Bioshock Infinite and the Video Game Dystopia

Prestructuring the Player's Aesthetic Response

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Talk inspired and is based on:

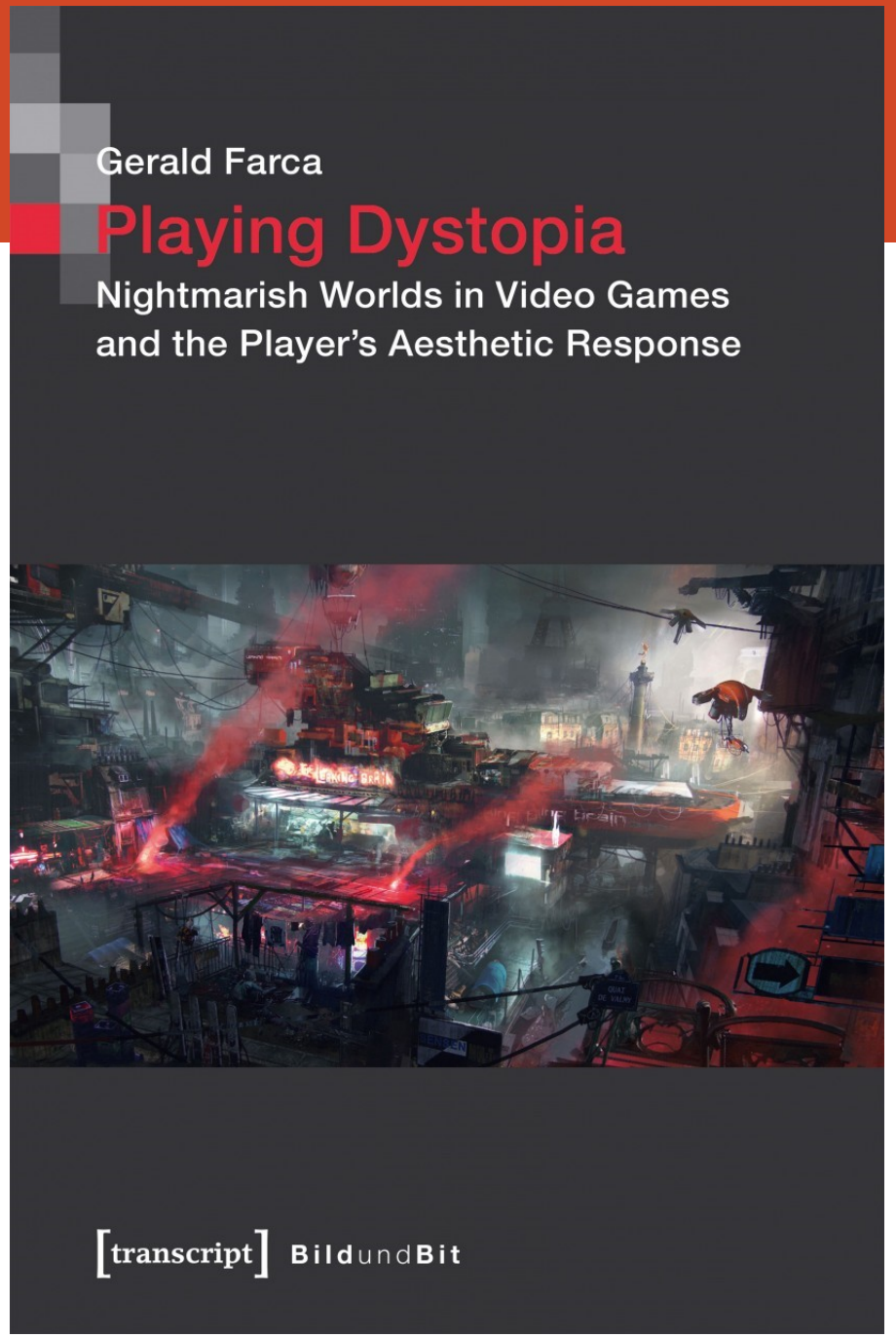
Playing Dystopia:
Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response

https://www.transcript-verlag.de/detail/index/sArticle/4330

https://books.google.de/books/about/Playing_Dystopia.html?id=mRM0vAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

https://www.amazon.de/Playing-Dystopia-Nightmarish-Aesthetic-Medienkultur/dp/3837645975/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1541699007&sr=8-2&keywords=playing+Dystopia

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Playing-Dystopia-Nightmarish-Aesthetic-Response/dp/3837645975/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1541699026&sr=8-1&keywords=playing+dystopia+farca



Effects on the Player (“Risks” of Play)

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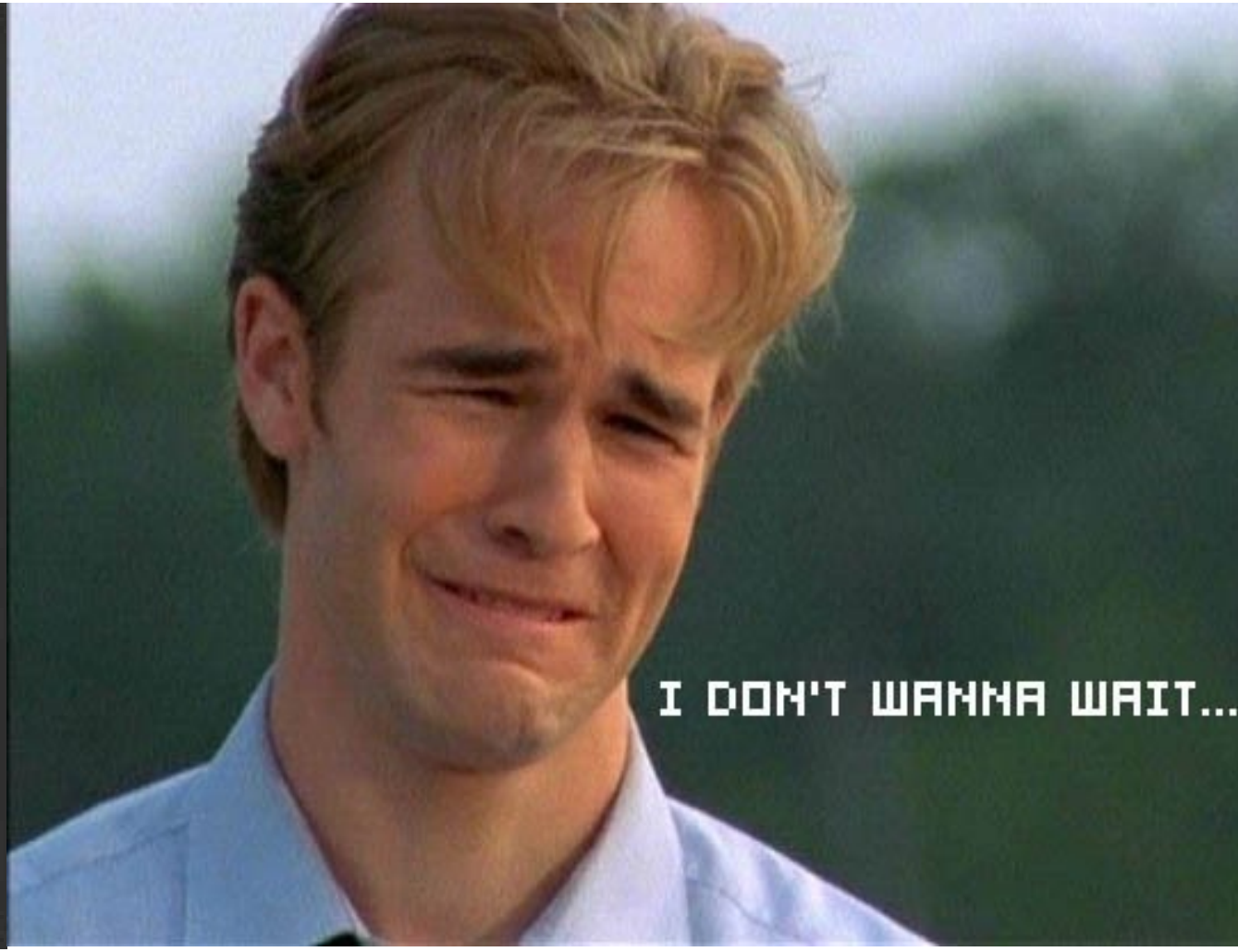


Effects on the Player (“Risks” of Play)

Aesthetic Effect

Trial Action in Fictional Worlds

Literary fictions allow the reader to see everyday norms and conventions, social habits of thinking and feeling, **in a different light**; they also allow readers to explore, in a kind of **trial action** in a virtual environment, the consequences of breaking and transgressing norms without having to fear sanctions in real life (Berensmeyer 79; cf. Iser).

The Player‘s Virtual Trial Action

For the player, this means becoming **the producer of aesthetic expression**, of meaning. He embarks on a virtual trial action where he can literary **test systems**, **problems,** and maybe even **solutions**.

- **Fictional virtuality a complement to reality**.

Sargent 9, cf. Viera 23

Literary **Dystopia**

Dystopia = the bad non-place, ‘not yet‘.

– a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as **considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived** (Sargent 9).

Dystopian **WARNING**

Estrangement

cf. Booker 65; Suvin 6, 63ff., 71; Moylan 8

- A world **different yet familiar**.
- Defamiliarized world.
- **Estranged genres:** science fiction, utopia / dystopia, cyberpunk, posthuman, post-apocalypse, …
- **Playing the detective:** Putting together the pieces of **a cracked and distorted mirror.**

Dystopia's Aesthetic Response

- **Aesthetic Response**:

What happens to the player!

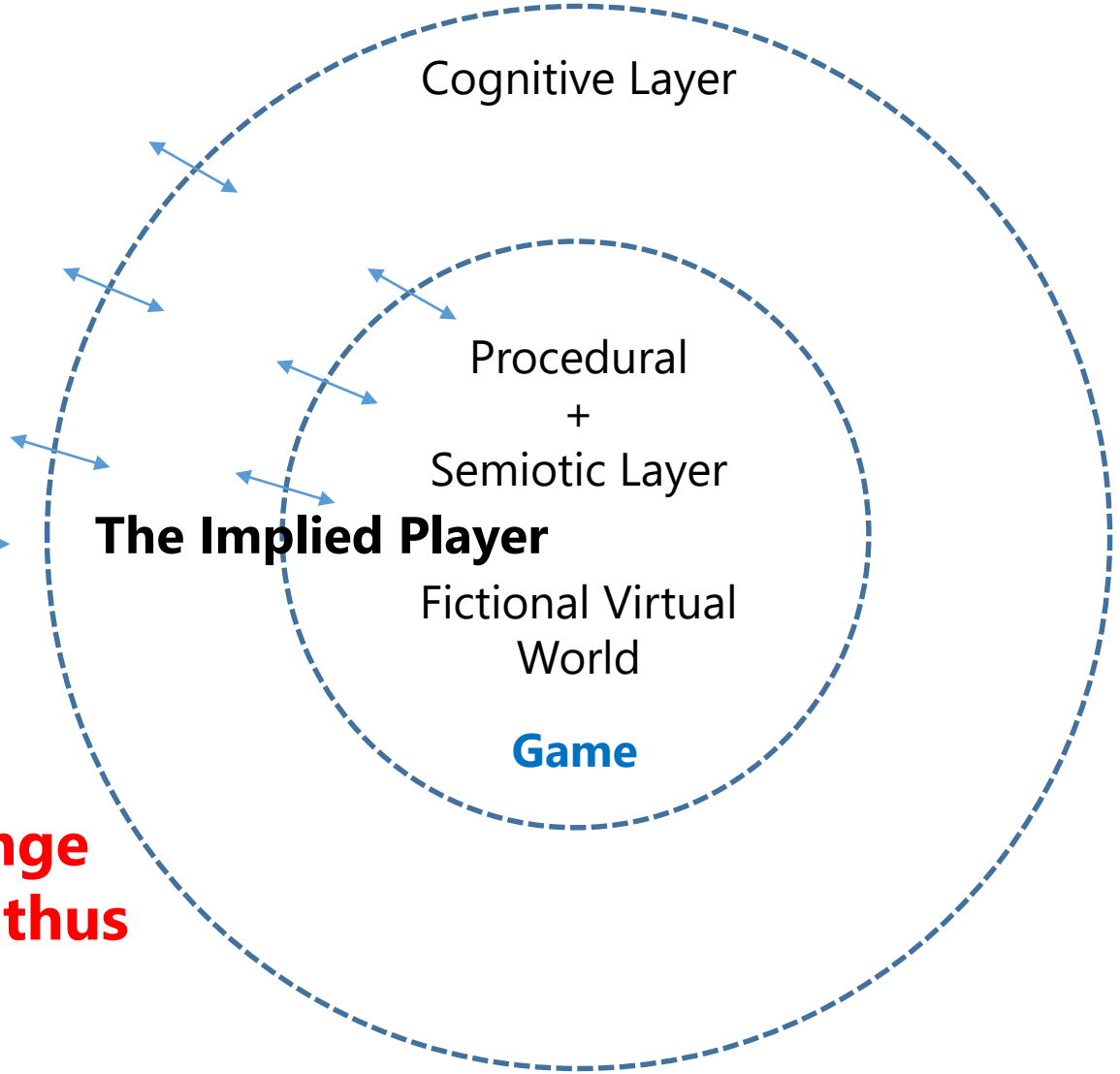
  - Gaining insight into the dystopian nature of the empirical present!
  - Invitation to act, before it Is too late!

The Act of Playing

Context
World Knowledge
Video Games
Literature
Film
Genres
…

Knowledge ⟷ **The Empirical Player** ⟷ **The Implied Player**

Reality



This open communication triggers a change in the player's habitual dispositions, and thus the aesthetic response.

The Blank as Precondition for Communication

- **Domain of the implied reader / player (on the cognitive level)**
- **Cognitive possibility space** of literature / film / the video game.
- **The blank** … **designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text,** the filling of which brings about an interaction of textual patterns. (Iser 182)
- They indicate that **the different segments of the text *are* to be connected**, even though the text itself does not say so. **They are the unseen joints of the text**, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives [narrator, characters, plot-threads, that marked out for the reader] from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader's part (Iser 182).

The Blank as Precondition for Communication

- **Domain of the implied player**

- **Physical possibility space** of the video game.

  - A dynamic blank space for player interaction and expression (as prestructured by the game). **Physical Dynamic Blank**

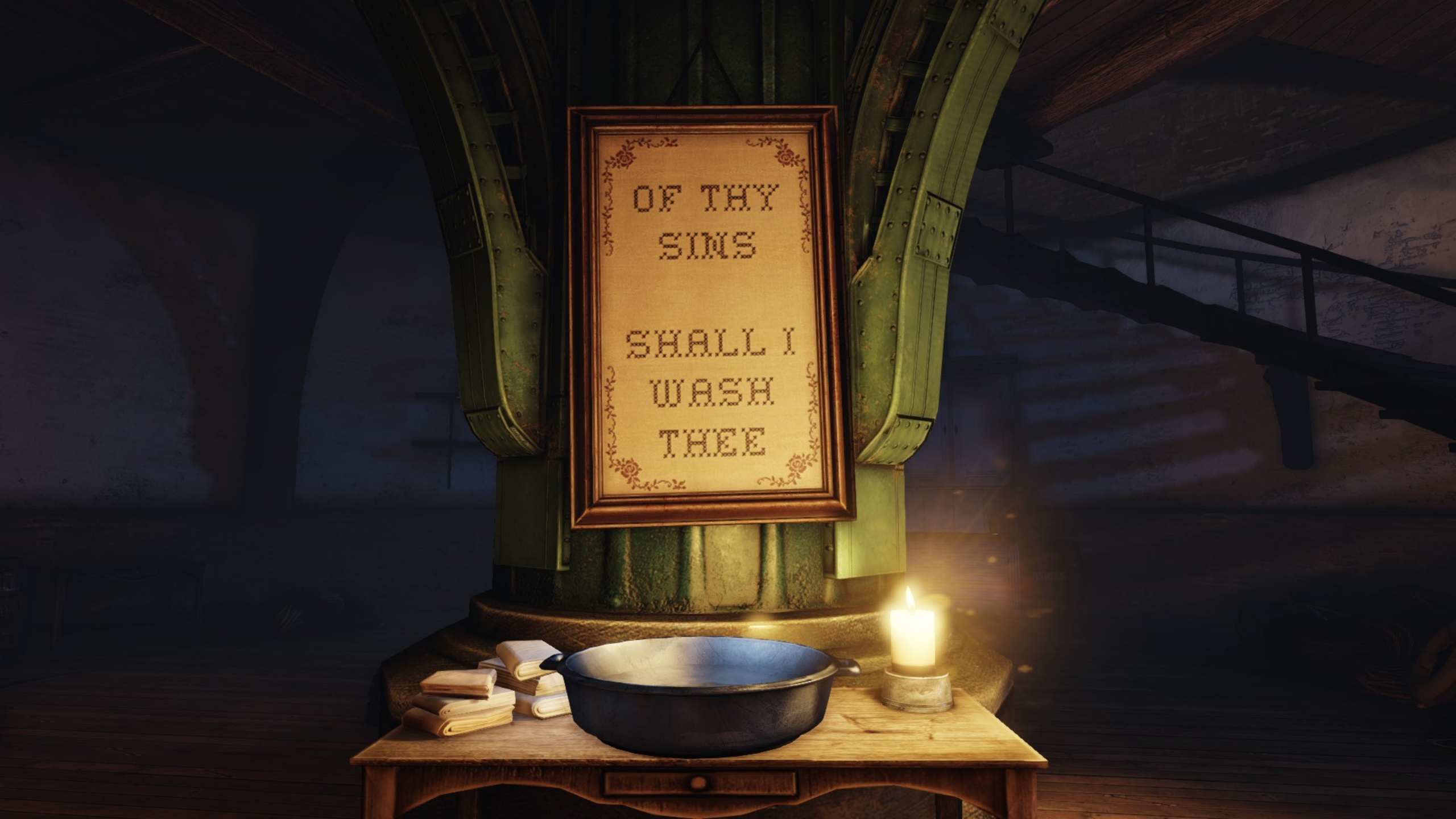
  - **The implied player** prestructures the player's physical role.

    - The player creates perspectives through filling physical blanks through action. This in turn which in turn may create additional blanks (physical and cognitive ones).

    - **Basic precondition for interaction / communication** between the game's dynamic system and the player.

SF and Disorientation

- Where in the world am I?
- What in the world is going on?
- What am I going to do?


OF THY
SINS
SHALL I
WASH
THEE

THE UNITED STATES OF NORTH AMERICA
Gulf of Mexico
Be Prepared
He's on
his way.
You must
stop him.
-C
CONDENSED SCHEDULE
TO AND FROM
COLUMBIA
DEPARTING
RETURNING
STATIONS
Flagstaff, AZ
Colorado Spgs, CO
St. Louis, MO
Chicago, IL
Rochester, NY
Portland, ME
New York City, NY
Washington, D.C.
Raleigh, NC
Savannah, GA

DON'T
DISAPPOINT
US

WHAT IS
COLUMBIA,
IF NOT
ANOTHER ARK
FOR ANOTHER
TIME?
Male Pilgrim: He who crossed the Delaware, with flaming sword and wings of angels...watch over me and lend me strength.

Curtis
GROCERIES
MEATS

Filling in basic cognitive blanks

- The player will try to find **a connection between these perspectives**.
- He encounters the perspectives on his way.
- He might miss some (especially in open world games).

Thema and Horizon

As perspectives are continually interweaving and interacting, it is not possible for the reader to embrace all perspectives at once, and so **the view he is involved with at any one particular moment** is what constitutes for him **the 'theme'** (Iser 97).

This, however, always stands before **the 'horizon' of the other perspective segments** in which he had previously been situated (Iser 97).

- **The Wandering Viewpoint**

Interaction between cognitive and physical blanks

HUNT THE VOX DOWN
TRY YOUR LUCK!
SHOOT THE TARGETS!
HOW TO PLAY
YOU HAVE 30 SECONDS
SHOOT THE TARGETS FOR
POINTS
Airgun Barker: Looking to do your part for Columbia?

ur Prophet"
61 / 21

Our Prophet"
X RELOAD
5 / 21

Comstock: I see every sin that blackens your soul. Wounded knee. The Pinkertons. The drinking and the gambling.
26

Interaction between cognitive and physical blanks

- The player **creates perspectives through his own actions** (potential participation in the “Hunt Down the Vox” game / potential shooting of Comstock’s followers that show no resistance).

- Player is confronted by Comstock’s words (or by the unconscious dark part of his self).

- The player’s **choices entail different interpretations** (different fillings in of cognitive blanks).

Elizabeth: Fifty percent of everything people earn here goes right to Comstock as a tithe.
70 / 90

HOARDER
70 / 90

Interaction between cognitive and physical blanks

- The game specifically **targets a gamist attitude**, in the context of the virtual world and its critique of a **capitalist consumer society**.
- Targets the status quo's method of Disneyfication (comforting lies of ideology).
- The structure points to a **plot of education**, in which the player shall be **guided from naiveté to awareness!**
- And this is how **the gap between virtuality and reality** may be filled.

Elizabeth’s Journey from Naiveté to Awareness

REGENT
LA REVANCHE DU JEDI
9:30 12:30 3:30 6:30 9:30 12:30

Dimwit & Duke in
GAMES
ACTIVATE CABINET
Duke and Dimwit Narrator: Are you a Duke or a Dimwit? Duke cleans his father's rifle every sunday, without being asked.

TIN
SOLDIERS
On
Sale!
Duke and Dimwit Narrator: Remember boys and girls, don't be a Dimwit.

ASSETS SEIZEDI
BY ORDER OF THE
COLUMBIA POLICE AUTHORITY
VOX
SYMPATHIZERS
ASSETS SEIZEDI
BY ORDER OF THE
COLUMBIA POLICE AUTHORITY
VOX
SYMPATHIZERS
ASSETS SEIZEDI
BY ORDER OF THE
COLUMBIA POLICE AUTHORITY
VOX
SYMPATHIZERS
Elizabeth: Booker, if the Vox get their weapons, there's going to be a revolution just like Les Miserables!

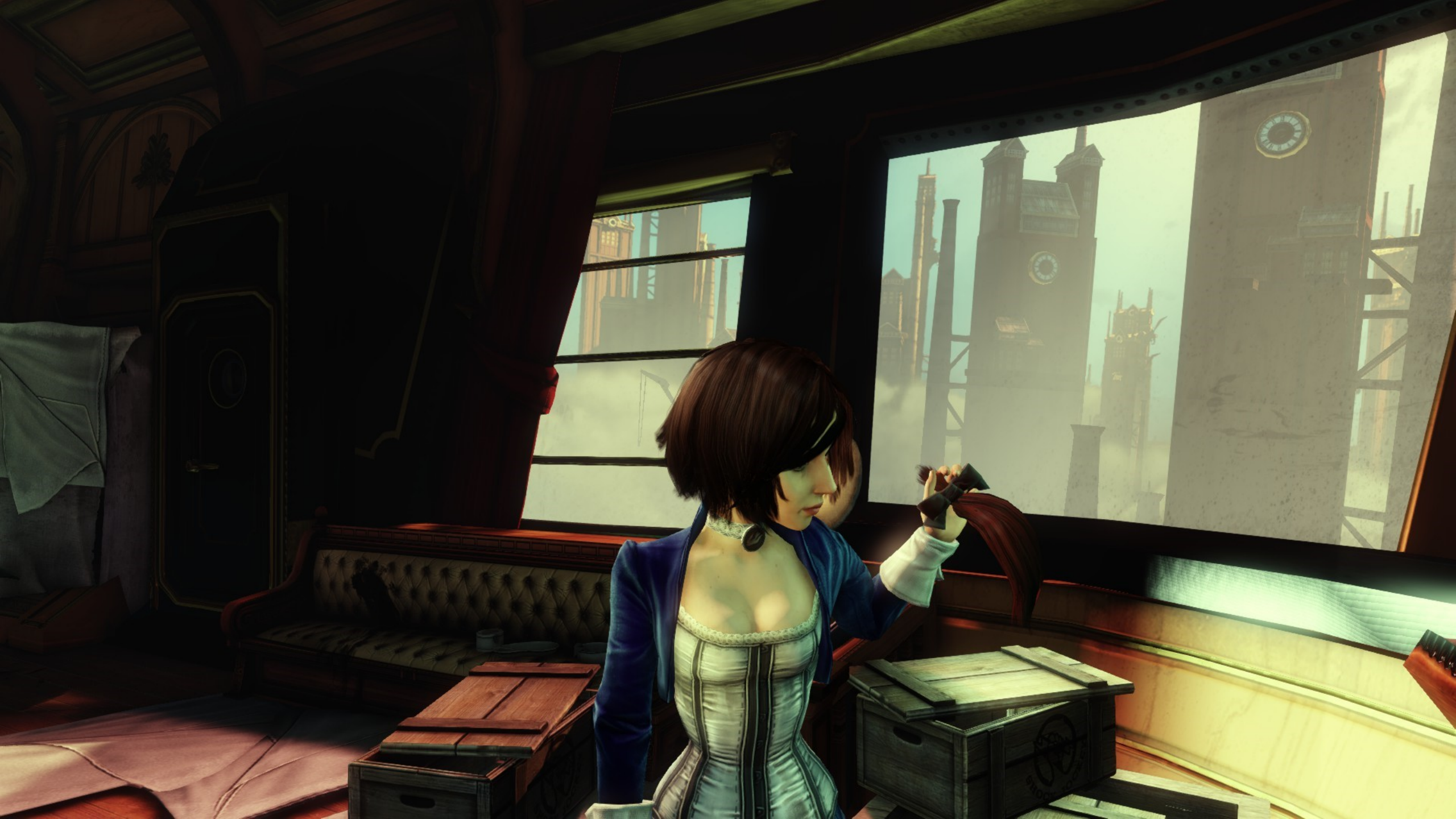
DAUGHTER SICK NEED DOCTOR
WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN US?
Brother Love: To keep you CHASIN' that ALMIGHTY SILVER EAGLE, so you can BUY EVERYTHING they're sellin' to keep you down, brothas...
11 / 40

THE
PEOPLE'S
VOICE
50
4 / 13

Brother Love: But Daisy Fitzroy says there's ANOTHER WAY... Another way comin' REAL SOON...
4 / 13

GO TO THE FACTORY AND RECLAIM THE FIRST LADY AIRSHIP
02701
X HOLD TO PICK UP REPEATER
21 / 89

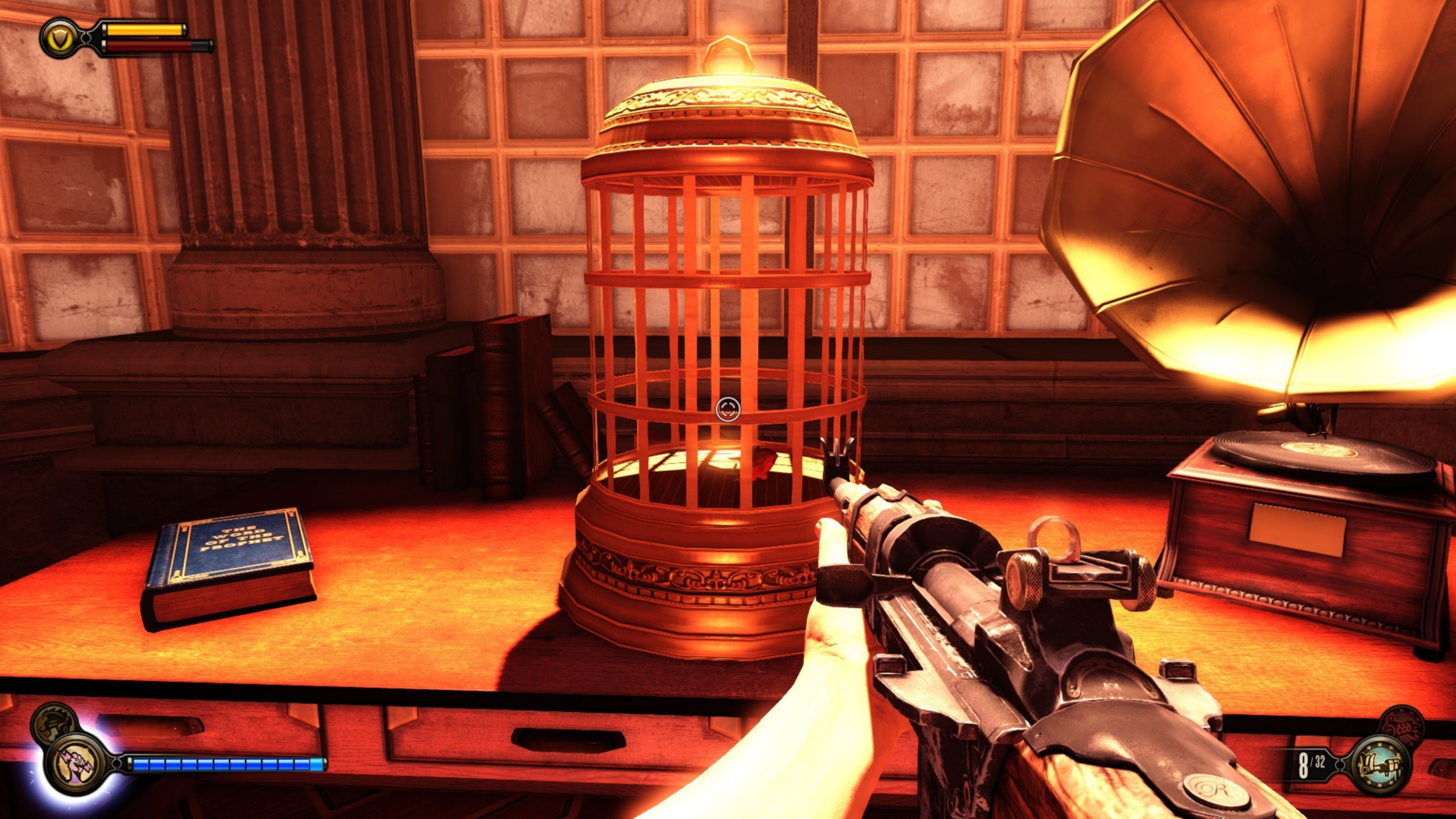
INK
MFG.



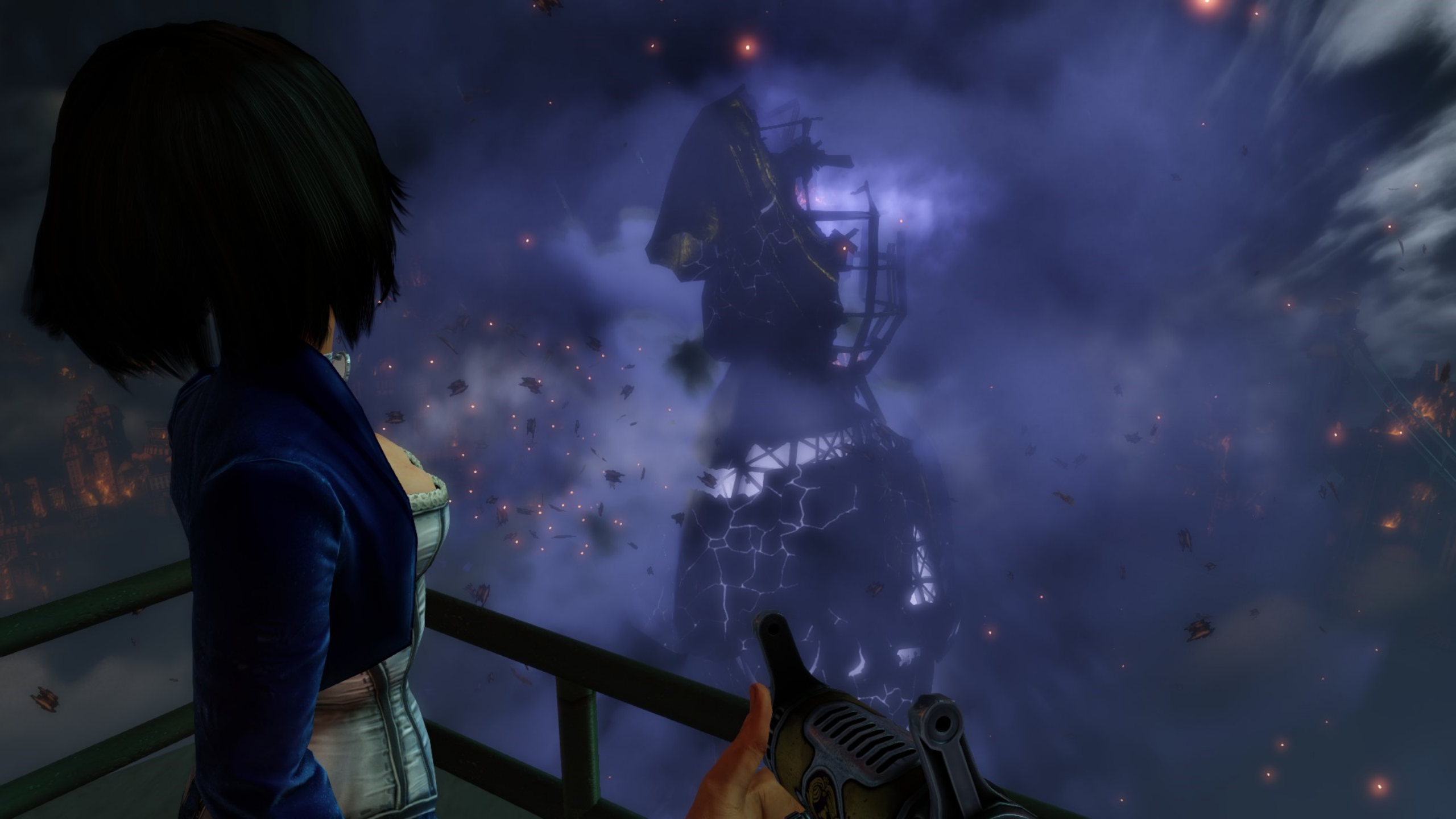
The Iron Cage of Anti-Utopia

BATTLESHIP BAY
COLUMBIA
Elizabeth: Look at these, they're amazing! Which one do you like more? This one...or this?

THREATENS
Booker: Advice on what?


THE WORD OF THE PROPHET
8 / 32

4 / 20



Elizabeth: There's always a lighthouse. There's always a man, there's always a city...

The Act of Playing

Context
World Knowledge
Video Games
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…

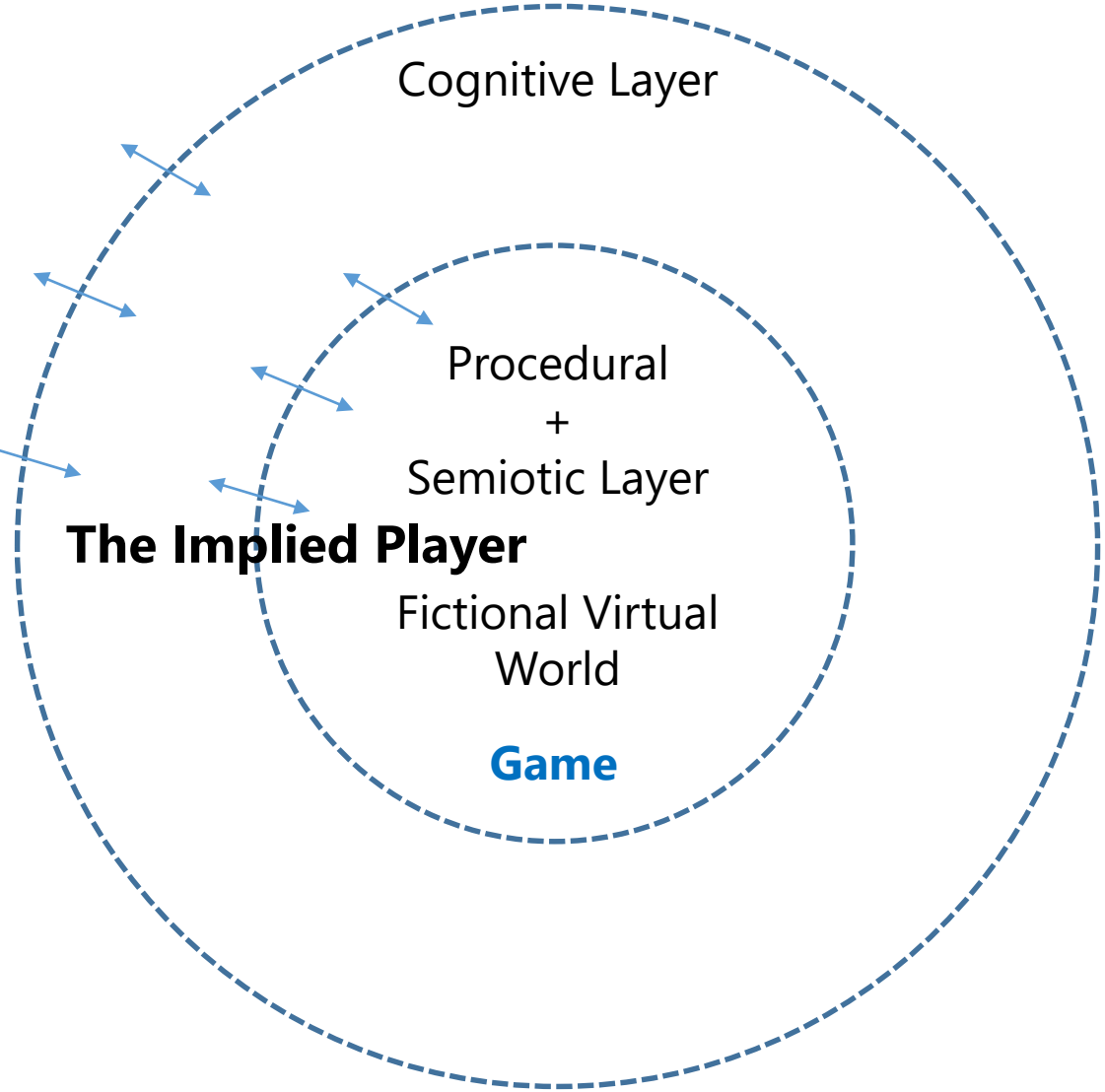
Knowledge ⟷ **The Empirical Player**

Reorganisation of knowledge / habitual dispositions

Reality

=> **New perspective on the empirical world**

Fills in the **blanks** spaces ⟷



Thank you very much!

Any Questions?

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