

# The Bioethics of Digital Dystopias

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay explores how two popular game franchises, BioShock and Portal, have addressed bioethical issues such as genetic modification, research ethics, and autonomy. BioShock and Portal are set in bioethical dystopias that simulate the absence of ethical restraint. The former is set in a city that allows unregulated genetic modification, and the latter in a research facility controlled by overseers whose only concern is scientific progress. These simulations allow players to gain insight into bioethical issues and contribute to theoretical debates in bioethics by showing the possible consequences of violating bioethical values.*

*Keywords:*     *Autonomy, Bioethics, BioShock, Genetic Enhancement, Portal, Research Ethics*

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## INTRODUCTION

The moral dimension of video games has received a great deal of attention in recent years, yet despite the popularity of scholarly research on this topic, few studies have addressed bioethical issues directly (Sicart, 2005, 2009, 2009; Luck, 2008; Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Reynolds, 2002; Schulzke, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Cogburn & Silcox, 2009). This is significant gap in the literature on gaming ethics, and one that deserves more attention given the prominence of bioethical themes in video games. Many games address controversial bioethical topics such as genetic modification, body modification, mind control, biological weapons, and drug use. Some games confront these challenges directly, in the form of moral dilemmas that are part of a moral choice game mechanic. However, most games

introduce bioethical themes tangentially, by incorporating bioethical issues into the game narrative. Such games may show the social and personal consequences, both positive and negative, of biomedical technologies and practices.

This essay will explore the bioethical themes of two popular video game franchises: *BioShock* and *Portal*. Each addresses ongoing debates in bioethics, such as the morality of genetic modification, what ethical constraints should limit scientific research, and what effect new technologies have on personal autonomy. Although *BioShock* does incorporate a moral choice system, most of the bioethical themes in both games are introduced tangentially as problems that shape the games' narratives. *BioShock* and *Portal* immerse players in settings that are profoundly shaped by the lack of bioethical consideration. In *BioShock* (2K

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Games 2007) and *BioShock 2* (2010) players experience a city that is torn apart because of the unrestrained use of genetic enhancement and erosion of personal autonomy. In *Portal* (Valve, 2007) and *Portal 2* (Valve, 2011) players are test subjects enrolled in extremely dangerous experiments that are conducted by uncaring researchers whose only concern is with a vague ideal of scientific progress. The problems these games address are not new, as they are established topics in bioethics. However, each game offers a new perspective on them by leading players to directly experience the potential costs of new technologies and the methods of testing them.

Bioethical themes in video games raise important issues for the study of technoethics. The game narratives show simulations of how new technologies can create ethical challenges, and the games themselves serve as a way of exploring these ethical challenges through technology. Video games raise and explore central issues in contemporary bioethics, such as the meaning of autonomy, the ethics of genetic engineering, and the ethics of human subject research. Games add to our understanding of these issues by simulating the potential consequences of different theories of bioethics or of bioethical practices. Because many of these bioethical issues relate to the use of new technologies, and because these issues are addressed through a technological medium, the subject of bioethics in video games is directly related to technoethics.

The first and second sections of this essay will discuss the bioethical themes in *BioShock*, devoting special attention to the representation of genetic enhancement. The first section will provide an overview of the scholarly literature on the game and explain its representation of genetic enhancement. The second section will argue that *BioShock* shows that genetic modification may be problematic even when it is used in the context of a liberal society. The third and fourth sections will explore the bioethical themes of *Portal* and *Portal 2*. The third section will discuss the games' theme of ethically unrestrained research in the name of scientific

progress. The forth section will draw parallels between the game and real world unethical research practices. The final part of this essay will argue that despite dealing with much different bioethical issues, *BioShock* and *Portal* present similar perspectives on how insensitivity to bioethical concerns erodes personal autonomy.

## The Ethics of Rapture

*BioShock* is frequently discussed the scholarly literature on video games because of its engagement with moral questions, its critique of objectivist philosophy, its good design, and its strong narrative (Tavinor, 2009; Weise, 2008; Konzack, 2009; Packer, 2010; Tulloch, 2010; Aldred & Greenspan, 2011; Goldberg, 2011). It is a prime example of how games can incorporate ethical challenges in engaging ways that add to both the narrative and the gameplay experience. Players take control of Jack, who unexpectedly finds himself transported to the underwater city of Rapture after a plane crash. Although the city was once a monument to human creativity, players experience Rapture as a bleak dystopia. Its inhabitants are in a state of physical degradation that matches the city's decay. They include murderous splicers, malfunctioning robots, genetically modified children, and the game's famous Big Daddies. Most of these characters lack any semblance of moral restraint, and are driven by self-interest alone. As Weise says, "Rapture's citizens are mindless horrors who attack on sight, and those who are not mindless are dead" (Weise, 2008). This is an apt description of these characters, most of whom appear to be little more than zombies.

Players' first experiences of rapture raise questions about the city's history, its mysterious creator Andrew Ryan, and about the drug ADAM. Over the course of the game, players find messages from Andrew Ryan and others who enthusiastically proclaim their individualistic ideology, yet the game's setting contradicts this ideology. The dystopian city serves as evidence that Ryan's ideas are unsustainable when they are used as the governing principles for

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