

BioShock

Believe the hype, this undersea action-adventure is the best game so far this year

I've played thousands of games since I stomped my first Koopa in Super Mario Brothers—way back in 1986.

WARNING:
This review contains spoilers!

Since then, I've played text games, 2D adventures, first-person shooters, simulations of every sort, strategy games, and role-playing games. I even played a "cyberpunk thriller" once. Of all the games I've played in the last 21 years, none has evoked such powerful emotions as BioShock.

Not one of those other games made me feel compassion for a character. I enjoyed having Alyx along in Half-Life 2, but I wasn't concerned about her safety because I knew she was never in danger. I wasn't excited about her accomplishments because she was nothing more than a well-animated prop to me. Come to think of it, characters in games rarely feel like more than 3D automatons.

None of those other games presented me with truly painful choices. Sure, there were choices to be made: Should I turn left or right at the intersection? Should I equip a sword or a bow? Should I complete an easy quest or a difficult one? Even when a game presented an ethical dilemma, the choices were usually black and white.

I've played dozens of "story-driven" titles in which the story was obviously tacked on during the final moments of development. Usually, the plot is some variation of "defeat the monster, escape from this maze, and then save the girl." Even the most satisfying game stories are as shallow as a dime-store serial novel.

BioShock tells a generic story: Kill the bad guy, escape from the dystopia. In that

regard, it's just like countless games I've played before. But unlike those other games, BioShock's story is rife with subtext—objectivist philosophy is obviously the underpinning for Rapture, the game's underwater setting, but the game is also injected with parables illustrating the dangers of hubris and science unchecked by a code of ethics.

The choice in BioShock is terrifying—do you kill a little girl to get a material reward or do you let her live and settle for a lesser reward? To make the choice more difficult, you're presented with conflicting advice from conflicting archetypes. A friend encourages you to kill the girls; an enemy tells you to save them. Choosing to kill the children has absolutely no gameplay impact—but you don't discover that until you kill the little girl. You have to make the conscious decision to kill an innocent child.

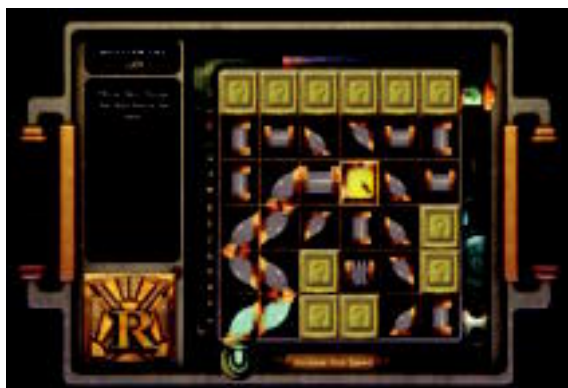
Of course, if I didn't feel empathy for the characters, killing the little girls would be an easy decision. But, by introducing you to the victims' families via audio diaries and in-game events, as well as a constant stream of one-way audio communications from every living character in the game, BioShock left me with a deeper feeling of investment in its characters—from Andrew Ryan to the character you play, to the bit players who show up for mere moments—than any game I've



Big Daddies provide the game's most challenging battles, requiring you to use your plasmids and ammo wisely.



Foolish splicers lounge about in standing water—leaving them vulnerable to your electro-shock plasmid.



Arguably the worst part of BioShock is the Pipe Dream-esque minigame, which is tedious and boring.

played in the last decade.

Completing BioShock isn't about the ending—the final battle and three endings are the weakest parts of the game—but about the journey along the way. I can say without reservation that this journey is far superior to any other I've ever taken.

—WILL SMITH

BIOSHOCK

+ LITTLE STAR
Amazing setting under the sea, rich subtext, and outstanding character development.

- BIG DADDY
Final battle seems misplaced. Game falters in final moments.

10

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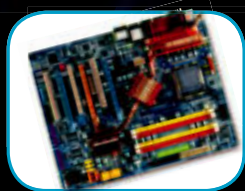
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