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Game Development

Assignment #4: Game Analysis

I am Andrew Ryan and I am here to ask you a question:
Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?

No, says the man in Washington. It belongs to the poor.
No, says the man in the Vatican. It belongs to God.
No, says the man in Moscow. It belongs to everyone.

I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something
different. I chose the impossible. I chose...

Rapture.

—Andrew Ryan

This is the first of many monologues from Andrew Ryan in the game Bioshock. Andrew Ryan is the creator of a vast underwater dystopia called Rapture. In Rapture Mr. Ryan attempted to create a paradise free from what he saw as the world's failures. As the player you control Jack, the lone survivor of passenger plane that crashes in the Atlantic Ocean. As you explore Rapture you encounter characters, situations, and concepts that few games can ever achieve. In this paper I hope to show why I find this game so enthralling and perhaps deepen my understanding and appreciation of Bioshock as well.

Bioshock was published by 2K Games and was developed by 2K Boston and 2k Australia. It was released for the Xbox 360 and Windows on August 21st 2007. It is scheduled for release on PlayStation 3 on October 21st 2008. I first played Bioshock a few months after its release on my Xbox 360. At the time of its release I was distracted by other great games on the market but I am glad I eventually played Bioshock.

The developers have promised they will add additional content to the PS3 release of the game. This includes a "Survivor Mode" which will increase the difficulty. This will be a nice touch since I was able to beat the hardest difficulty with little effort. It seemed in the Xbox 360 version, that the ramp up in difficulty was much greater from easy to medium then from medium to hard. The PS3 version will also offer challenge rooms. It isn't clear yet what will happen in

these rooms but any additional content in this game will almost certainly be great. Hopefully this additional content will eventually be available for download on the Xbox 360.

Bio shock is first-and-foremost a first-person shooter, but the game also contains some elements of role-playing games. You are able to upgrade your character and customize your abilities to your preference or to what is required to advance in a certain section of the game. Bioshock could also fall under the header of survival horror. At times it can be downright spooky. The enemies and NPCs have physically and physiologically twisted by life in Rapture. As you play you may even ask if the same things are happening to you. Bioshock even contains a puzzle side-game where the player must connect pipes to “hack” electronics. Bioshock brilliantly combines all genres into one seamless game. This adds great variety making the players change their frame of mind continuously. One of the few complaints I have about the game is that the puzzle side-games become a bit repetitive. Near the very end of the game you are able to reach a point where you can bypass these games, however it is too little too late. These side-games should have been bypassable about two thirds the way through the game or the side-games should have evolved to keep them interesting.

Bioshock is strictly a single player game. Rarely, these days, do we see a first-person shooter that is released exclusively as a single-player experience. Certainly people could take issue with this. Bioshock might have been a great coop-game or could have shipped with a online multiplayer mode. Then again these modes could have stunk. I think if you can create such a complete and enthralling single-player experience it is fine to leave it at that. Developing multiplayer modes may have upset the games balance or tainted the purity of its story. It may have diverted talent and resources away from the single player experience. I know I got my money’s worth in the single- player game. Perhaps in future sequels (which are nearly certain and anticipated) they can develop multiplayer element, but should only do so if they maintain the integrity of the single-player experience.

By-and-large Bioshock takes place in real-time. However some points of the game are almost turn-based. For example, when you bring up the in-game weapons or ability HUD, game time freezes. You can then select your ability or weapon at leisure, after your selection is made the HUD falls away and real-time resumes. It takes a moment for your character to switch weapon or ability but then it is ready to use. In this way you can use several abilities in rapid succession in just a few seconds of game time. To me this played out in the game as my avatar having extremely quick reflexes. Certain portions of the game (including mini-games) have time limits. This adds to the tension and excitement.

ESRB [Entertainment Software Rating Board] has rated Bioshock M for mature. The ESRB’s website states that Bioshock contains “Sexual Themes, Strong Language, Blood and Gore, Drug Reference, Intense Violence”. I would agree with their description and also with the rating of mature. Their description appears both accurate and level headed. This game’s target audience is and should be adults. In my opinion Bioshock is not intended to be marketed to a particular gender, lifestyle, region, or

ethnicity. Of course action games are most popular with men and the horror element could be too frightening to some more delicate ladies (wink, wink, nudge, nudge). Someone once said that “Genius is infinitely applicable”. I find this true for example with George Orwell (another dystopian storyteller). His writing and perspective are as applicable today as they were in 1948. Likewise I think Bioshock approaches this level of sophistication. In this way it has no target audience. Its ideas and philosophy can be utilized to evaluate experiences across the whole of human experience. Its commentary on greed, power, fear, and psychology are universal. This might be a bit grandiose but it just gives you an idea of the personal impact this game had on me.

On the first play through this game was very difficult for me. One reason it was difficult was due to the freedom the game gives you. There are several ways that you can approach any problem in this game. After several hours of play and online research (um cheating) you begin to understand some of the ways the developers anticipated you would overcome obstacles. Once you are able to think more like the developers the game becomes less difficult. As I said earlier I was eventually able to master the game on the hardest difficulty but not before lots of practice. All together I played through the game nearly three complete times. It has great replay value. One reason is that the designers hid lots of items and power-ups throughout the various stages. While most are not necessary to complete the game they do add complexity and replayability. Bioshock also has two unique endings that depend on decisions you make throughout the game. This is another reason a player might play through Bioshock more than once.

Spoiler Alert Bioshock contains a story feature that to me seems unique. Upon your arrival to Rapture you establish radio contact with a man named Atlas. Throughout the game Atlas acts as tutor, narrator, and remote companion. Your first long term goal in the game is to save his family and then escape Rapture. Just as you are about to rescue his family and escape you witness their murder. From that point on your goal is to avenge their death for Atlas and kill Andrew Ryan. After an epic adventure you reach Mr. Ryan. You can finally exact revenge, but something not quite right. Ryan can control your actions with the phrase “would you kindly”(a favorite of Atlas). He controls you like a puppet with these words. Then he orders you to kill him in a twisted murder/suicide. Upon Ryan’s death Atlas reveals his true identity and aspirations. You have helped him cease control of Rapture. You realize Atlas has psychologically controlled your actions throughout the game (including forcing you to crash the passenger plane into the Atlantic). It is revealed that you are a product of brainwashing since your childhood on Rapture. This suddenly changes every assumption you have held throughout the game. Everything is turned on its ear. You must now seek out and destroy Atlas for the remainder of the game. In my opinion it is the greatest twist in video game history.

Another interesting feature of Bioshock is its use of character and dialogue. In Bioshock you rarely come in contact with other characters. Instead you communicate with them via radio or through audio journal entries. As I mentioned earlier your contact with Atlas is via radio. You will also have radio communication with other characters in various portions of the game, but the most common way the game transfers information is via audio diary entries. These are scattered throughout the game, and are often hidden and hard to find. These recordings may tell you your next objective, give you the pass code to a safe, or just make the story richer. As you progress through the game you realize many of the people who made these recordings are now diseased. This increases the tension and the player’s feeling of isolation. As you listen to these recordings you can hear the characters slip into madness, you wonder if

this will also be your curse. For example you can hear as the characters down-play the seriousness of their situation only to meet an ironic and tragic end. All of this makes the world of Rapture more dense and interesting

Bioshock has an epic and sweeping philosophy that pulls the player through the game. The developers wanted us to think about idealism. Is it a positive force, as it appears to be, or does it idealism eventually lead to destruction? Our world is an imperfect place; will the struggle towards an unachievable idealism eventually lead to madness and destruction? Can perfection exist in our world? These of course our timeless questions and will forever remain that way, because a philosophical question is in its nature unanswerable. Well maybe not unanswerable, we may reach perfection, or go mad trying. Sadly no one may be around to discern the final answer.