

Spring 5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Tina Duong. "Inside the Mind of McMillen" *ART 108: Introduction to Games Studies* (2017).

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Inside the Mind of McMillen

“A game not necessarily made for the players, but rather for the developers themselves. The players just go along with it and as a result love it” –Josh Johnson, Indie Game Developer

Indie games are created by a small team of developers with very little funding. Over the last couple of years, Indie Gaming has exploded in popularity and revolutionized the constructs of mainstream gaming. *The Binding of Isaac* introduced gameplay and story elements that many mainstream games before would never touch.

McMillen’s games are a direct reflection of McMillen himself. *The Binding of Isaac* was based on his childhood fears, inspirations and influences. These range from spiders, to bloody monsters to even biblical icons and symbols and to internet memes and pop culture references. Growing up, McMillen didn’t draw typical subjects such as family, animals, or cartoons. He would often draw monsters that would be manifested from his fears. For example, he would draw himself with a monster inside of him clawing its way out. And on the other side of the spectrum he would draw himself in space and explain how space was his friend, and how he himself was space. As stated by McMillen himself, if he’s not pushing boundaries, he’ll just get bored and thus, won’t be creative. From horror, and psychological subjects to subjects of comfort and loneliness these themes are very apparent in *The Binding of Isaac*.

The Binding of Isaac took many risks in gameplay, design and especially story. The main character, Isaac lives in a home with his overly religious mother. One day his mother hears (supposedly God) telling her to strip Isaac of his clothes and lock him in his room. Later, “God” tells her to kill her son, and she attempts to with a knife. Suddenly, a Bible fell from a bookshelf above and knocks her out. Isaac then runs away by jumping into the basement where he must use his tears to fight with a variety of monsters. These monster range from religious icons such as the Lamb and Satan, to goofy ones like the poop monster (Dingle) and even Isaac himself. The biblical story this game references, depicts God telling a lowly farmer, Abraham to kill his own son, Isaac in order to prove his loyalty. Just as Abraham attempted to do so, he was interrupted by an angel. Most games wouldn’t dare touch religion, or at least would paint it in such bad light in a typical nuclear household (most games would make it seem like a sort of large group or mafia). In response to an interviewer asking about possible controversy, McMillen answers, “The only people that would be upset with this game, do not play video games. Period.” This is basically the only glimpse of story being told to you about the premise of Isaac. Everything else has to be pieced together through subtle hints of storytelling, so subtle that each individual playthrough can be considered a story of its own.

Rougelike games are defined as a dungeon crawling role playing games with randomly generated levels, including items and enemies. The game is most notably known for its permanent character death. With a variety of items and enemies Isaac can run into, it is possible to create a story of the current Isaac the player is playing. Whenever the player gains an item, Isaac would change in appearance. With the option of randomly generated items among its hundreds, on top of random bosses as well, each play of Isaac is a different experience and story

to the other. Players have the option of piecing together what happened during a certain playthrough to create a unique story. Of course, this is all up to the player, if the player just wants to experience the mechanics without the story, Isaac doesn't force feed the story to the player. Most of the things are up for interpretation. Up until this very day, theories of Isaac's story would accumulate in the thriving gaming community. The game leaves just enough ambiguity while at the same time, not forcing players to sit through the story. It creates such a unique environment with over the top circumstances and references to pop culture and the Bible, that it's almost impossible for a player not to be invested in it. It would have tidbits of story, that the player can pick up if they were looking for it. Of course, the story isn't the only thing to Isaac, the mechanics and how the game design is structured can pull in any hardcore gamer.

The player explores a labyrinth and goes room to room to fight the monsters within. These monsters must be defeated to open doors to proceed further into the game. This structure was inspired by the ever popular "Legend of Zelda" series and can immediately relate to many gamers. The player can maneuver through attacks and rooms with pixel perfect movement, and attacks can range from small, slow balls into a chaotic mess that would cover the whole area with little room for mistakes. Additionally, McMillen throws the player into the world of Isaac with little to no tutorial, purely using trial and error to learn. In this way, McMillen respects the players by assuming that they have the ability to grow and become smarter about the game. This is quite like the very popular series of Dark Souls. Only masochists can play this game, but most gamers are masochists anyway, so this feels right at home. Despite these unique qualities of the game that no one would ever dare venture before, McMillen has managed to combine all of them into a cohesive, engaging and amazing video game. The Isaac community isn't just full of

hardcore gamers, but just people who have used the internet a lot (probably 90s kids) as most of its references date throughout the past two decades.

Most of the dialogue and items in the game are direct references to pop culture. Ranging from games like Legend of Zelda to memes that have been on the internet for a very long time. In contrast to its dark, brooding subject and art style, these references feel oddly enough to fit right in and add so much to the Isaac experience. The feeling of understanding a reference right away makes the player feel welcome and acknowledges their other interests, thus making them connect with the game more. Isaac himself has become a meme as well. On the infamous “Twitch chat” his face is the replacement for a crying emote and is one of the most used icons.

Isaac’s face is very recognizable even among people that haven’t played the game. The artstyle is simple, yet can also be very complex and gruesome. It creates a perfect blend of adorable to disturbing. Isaac himself is the simplest and cutest aspect of the game, closely resembling to a chubby stick figure. He is in complete contrast to the overly bloody and detailed monsters around him. Additionally, the overall color palette is very dull and dark with Isaac probably being the most saturate pink flesh color against the desaturated browns, reds and blacks. On the other hand, the monsters are very grotesque and detailed; most of them range from disturbingly cute to just plain creepy and gross. Examples of these would be Larry Jr., a centipede-like monster with similar traits to the adorable Isaac. However, he attacks by surrounding you in poop and crashing into you. On the other hand, would be Mega Satan, where he resembles a demonic goat with red glowing eyes. As you battle him, his skin practically falls off and reveals his skeleton underneath. You can feel that this game is very specific and personal

to McMillen, and through social media he encourages the love for the game creating it into something even bigger than any game can achieve now.

McMillen is very active on twitter. He would constantly retweet fanart, engage with the community, promote fan made mods, and most of all, would add in suggestions from the community into the game. Already, this is a concept that is very rare, and mainly appears in indie games. Most companies would just create a game, and would make a new one based on the first game's reviews without streamlining consistent community feedback. However, McMillen would always consider the fanbase when creating new content for *The Binding of Isaac*. At first, McMillen made the game for himself, with one other person but over time it was him and a whole community that loves his initial idea. Now he's happily taking in new feedback, and constantly engaging with his audience in order to craft a new Isaac, one that the whole community has taken a part of. *The Binding of Isaac* is a game crafted through love and a community rather than a company or a team of workers. Who knew Isaac would come this far, despite McMillen's worries of even creating a game like this.

At first, even for McMillen, he thought this game was too weird to even sell. He even considered making it free just for people to even try it. However, no one would have guessed that the game would sell a record breaking 450,000 copies once it came out. Initially, McMillen was widely known for his first hit, *Meatboy* but now he is known for *The Binding of Isaac*. Recently, *The Binding of Isaac* was even published by Nintendo, one of the biggest gaming companies to this day on both the new 3ds and the Nintendo Switch. Of course, this wasn't easy as Nintendo's intended audience is geared more towards family friendly content. McMillen tried to publish through Nintendo but was rejected due to "controversial religious context". Thus, the game was

published instead through Sony and Microsoft. However, the community pulled through, and many representatives of Nintendo who loved the game, pushed for the game to be published on the Nintendo 3DS. Fortunately, it was successful and Nintendo gave way to publishing the game onto their consoles. Later, they were met with porting issues, and instead released it for the new Nintendo 3ds and the Nintendo Switch. Not only is the game popular enough to sell on major gaming consoles, it has been releasing DLCs that have generated more sales for Isaac than ever.

So far, Isaac started off as a game suited for Newgrounds, but was later remade with upped graphics and cleaner mechanics with Rebirth, and then created two new DLCs, Afterbirth, and Afterbirth+. Afterbirth introduced hundreds of new items, new level designs, a multitude of bosses, new characters to play, and a whole new mode named “Greed Mode”. The DLC was predicted to have added on at least one hundred extra hours of gameplay (which we all know is a lie, because people on average play Isaac for about five hundred hours on Rebirth already) This DLC was widely celebrated and was the result of many inputs from the fan base, making Isaac the indie game crafted by the many. Unfortunately, the newer expansion, Afterbirth+ wasn’t as great compared to its predecessor, and it produced a lot of mixed reviews. The expectation from Rebirth and Afterbirth was much too high, and a lot of the fanbase felt that Afterbirth+ didn’t reach it despite being the same price as Afterbirth. Even though it wasn’t needed, McMillen took the feedback to heart, and is continuously adding new content to the DLC in order to meet his fan’s expectations.

The *Binding of Isaac* is about the world inside the mind of Isaac, McMillen, and even the person playing. McMillen states that he doesn’t make the game for the players but rather for himself, making the game as genuine as possible. It’s a bit ironic that even though its for himself

it relates to many people. When McMillen describes his games, he gets so emotional and determined to feed the kid in him and thus he relates to all of us gamers. He not only accomplishes what game developers aspires to do, he also accomplishes what a writer, artist, and even just a human being aspires to do. As quoted by McMillen, “I know there is a kid out there that stayed up all night playing this, I made an impact in someone’s life. It feels cool, really cool.”

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