

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth
Platform: PC, PS4, PS Vita, Wii U, New 3DS, Xbox One
Genre: Roguelike
Release Date: November 4, 2014
Developer: Nicalis
Publisher: Nicalis
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Edmund McMillen

Overview

The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth is the story of a young boy who lives alone with his mother. He lives a happy life coloring and playing while his mother watches Christian television. One day, God came down and told Isaac's mother that he is a sinner. She listened to Him and took away all of his possessions to make sure he is not able to sin. God called down upon Isaac's mother to tell her that she is doing good by God, but she still needs to take one step further: to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac's mother with knife in hand looks to kill Isaac, but Isaac quickly escapes through a trapdoor to the basement, where he is to fight evil monsters using his projectile tears. It's not until he reaches the final boss, his mother, that he realizes that it'll take more than defeating her to end the torture he faces as a sinner in the hands of an angry God.

Characters

- **Isaac** - The player character. Isaac is a young boy who is trying to escape his mother who is trying to murder him. Isaac's name is an allusion to Isaac from the bible, where God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to prove his love. He is only clothed in his streaming tears as a result of his mother's attempt to protect him from sin.
- **Isaac's Mother** – The villain. Isaac's mother is depicted as a Christian-television loving lady. She abuses her son by taking away all of his possessions and locking him in his room. As Isaac describes her, she is driven by heresy to kill her son after God told her to do so. Isaac's mother commonly appears as the final boss who unmercifully spawns overwhelming amounts of monsters at a time while trying to kill him by stomping on him with her bright red heels.

Breakdown

The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth is commonly interpreted as a commentary on religion and how it drives people to do things, good or evil. It's easy to say this knowing that the plot is initiated by Isaac's mother's intent to murder her son because God told her to do so. Or did she? While it is not entirely clear at first, some evidence suggests that Isaac is an unreliable narrator. As a young boy with a big imagination, Isaac is not a liar who is begging to put down religion. Instead, he's just telling the story as he remembers it.

The evidence that Isaac is not a reliable narrator can be seen in several of the endings. The first time the player is given a glimpse at this is when Isaac defeats his mother the first time. In a series of drawings with narration, just as the introduction was told, Isaac tells the rest of the story. Just as his mother is about to murder him with a knife, God sends an angel to protect him by knocking his mother out with a fallen bible. Immediately after, the player is then given an in-color cut scene where Isaac is happy, only to be followed by the door opening behind him with his angry mother in the shadows. This is a juxtaposition of what Isaac imagines and tells the player versus what actually happens. So, did Isaac just imagine God's request for his murder? This is how the story begins (as Isaac tells it):

Isaac and his mother lived alone in a small house on a hill.

As one of the endings show, this wasn't always the truth. In this ending, which is unlocked far into the game, a series of pictures show that Isaac's father lived with them at one point. In the following pictures, there is a photo showing Isaac and his mother, looking out of the window together, implying that Isaac's father left them.

Isaac kept to himself, drawing pictures and playing with his toys as his mom watched Christian broadcasts on the television.

Given Isaac's young nature and neglect to observe other things about his mother, this shows that the one thing that Isaac remembers about his mother is that she is incredibly religious.

Life was simple, and they were both happy. That was, until the day Isaac's mom heard a voice from above: "Your son has become corrupted by sin! He needs to be saved!"

This shows the turning point in Isaac's life: when his father left. Is it possible that Isaac's mother wasn't told by God to murder her son? Instead, one can theorize that Isaac's mother started to become abusive to her son upon her husband's abandonment, and that his mother became so abusive to the point in which he believed that his mother wanted him dead.

Rather than being a commentary on how overly religious people affect others negatively, *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* is actually a story of how children are affected by abuse, causing them to see the world as it isn't. The religious aspect of the story is just

a motif, which is prominent in Isaac's hallucinations and fears as a result of the association of his mother and her Christian television shows.

There is a lot that can be said about the gameplay and its symbolism to Isaac's actual life. While the gameplay insists that Isaac is scavenging the depths of his house in order to defeat his mother, it can be argued that Isaac's journey is a representation of his unconscious. Isaac's journey underground provides a look into Isaac's mind, showered in religious allusions and references to his real life. This further supports Isaac as an unreliable narrator with an imagination filled with his biggest fears.

The first place this is seen is the setting. The journey begins in the basement, which is where Isaac escapes to hide from his mother. The basement, a room found underground in homes, is a metaphor for Isaac's own hell. As hell is commonly referred to as a fiery, unforgiving underground, Isaac similarly spends his entire journey in hell, fighting off its hellish monsters.

Psychologist Carl Jung describes one of his dreams which mirrors Isaac's journey into the depths. Jung describes his dream being in a house in which each floor was a representation of himself. The first floor being a representation of his personal narrative, and descending a level below to the ground floor tells of his family roots. Following this comes the cellar, which identifies the culture which Jung is defined by. Similarly, Isaac starts in the basement where he faces his monsters and his mother's anger, but descending several floors below him brings him to his mother's womb. After encountering Isaac's mother's womb, the player is given the opportunity to enter Sheol, similarly compared to hell in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that Isaac has identified himself as someone who belongs there.

Beyond its setting, the monsters that lie within it reveal a lot about Isaac and his fears. Some of the monsters are basic things that most people would find scary or disgusting; sometimes Isaac encounters pieces of poop that angrily run at him, and other times he encounters fiendish spiders that split out blood. Despite the guts and the gore of these monsters, it is important to take a look at the ones that look like Isaac. Many of these monsters look just like Isaac, but are somehow distorted in a dark and twisted way. For example, there are versions of Isaac that fatter, zombie-like, cycloped, headless, malnourished, skinned down to the bone and even ones that look just like Isaac if he were a dead fetus. These different versions of Isaac communicate to the player that much of his fears lie within himself being a monster, and that by defeating them he is destroying any bit of stigma.

Finally after trekking through the monsters, Isaac faces the final beast: his mother. But, what follows? At the end of the levels he finds his toy box that would give him an item that the player unlocks to play with. The game includes sixteen endings meaning that Isaac hops back through that trapdoor sixteen times. Why does he willingly go back into his own hell? Hasn't he defeated his mother and stopped believing that he is a sinner?

The answer comes from the bosses he beats after his mother. In Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, he suggests twelve stages of the Hero's Journey that Isaac follows. It is shown that Isaac for the majority of the game struggles to cross the first two stages, the Call to Adventure and the Refusal of the Call. Isaac continues to battle his mother time after time because he believes that fighting the belief that he is an evil sinner lies within destroying his mother. After fighting his mother and her heart,

Isaac comes upon several other bosses of which some include Satan, Mega Satan, and himself. In these bosses, Isaac's fears about him being evil unravel. This is where Isaac finally crosses the threshold in realizing that he would have to fight himself and his own beliefs that he is evil in order to make progress. By fighting himself and the actual devil in the game, Isaac is showing that it takes more than shutting down his mother and God's word; Isaac needs to convince himself that he is not evil.

The final ending of the sixteen showcases Isaac's final evolution throughout the story. In this scene, Isaac has locked himself in his toy box and is lying down with his dead cat, Guppy. As he is crying, his body begins flashing between Isaac and his body in the form of a demon. This time, he's smiling. This, in terms of the Hero's Journey, describes Isaac's resurrection. The juxtaposition between Isaac crying and Isaac as a smiling demon shows that in that moment, he accepted the sinner he is.

Writer Chris Colfer says, "People are not born heroes or villains; they're created by the people around them." *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* exhibits the story of a child that was told he was evil all his life, soon to believe that this is the only truth. The effects that Isaac displayed as a result of his mother's abuse is reflected in his journeys in the underground, but Isaac's battle for his self-worth is seemingly never-ending until he surrenders to his mother and truths he was taught.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *BOI* is using the items to play a role in Isaac's character development. As Isaac's underground journey is simply a metaphor of his greatest fears, all of the items tell a story about Isaac's real life. For example, some of the common items that come in different varieties are pills and syringes. Sometimes, these items can be found by exploding a dresser or finding Mom's coin purse. This is a narrative in itself, suggesting that Isaac's mother is a drug abuser and that these items are present in Isaac's real life. Religion as a motif is also very prevalent in some of these items. A lot of times, some of the items can come in forms of spirits that follow Isaac around such as demons that fire powerful beams, or even common religious symbols like the bible, which allows Isaac to fly with angel wings. This direction refers back to his greatest fear, his mother and her religious personality. Even items like "Guppy's Head", which is one of the items depicting a cat head, is later shown in one of the ending cut-scenes to be Isaac's dead cat that he keeps in his toy box. Using the items as a storytelling device is an innovative and uncommon component that ties the gameplay and the plot together and adds an extra dimension in allowing the player to immerse themselves into Isaac's subconscious fears and their unknowing effects.

Unsuccessful Element

An unsuccessful element of the game can be the pacing of the game's plot. The game is difficult, and there is nothing wrong with that. The game is unique in that much of its gameplay involves trial and error with what each of the items do as well as understanding the patterns and moves that each of the enemies do. Therefore, it does take skill as well as luck, both with encountering good items and not as difficult enemies, to complete a round and progress forward with the story. While the gameplay can be exciting and have lots of replay value, inconsistent winning makes it difficult to connect

the plot. *BOI* can slowly turns a game with a strong plot line into a roguelike game that a player will replay just because it is fun. This in no way deteriorates the enjoyment of the game, but the pacing of the story can easily get lost.

Highlight

Of the story's sixteen endings, there's always one thing that appeared in every sequence: Isaac's toy box. The toy box is brilliantly used in telling Isaac's character development, which is why its symbolism should be recognized as the highlight of the game.

In the first eleven endings, Isaac, after defeating all the monsters, is confronted with his toy box set where he finished the level, such as the womb. As he opens it, he would often find something strange, like rubber cement that would hold his eyes open or even something as silly as a quarter. In terms of gameplay, this simply meant that the player was unlocking a new item that would help, but for Isaac, each of these encounters symbolizes rebirth. These repeated discoveries are symbolic of Isaac becoming stronger, reborn again only with the hopes that he would be able to take down his mother and her view of her son as a sinner forever.

It's not until ending twelve that there is a shift in Isaac's character. This time when he opens the box, there is a blinding glow. In that moment, he flashes through the different characters: Magdalene, Cain, Judas, Eve, and Azazel, and back to Isaac, where he is standing in his own room. The flashing between these characters, all referencing biblical sinners (and a literal demon), followed by Isaac alone in his room highlights Isaac's revelation: he is a sinner, and no matter what he does, he will always be an evil sinner. And so, he hops into the box. Joseph Campbell says:

"Atonement consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster—the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed Id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself, and that is what is difficult. One must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy."

At this point in the gameplay, this is where Isaac faces Satan, the father figure who offers mercy and kindness to Isaac, as opposed to his mother and God. Isaac is finally able to let go of feeling bad about who he is. The clever thing about this ending is that it alludes to the story of Jesus in the tomb, who died for three days and was reborn. In Isaac's case, this moment reveals his new rebirth as an accepted sinner.

Critical Reception

- *IGN*, Dan Stapleton, 9/10- Stapleton's praise towards the game relies heavily on how the randomization of the game allows for a new adventure every time the player presses start. He also enjoys how there are hundreds of items that can bring surprise to the player on Isaac's abilities for that run, and it also makes it incredibly punishing when the player dies, losing an item that is extremely helpful. Stapleton's one negative critique is the lack of description of the items as sometimes after he picks them up, he has no idea what they do.

- *Gamespot, Brett Todd, 8/10-* Todd says that the game, while incredibly simple, is an addicting and time murdering game that can keep a player on for hours. He claims that while the game has endless references to Christianity, there isn't really a deep message to be found here. He believes the game is exciting in that there's plenty of different items and multiple endings, making players want to replay it over and over again. Todd is also very caught up in all the poop that the game has to offer, saying that there's a charm in the gross and dark humor of the game.

Lessons

- *Use the player's character to inspire creative world building-* How many protagonists do you know fight off evil monsters with their projectile tears? One of the strengths of *The BOI* is how the creators took into account how Isaac would see the world. The use of subjective world building is a tool that is not commonly used. By creating a world subjective to Isaac's perspective, not only does it contribute to Isaac's character development, but it also allows for more creative opportunities in inspiring game mechanics, bosses and items.
- *Not creating every item as a power-up adds an experimental aspect to the gameplay-* Too often in video games, many players only experience power-ups when finding an item or buying a new weapon. This game experiments with the idea that maybe sometimes Mario's red mushroom could be poisonous. One notable piece of the gameplay in *BOI* is learning about the different items that can be picked up, and that not all of them necessarily made beating the game easier; sometimes, it made it much more difficult! For example, there is an item called Tiny Planet which causes the tears shot from Isaac to orbit around him, instead going straight in the desired direction. The ability to practice trial and error makes the gameplay much more exciting and adds so much replay value to a game that has simple mechanics and repeating monsters and bosses.
- *Every element of the game should add to the plotline-* Another thing that makes *BOI* different from other games is that not only are items made to fit the world of *BOI*, but each item contributes to the plotline. For instance, Thor doesn't have a hammer just to have a hammer. Just as movies and books put significance on details given to the viewer/reader, video games should as well.

Summation

The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth is a game that is both unique in its gameplay and its story. What makes it special is its world inspired by a dungeon filled with a character's fears, rather than the typical roguelike zombies and dragons. Each item not only allows for extended character development, but they allow for experimental gameplay and a reason to come back and play again.