

Bioshock

Game Title: Bioshock

Platform: PC, Xbox360, Playstation 3

Genre: First-person Shooter/Survival Horror

Developer: 2K Boston/2K Australia

Publisher: 2K Games

Writer/Creator Director/ Narrative Designer: Ken Levine

By: Doug Williams

Overview

In the game Bioshock, you play the role of Jack, a man who survives a plane crash in the mid-Atlantic circa 1960, only to descend into the mysterious world of Rapture. Rapture is a dystopian society formed in a city built at the bottom of the sea by a man named Andrew Ryan. The city, originally made by Ryan to escape from what he viewed as an oppressive social, political, and religious environment, was to be an Eden of free enterprise and small government. When you enter the city you discover that Ryan's supposed paradise is no longer so. Using an undiscovered breed of sea slug, Rapture scientists created a substance known as Adam, which allowed them to create genetically engineered mutations called plasmids. Plasmids provide the people of Rapture with special abilities such as telekinesis, increased speed, and even the ability to create fire and electricity using only their own bodies. At the time the player enters the city, it has been torn apart by a civil war between Andrew Ryan and a mobster named Frank Fontaine, who is now supposedly dead after Ryan had him killed. The unrest continued as a resistance formed against Ryan led by a man named Atlas. The player is greeted by Atlas via radio upon entering the city, and is guided in a quest to escape from Rapture and bring down Andrew Ryan, who is intent on having Jack killed due to his belief that Jack is a government spy. When the player finally confronts Ryan, it is revealed that Jack is actually Ryan's own son, created in a laboratory in Rapture two years prior, modified to age quickly, and then released into the world with false memories by none other than the players strongest ally Atlas, revealed to be Frank Fontaine living in disguise after faking his own death. It is further revealed that the player has

been under Atlas/Fontaine's control the entire time due to mental conditioning that forces Jack to obey any order which contains the key phrase 'would you kindly'. Ryan forces the player to kill him, so he can thus die on his own terms. Fontaine betrays Jack and he is only saved by the efforts of Rapture inhabitant Dr. Tennenbaum and the rescued 'Little Sisters' she has taken in. For the game's conclusion the player must break Fontaine's hold on their mind and ultimately ally themselves with the Little Sisters to reach Fontaine and bring him down.

Characters

- ℓ Jack, the game's protagonist, enters the city of Rapture after a plane crash he is later revealed to have been the cause of. Created by genetic experiments in Rapture two years prior to the events of the game, Jack has been implanted with false memories and mind control triggers which force him to obey any order containing the phrase 'would you kindly'. Jack was created from an illegitimate pregnancy resulting from Andrew Ryan's affair with an exotic dancer, and was programmed by Frank Fontaine to be a tool he could use to bring Ryan down.
- ℓ Andrew Ryan, the founder of Rapture and the primary antagonist for the first section of the game. Ryan is an idealist who created Rapture with the idea of creating a paradise of free enterprise unrestrained by the political, religious, and social limitations of modern society, which he views as unnecessary. Ryan kills himself using the control phrase on Jack, forcing Jack to bludgeon Ryan to death with his golf club.
- ℓ Atlas/Frank Fontaine is a mobster supposedly killed by Ryan prior to the events of the game. Fontaine is obsessed with his quest for power and seeks total control of Rapture. He is supposedly killed by Ryan to end a power struggle between the two. It is later revealed that Fontaine did not die, but faked his own death and ran the resistance against Ryan by masquerading as Atlas, a man who helps the character through the early events of the game.
- ℓ Dr. Tennenbaum is a female scientist living in Rapture, and one of the few people Jack meets in

the city who is not trying to kill him. She seeks to save the Little Sisters and attempts to enlist Jack's help to achieve that end. In the later part of the game, Tennenbaum gives Jack aid and helps him remove the mental controls Fontaine placed in Jack. She is significant as Jack's only true ally throughout the game.

- ℓ Little Sisters are young girls whose bodies have been genetically modified to manufacture Adam, a substance which everyone strongly desires. They wander the city of Rapture, recycling Adam from the dead people who litter the streets. The dilemma of the Little Sisters represents a significant moral choice for Jack in the game.
- ℓ Big Daddies are guardians of the Little Sisters and serve as boss battles throughout the game. Big Daddies are men who have been genetically modified and fitted with diving suits and powerful weapons. Their sole purpose in life is to protect the Little Sisters from those who would harvest them to steal their Adam. At the end of the game, Jack must acquire the armor, voice, and even the smell of a Big Daddy, in order to enlist the aid of the Little Sisters in reaching Fontaine.

Breakdown

When Jack first reenters Rapture at the start of the game, it is symbolic of the character beginning his real life. Up until that point the player had been living a false life fabricated by Fontaine, and until they come home to Rapture, the player's actions are of no consequence, as if he were a newborn child. This symbolic birth to consciousness is further enforced when it is later revealed that despite his adult appearance, Jack's actual age is only somewhere around two years old. This is a time when most children first begin to reject their parents direction and choose for themselves (often dubbed 'the terrible twos'). This is made all the more significant by the theme of free will that exists throughout the game. Since Jack is being controlled by Fontaine for the majority of the game, he is like a child being controlled by his parent. Once Fontaine's mind control has been broken, the player

finally achieves true independence. What that independence means and the type of person Jack has become, is dependent upon his earlier actions regarding the Little Sisters.

For much of the game, Jack is inadvertently under direct control of Fontaine, much like a child who, despite exerting independent action, is still the subject of his parents will. At this time, the primary choice that Jack is given is what he will do about the Little Sisters he encounters. Fontaine is at this point disguised as Atlas and pretending to be a nurturing influence on Jack. He is supposedly guiding Jack to help him escape from Rapture, and he does not force the player to harvest and thus kill the Little Sisters. This moral choice which is left up to the player, whether he chooses to harvest the Sisters and attain power at the cost of others or save the Little Sisters at the cost of possibly sacrificing himself, is the quandary or primary problem faced by Jack. The quandary surrounding the Little Sisters is further explored through audio tapes and propaganda recordings heard by the player throughout the game, with the former containing citizens accounts of their feelings towards the girls turned monsters and the latter presenting the opinion of the corporations and Andrew Ryan, reinforcing the point of view that the girls are merely sources of Adam and not true human beings. The choice that the player makes concerning the Little Sisters is the defining choice that decides how the game ends up for Jack, after all in game tasks are accomplished.

Many visual symbols are presented throughout the game which are representative of Jack's struggles. Since the game is from a first person perspective, the only feature of Jack the player can see are his hands, and on the insides of his wrists Jack has a set of chain link tattoos. These tattoos symbolize Jack's bondage and lack of free will. For much of the game Jack is a prisoner even though he seemingly roams free, since he is being controlled by Fontaine's brainwashing. Another strong visual symbol involving Jack's hands center around his use of plasmids. For every plasmid Jack uses, his hands change to reflect that plasmid's effect on his body. For example, when using a plasmid to create fire, Jack's hands constantly burn and take on a charred appearance. As a plasmid's strength is increased, its visual effect on Jack's body also increases. At higher levels of the fire plasmid, Jack's

hands becomes even more charred and burned looking. Genetic splicing using plasmids is an extension of Jack's primary quandary involving the Little Sisters. To acquire and upgrade plasmids, the player must purchase them using Adam which can only be acquired from Little Sisters. If the Little Sisters are harvested for all of their Adam, the player can buy the best plasmids giving Jack a tactical advantage, but warping his features to symbolize the humanity he has lost in his acquisition of power.

The two primary antagonists of the game, Andrew Ryan and Frank Fontaine, represent the obstacles that must be overcome by Jack to discover his true self and achieve self-actualization. Only by overcoming the obstacles they represent for him can Jack hope to escape from both Rapture and the hold these men have over his mind. The ways in which Jack does eventually destroy these men enforces the theme of helplessness attributed to Jack throughout the game. When the player finally confronts Andrew Ryan, the facts about Jack's origin and the lie he has been living are made known to him. This is Jack's final coming to awareness, as he now knows the truth of his origin and his arrival in Rapture. It is at this point that Andrew Ryan forces Jack to murder Ryan with his own golf club, reinforcing the revelation that thus far in the game Jack has been an unwitting slave. Ryan's motivation for doing so was to die on his own terms, as he knew he had been defeated at last by Fontaine's quest for power. The primary antagonist then changes from Andrew Ryan to Frank Fontaine. Since he has confronted and resolved his conflict with his biological father, Jack begins to shed some of his former chains and achieve true independence. He is assisted by Dr. Tennenbaum in overcoming the mental conditioning forcing him to obey orders containing a key phrase, resulting in Jack truly having free will for the first time. The player must then fight against Fontaine in order to survive and escape from Rapture. When Fontaine is finally reached, the player does battle with him until Fontaine is significantly weakened. However Fontaine, who has injected himself with vast quantities of Adam to achieve power, still manages to overcome the player, and is only stopped by Little Sisters who ambush and swarm him while he is distracted, sucking all the Adam from his body and leaving him dead. It is at this point in the game that the significance of the moral choice concerning the Little Sisters truly

comes to fruition.

To reach Fontaine for the final battle, it is necessary for the player to enlist the help of the Little Sisters because they are the only ones who can open certain doors and lead Jack to Fontaine. To gain the help of the Little Sisters, the player must complete a set of quests to acquire the armor (a modified diving suit), voice modulator, and the smell of a Big Daddy, one of the powerful genetically altered men created to protect the Little Sisters. What this action means depends entirely on the choices the player has made during the game, as does the ultimate ending to the game once Fontaine is defeated. If the player chose to harvest and thus kill the Little Sisters, the action symbolizes their personal path to evil. Jack chooses to repeat the mistakes of his fathers and succumb to the desire for power. In this ending, dressing up as a Big Daddy is Jack's way of exploiting the Little Sisters to overthrow Fontaine. Once Fontaine is dead, Jack turns on the Little Sisters, taking all the Adam for himself and becoming a monster worse than Ryan or Fontaine. In the ending which results from saving all of the Little Sisters, the meaning of Jack's actions and the results are entirely different. In this ending, Jack donning the armor and taking the role of the Big Daddy is symbolic of his protective actions towards the Little Sisters and foreshadows the game's ending. This time, after Fontaine has been defeated, Jack returns to the surface with all of the Little Sisters he has rescued and they live out the rest of their lives treating Jack as a surrogate father, which further solidifies his role as their protector and nurturer. Ultimately the character's premise, or lesson they have to learn in the game, is whether to choose to repeat their father's mistakes, or to decide for themselves what is right and live with the consequences.

Strongest Element

The Adam with which plasmids can be gained is created by Little Sisters who wander the city protected by the Big Daddies who always accompany them. Rapture's streets are filled with Splicers, citizens of Rapture who have gone murderously insane from overuse of Plasmids, as well as Ryan's deadly security systems. To survive and progress through the game the player needs Adam to acquire

plasmids, and since the only way to get Adam is the Little Sisters, the player is faced with a moral choice. Early on in the game the player is given the means to 'save' the Little Sisters that they find by Dr. Tennenbaum. For doing so the player is given a small amount of Adam and the child is no longer a hunted inhuman monster. Occasionally, the player will also be given gifts by Dr. Tennenbaum for abiding her request and helping her save the little girls. The player has a second option, however, that allows them to 'harvest' the Little Sister, draining it of all Adam, earning the player a larger and immediate reward, but killing the child in the process. This added element of 'moral choice' to the game play is one of Bioshock's strongest and most memorable features. The player is forced to decide for themselves whether to save the girls and possibly face their own death, or to kill the girls and give themselves the edge to survive. Depending on the players choices, they are given a different ending to the game. In the ending where the player saves all the girls, he is shown returning to the surface with them and happily living out the rest of their lives. In the ending where all or most of the girls are harvested and killed, the player becomes a monster himself and a nuclear submarine investigating the plane crash is hijacked by Splicers. The multiple endings give meaning to the moral choice option, since while players can survive easier by harvesting the girls, the ending they achieve is essentially a bad one. If a player chooses to do the right thing and save the girls, the resulting ending is much more difficult to attain, but also much happier and thus rewarding.

Unsuccessful Element

The moral choice element of Bioshock centering around the Little Sisters is an excellent way to add depth to game play, however, the multiple endings which the choice can render are very limited. The ending can either be very positive, or completely negative, there is no in between, no room for redemption. Until the player is rescued by Dr. Tennenbaum and sees the sanctuary she has created for the Little Sisters, perhaps they do not realize the depth of harm they had been doing by harvesting the them for their Adam. If part way through the game the player realizes the error of his ways and

continues on saving every Little Sister they see, they are still going to get the negative ending. If a wider variety of endings were available, perhaps taking different trends of player action into account, greater significance could be attributed to the choice surrounding the Little Sisters, and a higher replay value would be achieved.

Highlight

When Jack finally manages to break through Andrew Ryan's security to confront him face to face, only to discover the truth about his identity, it is one of the strongest and most powerful moments in Bioshock. Control is taken away from the player as Ryan demonstrates the depth of the mental controls placed on Jack. When Ryan casually places his golf club in Jack's hands and asks him if he would kindly beat him to death with it, it shows how little free will Jack has truly had thus far throughout the game. In flashback sequences, Jack realizes that Atlas has been controlling him with this phrase the entire game, and all his actions must be reevaluated, except his one free choice of how to treat the Little Sisters.

Critical Reception

Bioshock holds a place as one of the most critically acclaimed games of the current console generation. It received perfect 10 out of 10 scores from Electronic Gaming Monthly, Eurogamer, and Game Informer. At the website Game Rankings, which compiles several reviews and produces an average, Bioshock holds a score of 95.4% for the Xbox360 and a 95.2% for the PC, making it the 3rd highest rated game on both platforms. In many reviews, the game is complemented for its powerful plot, atmosphere, and game play. Bioshock was also the recipient of multiple Game of the Year awards in 2007, and was named Game of the Show for E3 2007 by influential gaming websites such as GameSpot and IGN.

Lessons

- 1) Bringing up the subject of morality in games can be a useful tool to create narrative depth. The

choices Jack has to make surrounding the Little Sisters really help to define what kind of person Jack is and how things turn out for him once he has achieved independence and defeated Fontaine. Without this choice, Jack would just be a tool, only ever doing as he was told, and the game would not have contained the narrative power that it did.

- 2) Free will, and what it means to have free will, are concepts that need to be explored in games in new ways. So many games follow strictly linear story lines, and miss out on the narrative opportunities offered by giving the player real choices and moral quandaries. In Bioshock, the choice of what to do about the Little Sisters is a central theme to the game and adds a lot of depth by allowing the character to better define who Jack is and what he is like.
- 3) Multiple Endings are a good way to both give meaning to the choices made by players throughout the game and to increase replay value. Bioshock used this element to an extent, but failed to add enough endings to give a variety of meanings. Games in the future need to evaluate players and choose endings based on a variety of game play trends and situations. Doing so will lead to a more personal and immersive narrative experience.

Summation

Bioshock is a shining example of how games should be made. It has a few flaws, but the narrative is strong and compelling, the characters are complex, and most importantly, the game is fun to play. Bioshock integrates elements of morality into the narrative and allows the player to define for themselves what kind of person Jack will be. As Jack progresses through Rapture and learns who he really is, the player is drawn into the game. The level of immersion Bioshock achieves with its excellent story and chilling atmosphere makes the moral choice more meaningful. The world of Rapture is a beautiful and dangerous place, a paradise destroyed from within.