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DGD 511 – History of Games
We 6:15-8:50PM
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Game Review 1: *The Binding of Isaac*

Relentless. That's a word that can be used to both describe the game and how you'll have to be in order for you to enjoy it. Designed by independent game designers Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl, *The Binding of Isaac* is unlike any other game you'll play. Released in September 2011, it's described as "a randomly generated action RPG shooter with heavy Rogue-like elements." The game also clearly pays homage to *The Legend of Zelda*, as the game takes place entirely in top-down dungeon rooms.

Many games make the claim that you never play the same game twice – in *Isaac*, you couldn't if you tried. Everything is random, from the dungeon layouts, to the enemies you encounter, to the items you find. For that reason, the game can be extremely difficult or extremely easy and everything in between – and it can change on a whim. In one game you may be having a rough go of it and then suddenly find an amazing item that makes your life so much easier. In the next game you may have an amazing run with some of the best items in the game and then suddenly find yourself in a room full of the toughest enemies rushing right at you.

The game mechanics are simple. WASD moves your character up, left, down, and right, respectively. To shoot, you can either use your mouse or the arrow keys on your keyboard. I prefer the latter because the game has a natural dual-stick shooter feel to it. In addition, tears (bullets) only travel up, down, left, and right, not diagonally (except for the rare item, Mom's Knife, which you probably won't even unlock until 50+ hours into the game), so the keyboard

keys are perfectly suited to that. That being said, the game also follows the general laws of momentum, so you *are* able to shoot diagonally by moving your character perpendicular to the direction you're shooting. In addition to your general movement and shooting, you can press E or SHIFT to place a bomb at your feet if you have any in your inventory, SPACE to use a rechargeable item you may acquire during your journey, and Q to use a one-time use tarot card or pill item you may find. P pauses the game.

So you may have noticed that I referred to bullets as tears. That's right, your weapon is your tears...and if you think that sounds weird, that's just the beginning. The game is filled with memes, poop, biblical references, poop, and shout-outs to other gaming icons, and more poop. Most of it is somewhat related to the story, though you don't need to know the story to play the game, which in my opinion is one of the many beauties of the game. If you do want to know why you're running around killing creatures and eventually your mom, well then I hope you're not super religious and/or get offended easily. If this wasn't an indie game sold online only, I'm sure there would be some uproar about the game's subject matter, which may be viewed as blasphemous. Luckily, indie games don't often fall under the same scrutiny as say, a big budget game like *Grand Theft Auto*.

In the Hebrew Bible, the "Binding of Isaac" refers to the story in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and Abraham proceeds to bind his son and place him on an altar. In *The Binding of Isaac*, Isaac is a young child drawing pictures and playing with toys while his mother (presumably a single mother, as we never see mention of a father) watches Christian broadcasts on her television all day. Then one day, Isaac's mother hears the voice of God telling her that her

son is corrupted with sin and needs to be saved. This voice tells her to remove all that is evil from Isaac, so she takes away his toys, pictures, handheld video game console, and even his clothes. But that wasn't enough, and the voice tells Isaac's mother to cut him off from all that is evil in the world, so she locks him in his room. Still not enough, the voice returns and tells Isaac's mother she has done well, but questions her devotion, asking her to sacrifice her son. She then picks up a kitchen knife and walks to Isaac's room. Isaac sees this through a crack in his door and panics. That's when he finds a trapdoor and climbs through it. And so begins *The Binding of Isaac* – you play as naked Isaac (though you can unlock other characters along the way), and you travel through various chapters, starting with the Basement, until you get to face off against Mom, if you survive that long. If you don't want to watch the intro movie, you can simply press SPACE to skip it, as you can do for all cutscenes in the game

Survival isn't easy. You will die...a lot. And true to the Rogue-like nature of the game, death is permanent (though there are two items that provide extra lives – one rare and one that just plain sucks). You probably won't beat the game on your first try. Probably not on your second or third either. In fact, it may take a few hours before you do – hell, maybe even twenty. Yes, the game is that tough, but it gets easier over time. For one, you'll start to learn the strengths and weaknesses of each enemy, but more importantly, you'll unlock newer (often better) items along the way that stay unlocked in subsequent games. Replayability is high in *Isaac* – you *need* to replay it to progress in the game, and you'll *want* to do so, especially if you want to unlock the eleven different endings. Achievements (52, to be exact) will also drive you to replay the game, as will wanting to acquire all 132 different items (a stat that is tracked alongside Deaths and Mom Kills). Oh, and one of those items is only unlocked after you've died 100 times. Games can be as

quick as a few minutes if you have horrible luck (or are just horrible at the game) to as long as an hour if you're having a good run, leaving no room unturned, and spending some time at the slot machine, skull game, and/or blood donation machine. You cannot save a game to resume playing at a later time, but what you've unlocked is saved unless you decide to clear your data.

The visuals are just a step above 8-bit, but they're compelling nonetheless. Everything is hand-drawn by McMillen and there is certainly a level of great detail to be appreciated here, if you can get past the disturbing nature of most of it. The design and animations for the enemies are great, but the real star is Isaac himself – or rather what Isaac can become. Practically every item you pick up alters our look and/or your tears. You may find a beating heart hanging from your chin, a battery, dead bird, or rock jammed into your skull, horns, wings, and a variety of other cosmetic changes, all indicating something you have acquired along the way. Your tears may turn into blood tears, transparent tears that can pass through rocks, or you pick up an item that makes you pee instead, or throw bombs, or wield a knife. The possibilities and combinations are endless. By the time you face off against Mom, you'll most likely look nothing like you former self – and that's awesome. There are also several "familiars" you can acquire – items/helpers that follow the player, shooting or dropping items. Or maybe you'll have something orbiting around you, like a fly, a cube of meat, or a guardian angel. There are items taken from McMillen's previous games, like a Meat Boy, Dr. Fetus, or Little Gish. There are items that pay homage to other gaming icons, like Bomberman, Nintendo Gameboy, and even Steam (Valve's distribution platform where the game is sold). Then there are pills that are a one-time use item that provides a random negative or positive effect, where there is one pill that does nothing more than change your appearance to resemble a foaming-at-the-mouth drug addict. The amount of detail and thought

put into the game is truly amazing. Oh, and did I forget to mention this game was designed entirely in Flash? Yep, no fancy game engine here.

The audio of the game is nothing spectacular, but does fit well and never gets annoying. My favorite bit of audio is probably hearing Mom scream "Isaac!" during your fight with her, which sounds creepy and really gives the impression of her being possessed. The cool thing for me about the audio is that it is totally unnecessary to play and enjoy the game. Often times I won't even bother putting my headset on while playing *Isaac* and I don't feel like I'm really missing out. Some enemies do have audio cues, but there are so many visual cues in the game as well, that hearing isn't necessary to survival. I'm always a fan of games where the audio can add to the experience, yet it doesn't detract from it if you decide to listen to something else, like maybe your own music collection.

It should be noted that the game isn't without its issues. Though they seem to be a minority, there are quite a few people that report performance issues, particularly stuttering when there is too much happening on the screen at one time. That doesn't mean you'll have any though, as I haven't experienced any myself. Being a Flash game, it probably relies heavily on your CPU and RAM rather than your GPU, so maybe my quad-core system helps in that department, but I had no issues on my laptop either. However, the game did lock up on me once. I was fighting one of the later bosses called Scolex and was killed, which would normally bring up a "game over" screen and allow you to exit back to the main menu. The screen never showed up and Scolex kept jumping at my dead body, where I had a meat cube circling me, along with a dead bird. Eventually the dead bird and meat cube wound up killing Scolex, but still nothing happened. The

animations of the cube and dead bird kept playing and I could actually hit P on my keyboard, which subsequently paused the animations, yet still didn't bring up any screen to quit to the main menu. My only option was to forcibly, manually close out the game. From what I've read, this is actually a common problem if one happens to die to Scolex. It's not a huge deal, but keep in mind that if the game doesn't properly close, it may not save, and thus if you happened to unlock any items during that run prior to it locking up, those items may not actually be unlocked in subsequent playthroughs. The other major issue with the game isn't actually a bug, but rather a byproduct of the nature of the game – its randomness can put you in unwinnable situations. I'm not talking about acquiring bad items, but rather, there are certain room designs where you will take damage 99% of the time, most likely right away, because there's no room to escape. Flying abilities help in most situations, but those are some of the rarest items in the game, so when you enter a room filled with Chargers and impassable pits to both sides of the door, unless you've charged up a Brimstone shot prior to entering the room (or pull off a lucky freeze with Mom's Contacts), you *will* get hit. It's moments like that that can lead to frustration, where you feel it's the game's fault for your demise rather than your own. Those times are rare, but they do occur, and when they do, just take a deep breath and try again. Because it *will* get better, over time; over lots and lots of time.

Now you may have noticed I haven't mentioned the price yet. Hold on to your seat – *The Binding of Isaac* can be had for the exorbitant price of...\$4.99! No, that is not a typo, so hold off on that Subway sandwich today and go grab *Isaac*, you won't regret it. I've already put roughly 75 hours into the game and still haven't unlocked everything, though I did happen to finally unlock the eleventh and final ending while in the middle of writing this review. For a single-player game,

that is remarkable and something unheard of outside open-world RPGs like *Skyrim*. And even if you happen to unlock everything and somehow grow bored of the game, an expansion is on the way, entitled *The Wrath of the Lamb*.

Wrath will up the item count from 132 to 205, add a new item type called "Trinkets", and introduce five new chapters, new room types, new enemies, new bosses, and even a new character. The five new chapters are being referred to by McMillen as "alternate" chapters – in each game, you will randomly happen upon one of the new chapters or one of the old chapters each time you descend. McMillen mentioned one named the Cellar, which will be an alternate chapter for the Basement. So in one playthrough, you may encounter Cellar I followed by Basement II, then in the next, Cellar I and Cellar II, and maybe in the next Basement I and Cellar II, and finally the usual Basement I and Basement II. McMillen stated he decided to make them alternate chapters instead of tacking new ones on at the end of the current ones because he doesn't want games to last more than an hour thirty. It's an interesting way to do things, but one that fits perfectly with the rest of the game – randomness upon randomness. The only choice players will have is at the end, where one can decide to fight Satan or to descend further to an even more difficult dungeon. The decision may be impacted by how you think your current build can hold up, but it will also be influenced by the fact that beating certain sections of the game with certain characters will unlock different things, just as it is now.

Whether you go out and buy the game now or wait for a package deal with the upcoming expansion is up to you, but it is certainly a game everyone should check out, especially at such a meager price. It's certainly not a game for everyone, but it may just surprise you.