Delighted cheers and happy conversations fill the air. The player guides Booker through the crowd—there is only one busy, hectic street that leads him to where he wants to go. Arrows on sandwich-board signs indicate this is the way to the raffle. All the other streets are closed. Earlier, Booker was explicitly warned to avoid the raffle by the people who sent him to Colombia. The player has two choices: stop playing the game, or send Booker to the raffle.

As Booker tries to walk through the busy street, his way is blocked yet again, this time by bystanders. They are not intending to block his way, but they are still nevertheless an effective roadblock. To Booker's right is a stage, curtain drawn, boisterous announcer hawking the annual raffle. There is an attractive young white woman by the foot of the stage holding a basket of baseballs with numbers on them. She calls out to Booker, and the player is presented with the option to talk to her. At this point, the player again has two choices: talk to her, or stop playing the game. Once the player decides to talk to the woman, a cut-scene begins and all the player can do is watch. She flirtatiously offers Booker a baseball, which serves as his raffle ticket. Booker stands near the stage as the announcer draws the winning ticket—naturally, it's Booker.

The curtain rises, revealing a cardboard jungle scene. The typical cliched jungle scene soon becomes something reprehensible, as two cardboard cutouts of monkeys stylized as racist caricatures are moved towards the front of the stage on a conveyer belt. One holds boutique, the other wears a top hat and holds a ring. They are pulled to the sides of the stage, revealing a white man and a black woman, wearing rags, hands tied, and bound to stakes. Behind them is a third cutout, a pastor-figure, but another grossly racist caricature of a black man, holding a book and waving at the crowd. The announcer states Booker's prize is "first throw" at what the player has just realized is a public stoning—the baseball is much more than a ticket. "So, are you gonna throw it? Or are you taking your coffee black these days?" shouts the announcer, throwing his head back in laughter. The crowd cheers to throw it, the carnival music has shifted to the bridal march, the couple pleads for mercy, and a prompt appears on the screen with a ten-second timer. A choice to make. Do you: 1) throw the ball at the couple; 2) throw the ball at the announcer. There is no prompt for the third option, do not throw the ball at all, but the use of the on-screen timer implies that indecision is a decision in this situation. There is also the never-stated option to stop playing the game. What does Booker do?

It does not matter. The player's choice does not matter. It does not make a single difference to the entire story whether or not Booker fights this atrocity or if he actually attempts to stone them. This brief, limited moment of agency makes no difference, and regardless of the player's choice, Booker's hand is grabbed by authorities as he stares at baseball in his hand, poised to throw the

ball at a target (the couple or the announcer) or to the ground (if no decision is made, Booker lowers his hand in disgust, saying "I'm not throwing that"). After examining his hand, the police attempt to arrest Booker for matching the profile of a person of interest.

Yet again, regardless of the player's wishes, in defending himself against authorities, Booker brutally kills a police officer with the officer's own weapon, picks it up, and the game shifts back into playable space again, leaving the player to struggle against the repercussions of this scene the player had no ability to alter at all. The consequences of this cut-scene last for the rest of the game; this is the beginning of the constant waves of attacks Booker and the player face for the rest of the game, the emblematic pointless violence of the first-person shooter genre. If Booker does not survive an encounter with police, military, or various other enemies throughout the game, the player must restart, typically at the end of the last cut-scene. The player is asked to embody Booker, to influence his acts and behaviors during the course of the playable space. Essentially, the playable space of the entire game consists of reacting to the fallout of this scene—the consequences of a choice made by the game itself, not the player.

So on one narrative level, the cut-scene narrative, decisions are made independently of the player, but they have the greatest impact. On the other level, the playable space, the player is allowed to make decisions, but those decisions have no impact on the story. However, this decision could still have an impact on the gameplay. In a videogame, mirroring the duality of narrative in games, decisions in games can have two kinds of consequences; they can have narrative consequences, in which the story is altered, or they can have ludic consequences, where a decision impacts gameplay. As established, the Raffle Square Stoning scene decision does not have narrative consequences. However, ludic consequences can encourage players to behave in particular fashions, which in turn could change gameplay. For example, a game can withhold an item or ability that a player would prefer to access, depending on the actions of the player. If Booker benefitted from behaving in a particular way during the game, many players would prefer to maximize their own benefits and act accordingly. This ludic level may or may not influence narrative, but it has a serious impact on interpretation and meaningfulness. Booker is the narrator; everything the player understands, sees, and does within Colombia is done through Booker. Each element of the story is presented through Booker's eyes, but it's players who must interpret, react, and manipulate the available strands of the story to the best of their ability. Ludic consequences influence the ability of the player to navigate the digital environment, thereby limiting or maximizing different elements of the game. Characters, interactions, dialogues, objects, settings, and areas can be brought into the story or removed, depending on each player's ludic possibilities.

In the instance of the Raffle Square Stoning, since the narrative of the game is not impacted by the player's decisions within the scene, the attention of a reader can fall on possible ludic consequences. However, there are no ludic consequences to this decision either; there is no change in the reward Booker earns for the player's choice. Regardless, Booker receives a reward later in the story. If the player does nothing, or tries to harm the announcer, the couple reappears, having escaped. They thank Booker by giving him a helpful item. If the player tries to stone the couple, a friend of the announcer gives Booker the same reward. This dramatic and traumatic scene ultimately means nothing. This is an example of the way choice often functions in *Infinite*. What feels like a choice to player does not, in fact, have consequences because of the medium. These kinds of inconsequential instances are constant throughout the game. However, the choices that do affect the narrative, the choices that change the lives of Booker and the rest of Colombia, are made during cut-scenes.

**Infinite Remixes**

The entire game acts as an exploration of choice, but the game supplies no way for the player to make choices within the narrative. The fact that the game is steampunk, a genre exploring the various possibilities of choices, emphasizes and focuses the attention of players on the impossibilities of choices created by this game. By the end of the game, Booker has realized he can no longer hide from his past decisions and actions, the ones made before the game even begins. Booker's backstory and history, revealed to the player via dialogues and conversations throughout the game, exist independently of the player and his or her interpretations of gameplay or narrative. No matter what choices the player has made for Booker DeWitt, the game must end the same way. Those "infinite possibilities" implied through the genre and medium all come to the same conclusion.

Since steampunk literature seeks to help its audiences understand new pathways and new perspectives, highlighting both the advances and the costs of social and technological choices, *Infinite's* exploration of decisions and their repercussions seems be in tension with the genre. At the level of the player's experience, the influence of cut-scenes and playable space eliminates the player's agency for narrative purposes, but leaves minor ludic agency available. Ludic consequences can increase the frequency of choices, directly impacting meaningfulness and interpretation. However, in *Infinite*, the ludic choices are severely limited. Meanwhile, narrative choices are non-existent: Booker and the player are both manipulated in *Infinite*. Decisions and choices are emphasized in games by the very nature of the medium, but in a steampunk game, that concept of choice is brought to the absolute forefront.

As Edwards reminds us, remix establishes that "we do not create texts out of nowhere but we build them through the discovery of other texts."[11] Taking pieces of expectations from previous steampunk works and subverting them, combined with the already remixed gameplay processes of a first-person shooter game, the conscious awareness of making a choice, and moreover, the awareness of the repercussions of those choices become paramount. Whether a player opts to have Booker harm the couple, the announcer, or refuses to act at all, these choices greatly affect the player's own pathway through the narrative. It does not change the ludic elements of *Infinite,* nor does it impact the story.

What it does do is remix genres, pushing our awareness of these issues to the forefront. Booker, even as a character that players can't always control, is nuanced through the player's decisions. The Booker who would willingly stone an interracial couple is not written any differently than the Booker who would violently attempts to avenge innocents. However, the way a player reads those two versions of Booker are completely different because of the spotlight shined on him through the remix process. Edwards notes genre play is a particularly powerful rhetorical strategy specifically because it engages its audiences with social and political contexts from which the genre emerged.[12] *Infinite*'s commentary on racism, for example, is made all the more noteworthy because of the expectations of the genre. While *Infinite* has a great deal of failings, including its depictions and commentary on race, gender, class, and not to mention its blasé portrayal of extreme and unforgivable violence, the expectations of the genre and how they are subverted emphasizes those failings on its own part, as well as other games.

Church states a major tool of rhetoric is the direction of audience attention. He writes:

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[11] Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically," 43.
[12] Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically," 50.

> Rhetoricians, in fact, have assumed that attention was a scarce resource all along, so rhetorical theory usually postulates how to "skillfully allocate" that resource. Rhetoric has been defined as the "art of using language to help people narrow their choices" and "attend to what we would like them to attend to." In order to be persuaded, *the audience must be given options and then be directed to focus its attention toward certain choices*.[13] (emphasis added).

This is precisely what *Infinite* does. As more and more of Booker's past is revealed, each decision changes the player's perception of Booker as a character, but they do not change Booker himself. These messages create a firm argument about player agency and control in videogames as a medium, a meta-argument made through remixing the genres at hand. The game, in its story, its rules and coding, is indifferent to the choices of the player. The player's interpretation is where decision comes alive, where the story produces meaning, and where remix challenges perception. Booker can be a hero, a villain, a victim, a murderer, a soldier, a sociopath, whatever the player fashions through his or her decisions. In the face of these choices, a player produces his or her own meaning from the narrative scaffolding provided by the game. A remixed steampunk game only acts to emphasize those decisions.

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[13] Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," 43.