



Game Overview

"The Binding of Isaac: Repentance" is a DLC expansion to "The Binding of Isaac", a roguelike video game designed and released by Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl, independent developers, in 2011.

Theme

The game's plot is based upon dark biblical themes, resulting in an experience characterised by splatter, gore, horror, and distasteful elements.

A core component of the product's theme is the perspective on the game's topics, which is that of a child, i.e. Isaac, the title's main character. This point of view can be deduced from the game's cutscenes, as well as from the objects and characters that the protagonist will encounter on his "journey", which will bear names and descriptions like those a child might give.

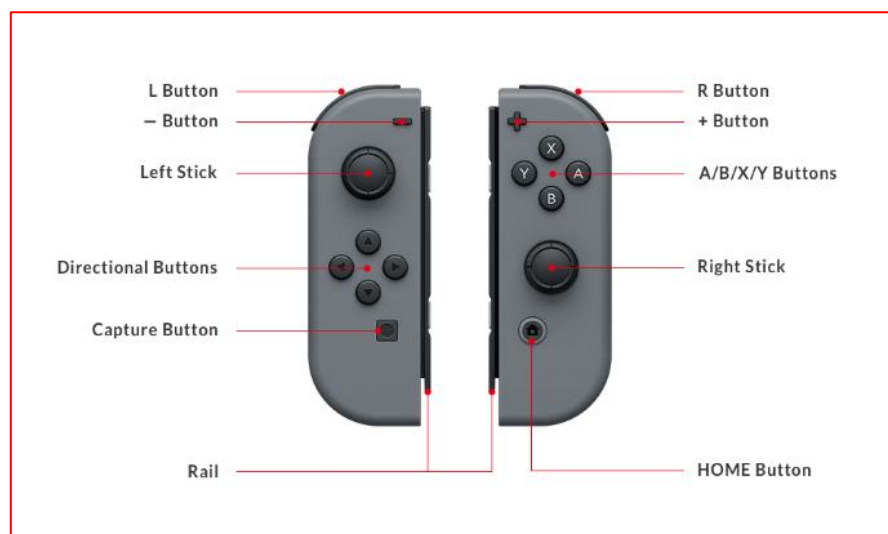


In game item example - source: The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth Wiki

Distribution

Starting from the edition “The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth”, the game has been expanded and polished in its graphic assets, also enabling the porting on other systems beyond PC, such as PlayStation, Xbox One, and Nintendo Switch.

The analysis contained in this document refers to the Nintendo Switch version of the game. This element will be useful when analysing the understandability and functionality of the menu, which depends on the game’s version and distribution system.



Nintendo Switch Control Scheme - source: Nintendo Support

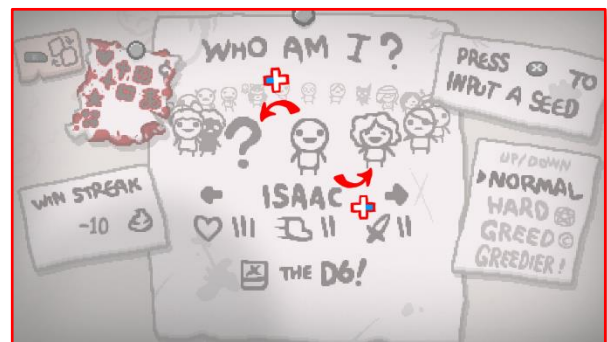
Analysis



Title Screen - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

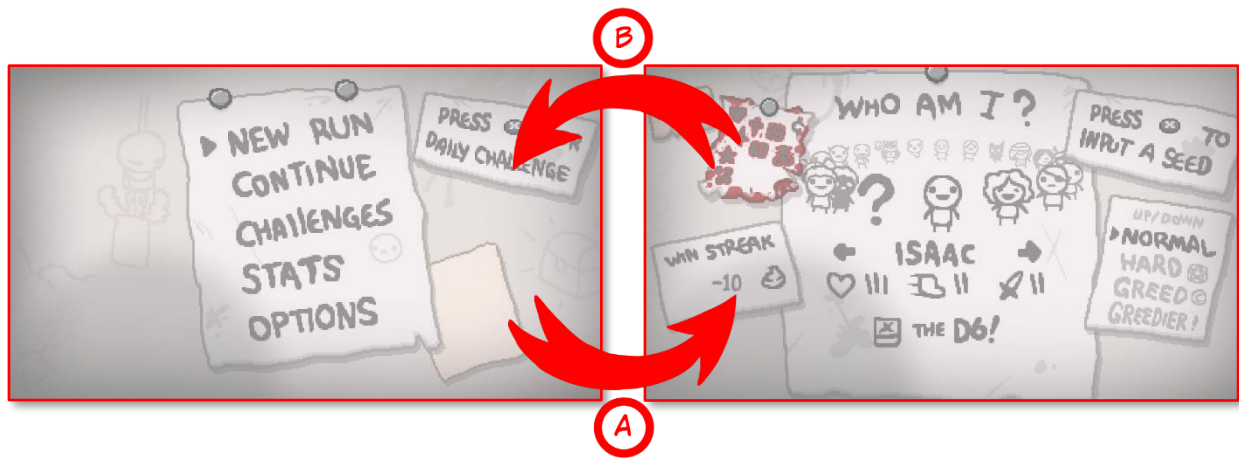
Functionality

From a functional perspective, the menu of "The Binding of Isaac: Repentance" is composed by eight main pages. The player navigates between the options of each page by pressing directional buttons.



Menu Functionality examples - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

By pressing the A and B buttons on their console, players can access to more internal or external menu pages depending on the menu entry in which they have positioned after navigating to it with directional buttons.



Menu Navigation examples - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

The example depicted in the image shows how the player can navigate from the main menu window to the character selection section by pressing the A button when the cursor is positioned on the “New Run” menu item. By pressing the B button, instead, the player can navigate in the opposite direction, from the character selection section to the main menu screen.

The sections that can be reached starting from the main menu screen (pressing the A button on the specific item) are "New Game", "Challenge", "Stats" and "Options". Exceptions to this are the “Continue” and “Daily Challenge” items, as the former has the functionality to take the player immediately into the main game (when a game is pending), while the latter leads to another internal menu through the pression of the X button, unlike the other main entries.

The only accessible menu items the player can interact with by pressing the X button are the “Daily Challenge” and the “Seed Selection” features (insertion of a code to generate specific rather than random gameplay at the start of the game) within the “Character Selection” menu.



X Button Menu Functionality examples - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

Understandability

From an understandability point of view, the menu system of “The Binding of Isaac: Repentance” bases most of its functional aspects on standards inherited from other games on the market or on the mapping between input and function that the user can deduce instinctively.

The very fact that pressing the A button results in a confirmation or active selection of what is shown on the screen is standard in Nintendo games, similarly, as pressing the B button is now associated by most players with the cancellation of an action or a logical reversal of a process, such as navigating from one menu page to another.

The use of directional buttons for navigation is an example of the use of natural mapping that users are instinctively driven to perform. Pressing the top directional button generates a shift upwards, just as pressing the right directional button generates a shift to the right. The latter concept is also reinforced in Nintendo hardware devices: directional buttons bear icons representing arrows pointing in the corresponding direction.

To let players understand their cursor's position in the menu, a triangle arrow points to the menu item selected by them, representing the player position within the menu. Thanks to this feature players understand what functionality can be accessed by pressing the A button in each moment.

To enhance the comprehensibility of the menu, the buttons required to interact with certain functionalities are explicitly indicated to the player the first time these functionalities arise respect to the menu flow, as is the case of the title screen and the already described “Daily Challenge” menu.



Explicit input buttons declarations - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

The differentiation in the input button required to access the “Daily Challenge” entry rather than the “Challenges” one is a flaw in the game's

menu system in terms of understandability. Players might find themselves confused not only by the similarity of the two features (a collection of all the challenges in the game on one hand and a separate specific challenge on the other), but also by the contrast that exists between accessing the "Daily Challenge" menu item versus all the others (pressing the X button in the first case and pressing the A button in the others).

Shifting the attention on the "Character Selection" section, an understandability issue is the amount of information, drawings, and text that the menu can potentially contain, risking therefore to overwhelm players. The box on the left of the page, for instance, shows the main achievements of the player with the selected character, but without a clarification of the meaning of the icons shown. In the top corner on the same side the player is prompted to press the R button to switch to a different set of playable characters. In the top right corner of the screen the player can interact with the seed input feature, while the playable characters, all visible and arranged in a circle in the centre of the screen, are described below their representative image with details such as name, statistics, and possessed items.



Character Selection Screen - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

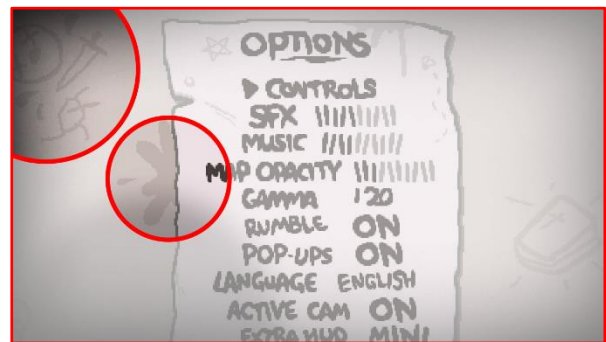
A positive design choice, however, consists in the fact that the information, although numerous and disordered in its arrangement on the screen, is not all present from the first start of the game, but rather appears and expands as the player's experience on the title progresses.

This feature is reflected in an optimisation of the understandability of the menu, as the player is given time to understand and metabolise information, mechanics, and interactions with on-screen elements. In the case of achievements, for example, players can associate new appeared icons to their progress in the game, understanding the interface and its evolution in time.

Theme

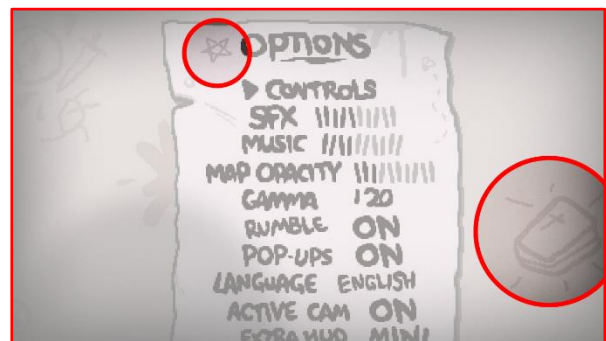
Thematically, the menu of “The Binding of Isaac: Repentance” is in line with what the game itself conveys, reinforcing the splatter and biblical undertones of the game's plot as well as the player's impersonation of the protagonist Isaac.

Elements such as flies, blood stains, knives, and depictions of gory scenes are used to highlight the dark tones of the game's theme.



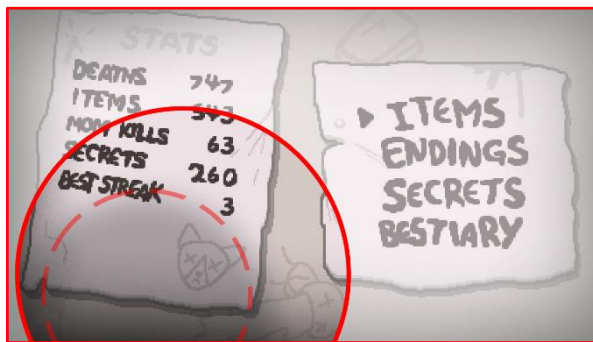
Splatter/Horror/Distasteful Thematic Elements - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

Crosses and other religious symbols, such as the bible drawings or the angel in the pictures below, are used to recall the biblical and religious themes of the plot.



Religious Thematic Elements - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced

In addition to the childlike drawings that decorate the entire menu, reinforcing the childlike perspective of the game's protagonist, each screen that makes up the system has a strong thematic identity within the game. Each interacting window and option are part of a collection of posters inside Isaac's bedroom or more likely in Isaac's wardrobe. To reinforce this thematic concept, also thanks to the affinity of the setting with the various scenes shown in the cutscenes, the representation of each menu screen is that of a sheet of paper hanging on a wall, written and decorated as if by a child. Even within the game menu, therefore, players are invited to perceive themselves in Isaac's shoes, whose very shadow, like as it is that of the player, is visible projected on every menu page.



Isaac's appearance and menu shadow - source: screenshot of the game, self-produced and pngwing.com

Conclusions

The menu of “The Binding of Isaac: Repentance” presents a deep system of options and functionalities.

Despite the understandability of the menu is based on standards of the contemporary video game market, players may struggle to comprehend the meaning of some elements displayed on the screen, as well as some menu sections that may result overwhelming for users because of the number of interactive functionalities available.

The menu has a strong thematic overtone, aligned with the main themes of the game and its plot, with biblical, violent, and distasteful nuances.