

# Adulthood, Prestige Gaming and the Little Sisters of Bioshock

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## Abstract

This paper explores the Little Sisters of *Bioshock* as contributing to the title's prestige status, positioning players as adult agents in relation to the othered child. Computer games, like comics, cartoons, pop music and theme parks, despite being enjoyed by people of all ages, are often stigmatised as juvenile. Many videogame histories suggest parallels between maturing games technologies, content and player communities, a problematically chrononormative model informing numerous accounts of the medium's development. As with comparative formation such as 'art cinema' and 'quality television', the concept of the 'prestige game' is synonymous with adult players and material such as violence, swearing and sexual content. In asserting their status as artistic endeavours, these titles construct their audience as adult players, involving the symbolic abjection or othering of the child with whom the medium is historically associated. In *Bioshock*, a classic prestige game, the figure of the Little Sisters contributes to this process. The game's horror content, implicitly othering various monstrous identities along lines of gender, class, disability and ethnicity, serves to define *Bioshock* as a mature title. Little Sisters reflect a tradition of monstrous children, variously ethereal, wraith-like, vampiric, ambivalently positioned between angel and demon. As creepy, eery, uncanny figures, their otherness is contingent upon players adopting the privilege position of adult self in contrast to child other. This is further enhanced through player interaction, a choice mechanic also contributing to the title's quality status, adopting an authoritative position of power in choosing either to 'harvest' or 'save' the young girls. Consequently the child is othered, as a non-playable character, as a figure who requires saving, as a thing without agency. In so doing *Bioshock* makes clear that Rapture, the game's underwater setting, is not a place for children.

## Keywords

Adulthood, *Bioshock*, childhood, children, cultural value, mature content, prestige game

'Adulthood is a fiction. With no consistent biological boundaries, it is at once a disciplinary ideal, a prized status for those who comply with gender norms and the ethos of capitalism, and a political rank long reserved for a small subset of the population... age itself is a political instrument, though seldom recognised as such, which is intrinsic to how other social hierarchies operate and to the distribution of power more broadly... Along with adulthood, I read all age categories – including old age, adolescence, and childhood – as narrative constructions...' (Edelstein, 2019: 1-2)

Computer games, like comics, cartoons, theme parks, pop music, fantasy and science fiction genres, despite being enjoyed by people of all ages, are often considered juvenile. The origins of associations between children and videogames are complex, inconsistent and often reliant on the medium's proximity to other cultures. Early arcade games were located in adult spaces: bars, billiard halls, pachinko parlours; while early consoles, like home computers, were advertised as brown goods for the whole family, albeit with children as the privileged players in much promotional material. The shift from vector to raster graphic led to games assuming aesthetics similar to children's cartoons, while Chuck E. Cheese restaurants, shopping malls and leisure centres across the USA relocated arcade cabinets to more family-friendly venues. The 1980s American crash led to the ascension of Nintendo whose consoles were retailed in toy stores, and whose games combined bright colourful landscapes with fairy tale narratives; while in the UK affordable home computers led to a boys bedroom gaming culture. This origin story positions young people as the primary players of videogames.

Historical accounts frequently suggest a subsequent maturing of game culture which maps onto the increasing maturity of game audiences, as though computer and console technologies have 'grown up' with their players. Successive consoles released throughout the nineties and into the 2000s, along with the titles they supported, reflect the targeting of an increasingly adult player, with flagship franchises such as *Tomb Raider* (1994-), *Halo* (2001-) and *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-). Games and game technologies effectively matured with their players, simultaneously becoming more technologically complex and sophisticated in content. This is a problematic discourses, reproducing the technological determinist framework which attributes a natural, evolutionary path to the development of consumer technologies thereby erasing human and corporate agency from such process. It ignores the role of adult designers and players in the early history of games. Adults were playing NES games in the 1980s, just as children undoubtedly play *GTA IV* (Rockstar North, 2013) and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* (Treyarch Raven Software, 2024) on the PlayStation 5 and Xbox One. Nintendo continues to produce games which are bright, colourful and cartoonish, while the success of many recent game phenomenon – from *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) to *Five Nights at Freddy's* (ScottGames, 2014) and *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015) – might be significantly attributed to their popularity with young players. Moreover, such accounts naturalise entrenched Western perspectives on temporal progress, variously reproducing hegemonic perspectives on gender, class, race and adult privilege.

Despite narratives of games maturity, like many of the lively arts, videogames continue to be considered a juvenile medium. This perception impacts on gaming culture in many ways. Adult players often find themselves rationalising their decision to purchase expensive consoles. Digital games are not taken as seriously as other modern media such as cinema and television, entertainment forms which were also considered juvenile in their day. Game scholars often feel obliged to emphasise the advanced average age of players, alongside the revenue the industry generates, as justification for their scholarly activities. Emma Reay writes of 'the continuing sense within Games Studies that unless the field can shield itself from accusations of childishness, videogames will never be considered a valid object of study' (2023: 9). Games cannot be regarded as art unless they divest themselves of juvenile associations. The child player must be ejected, abjected, othered, in order for the adult player to assume their place at the controller.

Inherent in such debates are various hegemonic ideologies of childhood and adulthood. Games themselves are regarded as a childly pursuit. Play, a non-productive, non-serious, pleasure-orientated leisure activity, is aligned with children and childhood. This conversely defines the adult as productive, serious and preoccupied with unpleasurable labour. Art is also associated with aspects of normative adulthood, being complex, cerebral and edgy, in contrast to simple, stupid and safe. Media for adults is dark, violent, swears, cynical and sexy, while media for children is reassuring, positive and asexual, containing no nudity, threat or bad language.

The concept of the 'prestige game' is also implicated in such hierarchical structures of age, adulthood and childhood. This term is borrowed from Felan Parker's discussion of *Bioshock* (2k, 2007), defined as: 'a special class of AAA game that is expected to excel commercially but has distinction from other popular favourites and best sellers by grace of its supposed artistic quality and canonical status' (2017: 740). The prestige game, as a mode of production employed by the culture industry, is comparable to art cinema, 'Oscar bait', or 'quality television'. Discourses of cultural value, many of which have been appropriated by stakeholders in the games industry, privilege implicitly adult audiences, aesthetics and content. In this respect the 2023 'Barbenheimer' phenomenon is revealing, involving the contrast between a bright, comedy fantasy, based on a line of plastic toys, with a dark serious biopic about the development of the nuclear bomb. The contrast of these movies reveals intersections between age and gender, while the award winning success of the Nolan-helmed drama indicates the way masculine adult feature films are favoured over feminine juvenile popcorn by the critical establishment. Adult spectatorship is similarly implicated and privileged in quality television. The presence of swearing, violence, nudity and drug use in canonical HBO shows, underline their status as serious television.

Reay's discussion of the controversy generated by the trailer for *Detroit Becomes Human* (Quantic Dream, 2012) is significant here. This short promotional film featured a scene where a young girl is

potentially killed by her father. While misinterpreted by commentators as a child abuse simulator, Reay points out how the player is actually positioned as responsible for intervening to save the girl from her violent father. Reay considers the response of writer/director David Cage, a self-styled 'avant-garde artist, misunderstood by the mainstream and persecuted by censors', who accused detractors of medium-specific bias in failing to appreciate the videogame's potential to 'transcended the category of mere entertainment and sit upon the throne of high art' (2023: 72). In a bid for cultural status, and as a means of promoting the game to an audience presumably invested in the potential for games to be taken seriously as an artistically expressive medium, the choice to foreground the murder of a child as a set piece implies an adult subjective position. Not only is the child potentially murdered, but the player is interpolated as an implicitly adult carer, assuming the role of protector. In such a situation the child is variously othered, as a non-playable character, as a figure who requires saving, as a thing without agency.

The prestige game *Bioshock* has various parallels with *Detroit Becomes Human*. This project was similarly helmed by auteur figure Ken Levine. The title also foregrounded a choice mechanism, a feature Parkes identifies as 'a major marketing feature and technical goal of games' (2017: 749). Furthermore, this was a product intended to raise the bar concerning videogames' potential high culture status. This is evident in the title's politics; its critique of capitalism; its philosophical engagement with ideas of choice and free will; and its literary allusions to Gothic horror and science fiction. Insofar as politics, economics, philosophy and literature are adult spheres from which Western children are conventionally excluded, such aspects define the game's ideal player as characterised by adult concerns, preoccupations and cultural capital.

The game's idle title screen sequence is notable here. A distinctly adult voiceover underlines the thematic emphasis on choice and morality, in a wordy speech the eloquence of which complements the photorealism of the visuals they accompany. This segues into a first-person sequence. In another moment of potential child abuse, the protagonist grabs and manhandles a small girl, before being attacked by a large creature with a giant drill. Thrown to the floor, the protagonist injects themselves with a green syringe which causes bees to emerge from their injured hand. These distract the beast long enough for the protagonist to shoot it in the head with a shotgun. While they peer over a bloodstained balcony at the fallen creature, another surprises them from behind, plunging a drill into their back which bursts through their chest. Gore, mutilation, bodily harm and drug use, the excessive bloodiness of the sequence contrasts with the poetic opening monologue. Yet despite their juxtaposition, both elements serve to define the player, like the avatar they inhabit, as an adult agent.

The most significant juxtaposition this sequence contains is between the character through whose optical perspective the scene unfolds, an adult male briefly glimpsed before the roving camera moves in to occupy their headspace, and the small child he manhandles who cowers on the floor throughout this encounter. This Little Sister is the game's most prominent choice mechanism. Successful completion of the game involves defeating their protectors the Big Daddy, whose naming defines them within the patriarchal structures of familial dependency which characterise normative Western childhood. Once their father figure has been vanquished, players decide whether to 'harvest' or to 'rescue' the girls. The former results in more in-game resources, as the child disappears in a burst of green smoke, leaving only the slug imbedded in their body for the player to use. The latter involves curing them of their affliction, whereupon they curtsy politely, thanking the player for their intervention, before scurrying away. Both actions involve the playable character grasping the girls in their large hands as they squirm and struggle to escape in an exchange clearly against their will.

I would argue that the position players are conscripted to adopt in relation to the Little Sisters contributes to the prestige title's strategy in positioning itself as a 'quality game'. An implicitly adult player is enlisted as an agent disciplining or rescuing the subordinate child. Either the callous decision to harvest the girls, or the kinder choice to save them entails distinctly adult actions, either cold and calculating, or benevolently patriarchal. The moral mechanism is hierarchically predicated on adult authority and privilege in deciding what is best. This is an adult game for adult players with traditionally adult subjective positions, meaning the child must be removed, abjected or othered. Rapture, the underwater city in which *Bioshock* unfolds, like the prestige game itself, is not a place

for children. This is made clear in an early encounter where the player is attracted to the sound of a woman singing what appears to be a creepy version of a lullaby. As they approach it transpires the woman is mourning their dead child, whose body has been substituted for a gun which lies in the mother's pram. The switching of the child, soft, pink, symbol of life and hope, for a cold hard death-bringing gun, employs the discourses of childhood in making clear the mature audience for whom this game is intended. Later in the game, players explore the facility in which the Little Sisters, having been forcibly taken from their parents, were turned into monsters. While this encourages sympathy for the children, it is the Gothic sympathy for the monster which serves to shore up normative distinctions between self and other.

Reay classifies the Little Sisters not as Little Monsters, a category which according to the author's taxonomy requires the girls to be cannon fodder adversaries, but rather as the much more ambiguous figure of The Waif. Feral, stunted, orphaned, The Waif is a liminal figure whose indeterminacy is predicated on the juxtaposition of the child and the monster. Other examples of The Waif can be seen in *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios, 2017), *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) and *Inside* (Playdead, 2016). Unknowable, inherently eerie, these figures resemble a possessed doll, an uncanny figure seen in many horror films. With their pale skin, emaciated limbs and shining eyes, there is something inherently creepy about the Little Sisters. Many in-game commentators comment on their repellent appearance. They are distinguished from the Splicers that patrol Rapture and the Big Daddies who protect them, in their vampiric task of draining corpses, and in their ethereal invulnerability. The player is unable to injure the girls, but attacking them attracts the ire of their larger protectors, whose bulk serves to underline the children's comparative diminutive frames.

This othering serves to further shore up the player's position as privileged adult. This becomes most evident in the later sequence where they adopt the guise of the Big Daddy, escorting a procession of Little Sisters to safety. This might be the most adult position to assume, protecting the small, weak, vulnerable child, whose plight the player has been exploiting throughout the game. In this respect *Bioshock* reflects the adult privilege of prestige gaming, the abjection of the child within certain gaming cultures, and the ambivalent relationship between Western adults and Western children.

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