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"Train a Scribe" card from *Lost & Found*, illustration by Annie Wong and Mimi Ace

Special Issue

# **Jewish Gamevironments**

edited by

Owen Gottlieb

## Issue 07 (2017)

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# Defeat Mom Using the Bible. The Controversial Debate in *The Binding of Isaac*

Isabell Gloria Brendel

### Abstract

Review of the video game *The Binding of Isaac* concerning the controversial debate this game caused among the gamers.

**Keywords:** *The Binding of Isaac*, controversial debate, religious subject, gameenvironments

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### Introduction

The creation of a good video game is not only a creative process. The financial aspects are important as well. A well-known publisher guarantees an elaborate marketing for the upcoming game, ensuring that a great range of potential customers can be reached. However, most of the big publishers refuse to release games with controversial and sensitive subjects, as for instance abuse, bullying, nudity or religion. But besides publisher-supported games, there is another category of video game: The independent video game. Independent video games or "indie" games for the developers provide freedom to make a game of their choices. With crowd-funding campaigns or a stable financial community support some of these games made the jump out of being lesser known to popular.

One of the recent popular indie games is *The Binding of Isaac*. First released on 28th September 2011 on Steam, the game got great review scores and built its own community. In the years following 2011, the game got some expansions and new versions, which added more items, characters, enemies, levels and endings to *The Binding of Isaac*. After releasing the DLC *Wrath of the Lamb*, McMillen decided to redo his game, and in 2014 *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* was released. This upgraded game got two DLC's: *Afterbirth* and *Afterbirth+*. *The Binding of Isaac* and *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* sold over 5 million copies worldwide (Working 2015). With *The Binding of Isaac* Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl created a rouge-like 2D-action-adventure game, which is not only one of the better known indie games but a good example for showing how an underlying religious tone during the prolog and game play can upset both publishers and gamers, as well.

### **The Controversial Debate – McMillen’s Idea**

The game features many religious inspired references throughout the game play, regarding e.g. the plot and many of the characters and items. Obviously, the game’s name is the same as the well-known Jewish respectively Biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac in Gen 22, 1-19<sup>1</sup>. According to this narrative, God calls on Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. However, in the very last moment, God restrains Abraham from scarifying Isaac, and Abraham slaughters a ram instead. In the game’s version of this story, Isaac’s mother hears “a voice from above”, which she refers to as “my lord”. This voice tells her that Isaac is exposed to sin and needs to be saved. Subsequently, his mother takes all of her son’s belongings from him and locks him in his room. However, the mysterious voice gets back to her, now demanding her to sacrifice Isaac in order to proof her love and devotion for the lord. Isaac’s mother is obedient once again and tries to murder her own son. However, before she can harm him,

Isaac escapes through a trapdoor into the basement. That is the point where the gamer takes control over Isaac and the actual game begins. During the game the gamer can unlock thirteen other avatars besides Isaac, e.g. Judas, Cain and Lilith, and can make use of items like God's Flesh, the Holy Light, 'Jacob's Ladder' or even the Bible itself to defeat Isaac's Mom and Satan.

The plot along with the titling of most avatars and items evoke various views among the gamers and cause many forum contributions and online articles regarding the game's religious message. The creative motivations of McMillen should be kept in mind when trying to understand the game's concept. During an interview, he states that

"[N]othing in the game is really anti-Christian. It can be taken as that, but it really isn't, a lot of the stuff in the game is by the book, literally. I think it's more of a conversation about religion more so than me saying Christianity is bad. It's more like "Hey, let's talk about religion, let's think about it. I'm gonna throw some things out there, give you some context here and there, and let you figure out how you feel about what I might or might not be talking about." It's not this literal slap in the face to Christianity in any way. The majority of what I'm drawing on is my experience with Catholicism, the pros and cons, I guess. It [is] honestly me having a conversation with myself about how I felt about religion growing up, and that's how it came out." (McMillen 2012)

According to McMillen, *The Binding of Isaac* is a creative way to process his childhood experiences and to open a dialogue with the gamers about religion at the same time. But, the game's release was obstructed precisely because of the religious basic theme.

## Publisher and Authorities

Unlike originally planned, *The Binding of Isaac* did not get its porting for Nintendo's handheld device, the New Nintendo 3DS. As McMillen communicated via Twitter, the game was blocked due to its questionable religious content. Only the remake made its way to the New 3DS. Furthermore, *The Binding of Isaac: Afterbirth+* has been released on Nintendo Switch, the company's newest console. Nevertheless, Nintendo's initial resistance was not the only difficulty. The authority responsible for rating video games in Germany, the Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (Entertainment Software Self-Regulation), classified the game sixteen years and above. According to their official explanation, the game contains a tendentious blasphemous message, and possibly may result in troubling children below than sixteen years (Kauz 2012). The assessment of the ESRB, the American and Canadian counterpart to the USK, was an M rating.

## The Gamers

Whereas the USK has a clear position regarding the religious main theme, the attitude among the gamers is very diverse. Their opinions range from describing the game as entertaining to play to explicitly warning about it.

On commonsense.org, children and parents can rate and review games. Some of the parent's reviews took up the religious tone of the game and described it from their point of view. For example, for a parent of a nine and a thirteen year old explains that *The Binding of Isaac* "may be offensive to the religious, but other than that I wouldn't avoid it for the themes" (galena, 2015). Another voice commends on the educational side of the game because it taught about the Bible (Soccermom87, 2015).





the mother of Isaac hears with God's, too, otherwise he would not cite Proverbs.

For the most part, the further discussion affiliates Joe Blow's refusing approach. Only one other forum member expresses intercession for the game but at the same time emphasizes that he or she does not defend the game. The user kussarojam (now banned from the forum) enumerates some "positive" points, e.g. the basement from which Isaac escapes could be a reminiscence of hell, or Isaac has to fight Satan and not God. That is not the only affirmative position to *The Binding of Isaac*. In an online article, Arthur Chu, a "former fundamentalist Christian", avows for McMillen's and Himsl's game. In his opinion

"(t)he tone and content of the game captures the feeling of being a little kid raised in a conservative religious household [...]It's one of the purest forms of using game play to convey an emotional experience I've encountered in years."  
(Chu 2015)

Thus, Chu's point of view is the opposite of Joe Blow's. He plays the game because of the relieving experience which the "shocking, gross, ugly, distasteful and arguably gratuitous" (Chu 2015) content of *The Binding of Isaac* can give to him, in regards to his Christian upbringing. When considering Chu's statements why *The Binding of Isaac* is so special, his statements come close to McMillen's original game concept idea of making a video game in order to come to terms with a Christian childhood.

## Conclusion

On the one hand, there are gamers who refuse playing this game because of its possibly blasphemous content. On the other hand, there are gamers who value *The Binding of Isaac* precisely because of its unique story setting, or who do not care

much about the religious references.

*The Binding of Isaac* is an indie game on which opinions may be divided. Of course, it is not the first game using religious motives for creating a narrative and it is not the first game initiating a discussion about religion in video games. The baptism scene in *BioShock: Infinite* or the religious references in the *Final-Fantasy*-franchise have initiated discussions among gamers, as well. However, in the end McMillen’s basic idea that the game would make an impact and trigger discussions about religion was fulfilled.

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<sup>i</sup> Alongside Genesis' narrative, the game uses full-organized verses from 28 biblical books and one from the Apocrypha in total.