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Bioshock creates a unique immersive experience. The way it constructs a story, the way it allows players to customize their avatar, the way it creates a fictionally coherent space: all these things make *Bioshock* more than a mere genre exercise. It's interesting to examine how *Bioshock* does all these things, yet few can probably explain *why* it does them. Understanding *Bioshock's* design influences is the key to a more meaningful analysis.

The first hint of *Bioshock's* legacy is right in the title. According to *Bioshock's* creators at Irrational Games¹, *Bioshock* is the spiritual successor to *System Shock 2*. Yet *System Shock 2* did not originate all the conventions *Bioshock* employs. Nor did the original *System Shock*. To truly understand where *Bioshock* comes from one has to go all the way back to *System Shock's* predecessor, *Ultima Underworld*, released by Looking Glass Studios². Though Looking Glass made games using the first person perspective during the same time period as *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*, *Quake* and *Half-Life* it never made games that could accurately be called first-person shooters. Looking Glass had its own trajectory of first-person game design independent from first-person shooters. Their games experimented with story, character, and immersion in ways first-person shooters did not. *Bioshock* would not be the game it is without Looking Glass's innovations.

Lost Utopia

Bioshock's entire premise centers on the concept of Rapture, the lost underwater city founded by mad industrialist Andrew Ryan. Rapture's location, ideology, and history form the foundation upon which *Bioshock* builds all its logic. It explains why the city corridors are deserted (civil war), why they are filled with genetically altered maniacs (unregulated capitalism), and why players cannot escape by simply walking outside (underwater city.) The concept of a utopia gone wrong is a framing device, a way to make the player's solitary journey through a treacherous world coherent. One can trace *Bioshock's* use of this device back to *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock*.

Ultima Underworld was an off-shoot of the popular fantasy role-playing franchise *Ultima* by Origin Systems. It offered players the experience of exploring a mysterious dungeon, The Stygian Abyss, with nothing but their wits, tools, and magic to save them. But *Underworld* was no mere hack n' slash dungeon crawl. The Stygian Abyss was not a pit of mindless monsters but a lost colony of moral idealists whose civilization had fallen apart. *System Shock* was a cyberpunk-themed variation on *Ultima Underworld* made with the same engine. Instead of being trapped in a ruined dungeon the player was trapped in a ruined space station called Citadel. The player was pitted against SHODAN, Citadel's onboard A.I., which had gone rogue and

overthrown her human masters in a bloody fit of genocide. In both cases, as in *Bioshock*, the concept of an existing social order coming undone, often because of the hubris of its founders, became central to the logic of the story, the world, and the gameplay.

Physical Augmentation

Bioshock offers players the ability to enhance their avatar through plasmids, the genetic consumer products available throughout Rapture. Players can gain a number of abilities via plasmids, ranging from pyrokinesis to invisibility. The player can upgrade these abilities at upgrade stations, making them more powerful or longer lasting. *Bioshock's* upgrade system is finely incremental, offering frequent yet small boosts in ability. Though they involve no on-screen numbers, *Bioshock's* plasmid upgrades strongly resemble an RPG stat system. This can be most directly traced back to *Bioshock's* immediate predecessor, *System Shock 2*, though it really goes back to *Ultima Underworld*.

Ultima Underworld borrowed the traditional RPG character enhancement system from Origin's *Ultima* games. On-screen numbers governed attributes like speed, strength, and fencing ability. Increasing these numbers increased abilities. *System Shock* did away with numerical stats, arguably for the sake of maximizing immersion (Starr, 1994). Instead it featured computer hardware upgrades which the player's avatar, a hacker, could "install" via cybernetics. Ability gain was not incremental but instant. *System Shock 2*, however, returned to a traditional numerical system like *Ultima Underworld's*. *System Shock 2* was a joint project between Looking Glass and the newly created Irrational Games. Irrational had a slightly different design philosophy than Looking Glass, which fostered a return to abstract RPG conventions. Irrational extended this trend into *Bioshock*, which kept an incremental upgrade system but disguised it to greater immersive effect.³

NPC Interaction

Bioshock features no conversation system. Rapture's citizens are mindless horrors who attack on sight, and those who are not mindless are dead. While this does not make *Bioshock* much of a social experience, it does create a sense of immediacy. All the player's interactions are physical, primal acts of survival. They are therefore believable. There is no clunky dialog system to navigate, no sense that your avatar said something that wasn't quite what you intended. There is also no chance of friendly A.I. misunderstanding a request or failing to be helpful at exactly the wrong moment. A world full of madness and death is one in which all people behave as expected: violently or not at all.

This is the most significant area in which *Bioshock* borrows from Looking Glass. It represents a line of thought spanning several of Looking Glass's first-person games, beginning with *System Shock*. *System Shock* was not just a spiritual successor to *Ultima Underworld*. It was a purpose-driven revision of *Underworld's* experimental design. Released in 1992, *Underworld* was the first game to use smooth-scrolling, textured graphics complete with lighting effects and physics. It thus revolutionized the

first-person 3D game with new levels of immersion. However, one area it did not innovate in was non-player character interaction. *Underworld's* NPC interaction paradigm came directly from mainstream RPG's. It involved choosing pre-written responses from a list. This "canned dialog" approach was an abstract convention that sat uneasily in contrast to *Underworld's* innovative sense of immediacy. Frustrated with the limitations of traditional conversation mechanics, *System Shock's* design team chose to forgo NPC's altogether (Spector, 1999). This is why everyone on Citadel Station is either dead or turned into blood-crazed cyborgs. This solution worked so well Irrational adopted it verbatim in *System Shock 2* and again in *Bioshock*.

Audio Drama

Bioshock features a collective diegetic narrator. Rapture is not only littered with dead people, but dead people who were kind enough to record their own demise. The player constantly encounters small devices which contain audio recordings illuminating how and why Rapture degenerated into chaos. These recordings feature a colorful cast of characters and can be listened to during play, making *Bioshock* into somewhat of a macabre radio drama. Along with the everyday citizens of Rapture, the player is taunted by Andrew Ryan... who isn't dead, but remains unseen and out of reach. *Bioshock* tells a complex human story by making dialog strictly mediated, ensuring nothing distracts from the immediacy of the experience. This convention is lifted directly from *System Shock*.

Released in 1994, *System Shock* was a very early CD game. This may explain why its use of sound was so experimental. Most early CD games subjected players to endless scenes of spoken dialog, but *System Shock* let players move around while they listened to other characters speak. This worked only because everyone on Citadel was dead and had dropped their personal audio recorders. Playing detective by piecing together the story of Citadel's downfall via these recordings was one of the prime pleasures of *System Shock* (Starr, 1994). And then there was the overpowering presence of SHODAN, her voice taunting the player at every turn. SHODAN was such a huge part of *System Shock* Irrational concocted an elaborate explanation for her return in *System Shock 2*, a game which also featured haunted corridors rife with audio recordings. The developers at Irrational clearly felt this audio-based storytelling scheme was a defining element of *System Shock* and a feature that no proper successor, spiritual or otherwise, should be without.

Future Shock

Bioshock is not an isolated artifact but the latest of a particular strain of first-person game design. It exists as part of an ongoing dialog with other games of similar design⁴ stretching back to the first days of Looking Glass Studios. However, *Bioshock* should not be mistaken for a direct extension of Looking Glass's design philosophy. It is a variation, a mutation, of what began with *Ultima Underworld*. Looking Glass eventually evolved beyond the dead world concept with *Thief: The Dark Project*, one of the first stealth games. *Thief* still avoided NPC interaction, though in a different way than *System Shock* had. Players were forced to lurk, listen,

and sneak rather than engage with people directly. Instead of a living being in *System Shock's* world of ghosts, *Thief* players were ghosts haunting a world filled with life.

Critics and audiences have hailed *Bioshock* as an innovative game, yet it's interesting how *Bioshock* religiously follows a narrative formula Looking Glass continued to revise. *Bioshock's* achievement consists of incorporating this effective formula into a game that is instantly recognized as a first-person shooter, something none of Looking Glass's games were. *Bioshock* thus contains within its DNA an extremely important era of videogame history, ensuring its lessons will continue and (hopefully) evolve in the age of first-person shooter blockbusters.

Games cited

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Doom (1993): Developer: id Software. Publisher: id Software.

Half-Life (1998): Developer: Valve. Publisher: Sierra On-Line.

Quake (1996): Developer: id Software. Publisher: id Software.

System Shock (1994): Developer: Looking Glass Studios. Publishers: Electronic Arts, Origin Systems.

System Shock 2 (1999): Developers: Irrational Games, Looking Glass Studios. Publisher: Electronic Arts.

Thief: The Dark Project (1998): Developer: Looking Glass Studios. Publisher: Eidos Interactive.

Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (1992): Developer: Blue Sky Productions. Publisher: Origin Systems.

Wolfenstein 3D (1992): Developer: id Software. Publisher: Apogee Software.

References

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Starr, Daniel (1994). [An interview with Looking Glass Technologies](#). Gamebytes.

Notes

¹ Irrational Games was renamed to 2K Boston immediately before *Bioshock's* release. For the purposes of this piece, I refer to the makers of *Bioshock* as Irrational Games.

- ² Looking Glass Studios was actually called Blue Sky Productions at the time it released *Ultima Underworld*. The name was changed after a merger with Lerner Research in 1992. For the purposes of this piece, I refer to the makers of *Ultima Underworld* as Looking Glass Studios.
- ³ One could argue that System Shock's upgrade system is not radically different from Bioshock's since they both forgo numerical stats in favor of "implants." However, I think a close look at Bioshock will reveal a much higher level of incremental creep in its character enhancement system. System Shock's implants functioned like tools with discrete uses, whereas Bioshock's implants usually offer small improvements to existing abilities.
- ⁴ Many games that are part of this dialogue are not discussed in this piece. *Deus Ex* by Ion Storm and *Arx Fatalis* by Arcane Studios are a few prime examples.