

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Binding of Isaac.
Platforms: PC, Mac, Linux.
Genre: Action adventure, horror.
Release Date: Sept. 28, 2011.
Developer: Florian Himsl.
Publisher: Independently published.
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Edmund McMillen.

Overview

The Binding of Isaac is about the young boy Isaac, who lived peacefully with his mother in a small house on a hill. One day as his mother was watching Christian broadcasts, she heard a voice from above: "Your son has become corrupted by sin. He needs to be saved." Quickly, Isaac's mother removed all the evil toys and games he played with, before they could stain his soul. But the voice came again: "Isaac's soul is still corrupt. He needs to be cut off from all that is evil in this world and confess his sins." Following this advice, Isaac's mother locked her son in his room to protect him from outside influences. Still, it was not enough: one last time the voice called out to her.

"You've done as I've asked, but I still question your devotion to me. To prove your faith, I will ask one more thing of you. To prove your love and devotion, I require a sacrifice. Your son, Isaac, will be this sacrifice. Go into his room and end his life as an offering to me to prove you love me above all else."

Isaac, watching through a crack in his door, trembled in fear as he saw his mother coming with a butcher's knife in hand. As he desperately searched for a way to escape his fate, he found a trapdoor to the basement hidden under a rug. His mother burst through the door: he had no other option but to leap into the unknown depths below that trapdoor.

Characters

- **Isaac** – Like his biblical namesake, Isaac is slated for human sacrifice. Despite Isaac's lack of knowledge or interest in religion, he's still forced to face the gruesome fact that his own mother is trying to kill him. Even though the game is about him escaping through a trapdoor, he can't escape the way religion is

endangering his life: his attempts to escape serve as a metaphor for his attempts to face and understand religion.

- **Mother** – Since God isn't actually a character in the game, Isaac's mother acts as a proxy. Therefore, to Isaac it is as if she herself is God. She remains static in her determination to kill her son: there is no development of her character, no insight into her personality, nothing but that singular goal to kill Isaac. Just as we humans may never understand God, Isaac and the player never manage to understand his mother.

Breakdown

The Binding of Isaac isn't a game about religion: it's a game about how religion is experienced by those who aren't a part of its world. Isaac is one of those people, terrified at the thought of being sacrificed for a concept he never understood. As he explores the strange psychological depths of his house's basement, he spirals deeper and deeper into confusion, never managing to find an answer. The basement represents Isaac's psyche, using the game's depth as a metaphor for Isaac's futile attempts to understand God's ways.

When first beginning to play the game, a player will inevitably die many deaths in the game's early and middle stages. The game does not save sessions, so the player's ability to progress relies on his knowledge of the game's mechanics. Eventually, the player develops an understanding of how the basement works (or rather, as good an understanding as mere humans can develop) and starts penetrating the dungeon's depths deeper with each playthrough.

A key aspect of the game is the use of various items. As Isaac progresses through the basement, he finds many different kinds of collectibles. Some of these are pills that have effects ranging from positive to negative, unknown until revealed through retrospect. In addition, there are trinkets that can be held to grant a passive effect: sometimes the effect is obvious, whereas other times it may seem completely useless. Other items like tarot cards have a one-time effect that is again unknown until tested.

Progressing through all of these mysterious items can be a harrowing, mind-bending experience. The tarot card "II The High Priestess" sounds like it would have some kind of beneficial effect, but when used causes a giant foot to crush Isaac and immediately kill him. A pill which damages Isaac when taken can inexplicably transform into a pill which fully heals him when he's low on health. Items which teleport Isaac into a random room can sometimes teleport him into a glitch room filled with unobtainable treasures, as if the game's own teleportation mechanic somehow broke itself. Sometimes an item will do exactly what Isaac needs most, but other times it will just outright kill him. Trying to understand all of these effects is difficult, and trying to use them in a practical context is even more so. Is the basement trying to kill Isaac, or somehow protect him? Or is the basement controlled by some whimsical higher power who enjoys watching Isaac scramble helplessly in confusion?

At the start of the game, the player has no idea what any of these items do. But with each foray into the basement, the player deepens his understanding of the game's various items

through trial and error. When a player discovers that "II The High Priestess" can be aimed at enemies, it suddenly becomes a valuable offensive option that enables him to defeat a boss more quickly and thus conserve more health for the adventure. The basement is like a well of knowledge, and the player's attempts to better understand it parallel Isaac's attempts to better understand the circumstances that led to his situation.

However, it's not a positive journey. The sheer depth of the basement's content means it's impossible to ever fully understand it. All content is placed randomly in the basement, so the player is constantly assaulted with strange new items despite the knowledge he accumulated over previous playthroughs. Not only that, but the interactions between items change drastically: that glitch room might never appear again. In the end, the basement is never truly able to be "understood" because of how much content there is to explore, and how it's presented in a randomized order.

Even putting aside the mechanics as metaphor, the basement itself is still a mystery. It's obviously not a real basement: real basements don't have strange spiders wearing the face of a bleeding child in them. So where exactly did Isaac end up when he leapt through the trapdoor? "Where" might be an inappropriate word to use: it becomes very clear that the basement is not a mere physical space. If Isaac travels far enough, he'll enter areas like his mother's womb or Sheol, the land of spirits. Discovering the paths to these various floors is another trial-and-error business just like the game's item system: sometimes you must hold a specific item to enter an area, or sometimes an area will unlock after clearing the game a number of times, or sometimes an area will just not appear at all.

Different endings will be shown depending on which area Isaac was in. Of course, none of these endings make any sense: the basement is not something that can be understood by simply completing the game a few times. However, a recurring item throughout nearly all of the endings is a giant golden treasure chest. Sometimes, Isaac will open the chest and find an item inside, which is then added to the list of things that will appear in the basement, continuing the theme of building off past experience. Sometimes, Isaac will crawl inside the chest and shut the lid (and sometimes in subsequent playthroughs, Isaac will find the past version of himself who had been locked inside). Sometimes, Isaac will just stare sadly at the treasure chest. But the recurring nature of the treasure chest raises an important, if unanswerable question: just what exactly is inside it?

If a player wrestles with the basement enough, he may discover the last area of the game: the inside of the golden treasure chest. Clearing this area triggers the final ending, which reveals that the chest contained a series of family photographs. Although these photographs tell a disjointed, confusing story, they still show scenes from happier times before Isaac's mom began trying to kill him. Despite all of the confusion and terror and randomness of the game, the treasure chest's contents reveal that Isaac was only ever driven by the desire to have a loving family and a mother who wouldn't try to kill him. That fact is quite possibly the only fact in the game.

After reaching the photograph ending, the game displays a giant "THE END" image on its title screen, bringing the game to as much of an ending as it can possibly reach. But

the ending isn't just about narrative: Isaac himself attains a small form of closure as a result of his journey. If the player managed to fulfill a difficult and unknown condition, from then on Isaac starts his adventure holding an item, "The Dice." Using the dice rerolls all items on the screen: if Isaac finds an item he can't use or doesn't want, he can reroll it and hope the basement gives him something better. It's not a lot, but in the end Isaac managed to gain a tiny, tiny degree of control over the basement's wild randomized insanity. Did he come to terms with his family situation? Did he receive a revelation from the photographs? Did he accept his gruesome fate as a sacrifice? There still aren't any definite answers (and there probably never will be), but by the end of the game both Isaac and the player managed to develop at least some degree of understanding over that which is impossible to understand: the will of God as channeled through Isaac's basement.

Strongest Element

As the game progresses, new characters can be unlocked by achieving certain goals. Characters like Cain, Judas, Samson, and Eve all have different strengths and weaknesses compared to Isaac. But the important thing to note is each character's biblical significance: they were all people forsaken by God. Cain killed his brother, Judas betrayed Jesus, Samson lost his hair, and Eve got humanity kicked out of Eden. Did all of these people have to suffer through the spiraling confusion of the basement in their moment of judgment? Is it the fate of all those who have lost God's favor to wander through an infinite dungeon surrounded by items with terrifying unknown effects? Even though the game is about Isaac, the message applies to anyone struggling with their god.

Unsuccessful Element

Because *The Binding of Isaac* is so randomized, it's impossible to draw a definite power curve for the game. Players who have collected many powerful upgrades and items will have an easy time with bosses, whereas those same bosses would dominate players who were less fortunate in their treasure hunting. The battle against Isaac's mother suffers greatly from this problem: if it's too easy it doesn't feel like a rewarding end to the game, and if it's too hard the player dies and is forced to start again from the very beginning. Her power level doesn't change, but the player's fluctuates wildly.

Highlight

When I found the giant treasure chest for the first time, Isaac opened it and found a silly hat inside, and the game ended. A little strange, a little random, but it fit into the game's style of humor.

So when I found it the second time, I was expecting the same ending. He found the treasure chest again, he opened it again. Everything seemed the same at first. But this time, Isaac found a noose inside the chest. The scene cut to a shot of him hanging from it before fading to black.

In the end, after fighting his way through hordes and hordes of monsters and confronting his own mother, Isaac died anyway. He didn't just die, he committed suicide of his own accord. Why? Was he playing into God's hands, being the sacrifice He had asked for all

along? Or was Isaac driven to despair at the thought of how deep his mother's desire to kill him was? But I think it was a combination of both: Isaac's suicide was caused by not only his depression at finding out the depth of his mother's murderous intent, but also by his desire to somehow make it up to her and be the sacrifice she always wanted.

Still, it's not as if Isaac's suicide is the "true" ending. Sometimes, his mother's arm reaches out of the treasure chest and drags him inside. Sometimes, he finds a reference to *Super Meat Boy*, another McMillen game. Sometimes, he finds a quarter.

Critical Reception

Reviews for *The Binding of Isaac* trend around 8/10 scores. Hit925 from Metacritic rating the game as a 4/10, noting that the game was "just twisted and just weird" without considering the purpose of that style. A more positive review from Sawbuck Gamer giving the game 100/100 said "It's impossible to play *The Binding of Isaac* without coming away with the feeling that McMillen (the game's designer) could really use a hug," tapping into the game's dark psychological depth. Neilie Johnson from IGN rated the game a 7.5/10, calling it "a game that has a lot in common with the God of the Old Testament - it's totally random, highly creative, and brutally unforgiving," recognizing the game's power as a metaphor for religion.

Lessons

- Symbolism and good game design can sometimes be at odds. The use of randomization is a case of symbolism that hurts the game's power curve. Difficult bosses are meant to convey a feeling of desperation and fear to the player, but it's hard to experience desperation or fear when you can defeat the game's hardest enemies in mere seconds.
- Humor can be used to set a tone. *The Binding of Isaac* uses twisted humor: for example, one of the collectible powerups is a futuristic eyepiece that lets you shoot laser tears. These laser tears are powerful because they have no travel time, but they're more of a dark joke than a tactical weapon. If the game hadn't been whimsical and silly, the randomization would just be annoying: players would restart over and over until they found the laser tears or other powerful items.
- Mechanics as metaphor allow players to experience a character's emotions firsthand, rather than just know about them. The extreme randomization of the basement's gameplay dynamics leave players lost and bewildered. When I carried an unfamiliar tarot card into a difficult boss fight, I found myself practically praying that the card would do something to help me. Luckily, it did: the card was "XIX The Sun," which damages all enemies and fully heals Isaac. However, I was surprised to notice that I had actually been praying for a good effect and offering thanks to the basement when "XIX The Sun" saved me.

Summation

In theology, the story of Abraham and Isaac has been fairly thoroughly studied. However, all of those studies focused on Abraham: he was being tested by God, or he was being punished for sinning, or all sorts of other interpretations. But how did Isaac feel about the

whole ordeal? *The Binding of Isaac* not only answers that question, but forces the player to experience the same emotions Isaac felt under the knife: terror, confusion, and hesitation. The player's journey through the basement is a journey through Isaac's tumultuous psyche in the moment between life and sacrificial death.