

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Bioshock*

(Game Developer: Take 2 Interactive) Rated 18s  
Multi-Platform - Game reviewed on the Xbox 360

So there you are, on a plane trip home, gazing at a picture of your proud parents, when suddenly the engines splutter, then fail, and the plane crashes into the ocean. By pure chance you survive, spluttering up through the seawater and dodging detritus, burning fuel and the bodies of your fellow passengers. Glancing around, you notice a stone monolith rising from the sea and swim towards it. Shivering with the cold, you climb up a broad set of steps and into the entrance only to discover a

large room with a bathysphere – a kind of miniature submarine – sitting below a large, tattered banner with the word “Welcome” written on it. Now, any sane person would sit down in the room, maybe try and light a fire and wait for help, but not Jack the character whose persona you adopt at the beginning of *Bioshock*. As Jack, the player enters the bathysphere and starts the journey to Rapture, an underwater city built by industrialist Andrew Ryan in an attempt to create a utopia which facilitates unfettered expression in art, music, engineering and science. About 15 seconds after you arrive in Rapture (after a visually stunning journey), you begin to realise that naturally, something has gone very badly wrong. It could be the destruction wrought on the entrance chamber, or the voice coming across the radio telling you that you’ve made a terrible mistake. Or, and more likely, it’s the woman crawling on the roof who has hooks instead of hands...

This is the opening to *Bioshock*, one of the few horror genre games to be released on a next gen console: in this case, Microsoft’s XBOX 360, which is pushed to the very limit of its processing power in order to produce the stunning graphics on display in the game. Indeed, following a few minutes of Full Motion Video (FMV), the game seamlessly gives control of the character to the player, a changeover executed so smoothly that many first time players may only realise gradually that they’ve actually been in control of the character for the last few minutes. The merging of FMV into gameplay graphics flawlessly has been a Mecca for many development teams and this is one of the few instances where it works beautifully.

Plot wise, *Bioshock* is ahead of the pack in comparison to many other First Person Shooters (FPS). Most other games in the genre rely on limited, predictable plots which serve the graphics and the players desire to shoot things more than the story itself (such as the *Timesplitters* series and *Black*, a game that deliberately went out of its way to eschew plot, instead relying on high end graphics and gameplay to sell it). Throughout *Bioshock* however the player is encouraged to explore his or her surroundings and to find out how and why the great experiment that was Rapture failed, a tactic which leaves one feeling particularly engaged with the overall story. There are also several major plot twists that will leave you feeling genuinely surprised. The back-story of Rapture is introduced incrementally, with hints of murder, bribery and genocide played out via radio messages and by means of recorded diaries made by Non Playable Characters (NPC’s) (in a similar way to *Doom 3*’s use of PDA’s to advance the plot).

When you first arrive in the city you’re guided by helpful Irish man named Atlas (whose characterisation represents some of the best voice acting seen in a game to date). Atlas, the leader of a resistance group within Rapture, is desperately trying to get his wife and child out of the city and away from the control of

insane industrialist Ryan. Ryan has somehow seized control of the city by deploying his so-called ‘Splicers’, residents of the city driven insane following their continuous use of genetic enhancements known as Plasmids. It’s these enhancements that form a major part of the gameplay, with the player able to pick and choose Plasmids with which to augment themselves, from enhanced strength for melee combat to firing wasps out of your forearm (yes, really, and it’s the most fun you’ll ever have with Wasps, trust me...). These enhancements are unlocked through the injection of ADAM, a genetic material extracted from corpses and then injected into living tissue, with alterations to genes allowing the growth of enhancements. ADAM is gathered by the Little Sisters, young girls who carry large needles to extract blood from dead bodies, and who then drink it in order to extracting the ADAM (nasty, eh?). The Little Sisters are valued commodities within the world of *Bioshock* with splicers and resistance members hunting and killing them to extract the ADAM to enhance their abilities. The Little Sisters, however, are not without their defences. These take the form of ‘Big Daddies’, lumbering monsters (dressed in a divers suit’s and carrying rivet guns) that attack ferociously whenever a Little Sister is attacked. The Big Daddies are some of the most formidable enemies you will encounter during the game and when they occasionally appear in pairs it’s time to start worrying.

One of the major plot arcs within the game (and one which seeks to elevate the cultural idea of videogames) is the moral choice placed in front of the player regarding the Little Sisters. In order to progress through the game, you need to extract ADAM from them. There are a number of Little Sisters within each section of the game, each one guarded by a Big Daddy. Once you successfully kill her protection, the player is given the choice of either killing the Little Sister for a large amount of ADAM or free her from the parasite that gives her the ability to generate the ADAM and receive a much smaller amount for greater rewards later in the game. No matter which one you choose, the player must grapple with a struggling Little Sister who repeatedly cries ‘No!’ as you either extract the parasite or kill her, either option being vaguely disturbing. The architects of these choices are Atlas (who encourages you to kill the Little Sisters, citing that they’re no longer human and as such it’s ok) and Dr. Tennenbaum (who created the Little Sisters from girls abandoned in an Orphanage on Rapture and who now wants to give them back their lives).

Graphically, *Bioshock* is stunning, with the water effects in particular far beyond anything previously seen. The Art Deco look of Rapture also adds a wonderful feel to proceedings, with the fact that the game world is so fully and realistically imagined adding much to the overall experience. However, some criticisms can be made. The game itself is remarkably easy, largely because the player hardly ever dies, a result of the large number of health packs and EVE (a substance which allows you to use Plasmids) scattered across the levels (for example, when playing the end of game boss I had 8 health packs and 4 EVE injections left *after* I had beaten it. For those of you who don’t know the game, this is a lot!). If you do get killed, the character is soon respawned in a handy resurrection chamber. These are generally just a few hundred metres away from you at any one time and take much of the challenge out of the game. When you die you know you don’t have to reload a level and fight those same pernicky bad guys, maybe having to change your attacks to finally make your way through. In *Bioshock* you could die for every bad guy you kill and still complete the game in a few days (but it would be very annoying...). In addition, there is no feeling of achievement in having unlocked or found additional Plasmids with the splicers that regularly attack you never changing in appearance or in the number of bullets or wasps needed to kill them. This lack of change in character models or attacks does leave the player feeling that they have made little progress in the game). Attempts are made to enhance the life of the game such as a

using a research camera to unlock enemy weaknesses. This doesn't really work, as you can still work your way steadily through the levels with or without it and as the camera is not an essential part of the game it is easily forgotten. More could have been done with the player's enhanced powers, especially ones such as telekinesis (whose use is remarkable similar to that of the gravity gun in *Half Life 2*). Nor is *Bioshock* particularly frightening: whilst it does have an occasional creepy moment, the excess of ammunition, health and EVE means that the player never feels particularly threatened or apprehensive. The game is also let down by a lack of replay value. Whilst it does have multiple endings and large game areas to explore, the linear nature of the plot and the lack of any multiplayer modes do let the game down. Generally though, *Bioshock* is in most respects an excellent game with its few minor flaws doing little to affect the player's enjoyment.

### ***Eoin Murphy***

*Bioshock:*

Graphics: 10

Sound: 10

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 6

Average Score: 8.5

### *The Darkness*

(Developer: Take 2 Interactive) rated 18s  
Multi-Platform – reviewed on the Xbox 360

21st birthdays are great. You get a big party, all your friends are invited, there's lots of food and drink and all kinds of craziness ensues! Such as: a botched attempt to extort money which results in your mob boss Uncle hunting you down for revenge, at which point you discover you are possessed by an inherited Demon called 'The Darkness' that makes tentacles grow out of your back and little monster things attack your enemies, all the while trying to steal your soul. All in all it's not the best way to celebrate your birthday...

*The Darkness* is based on the Top Cow comic of the same name by Marc Silvestri, Garth Ennis (of *Judge Dredd* and *Preacher* fame) and David Wohl. In the game you play Jackie Estacado, an orphan adopted from St. Mary's Orphanage at the tender age of 12 by his mob-connected uncle Paulie, who, rather than shower him with affection, trains him to be a contract killer for the family. However, unbeknownst to Jackie, his great-great-grandfather made a deal with a Demon during World War 1 in order to save his own life with the inevitable caveat that when one of his descendants hits the grand old age of 21 'The Darkness' will take possession of him and use him to unleash evil onto the world. This turns out to be poor old Jackie, who luckily manifests the Demon when he needs it most. The only bright spark in Jackie's life is his girlfriend, Jenny, who is also his only friend from the orphanage (you should see what happens to the rest of them...). Add to the mix corrupt cops, a Chicago crime family and Darklings (the aforementioned Monster things that attack your enemies) armed with mini guns and chainsaws and you've got *The Darkness* in a nutshell.

The game is a first person shooter, which opens with a sequence involving a high speed car chase through a tunnel. This works really well as a beginning, dropping the player straight into the action as the unfortunate Jackie is sent out to kill a construction yard foreman who's also been running a rival drug pushing operation. The player has two main offensive styles in the game. The first is the standard FPS method of arming yourself to the teeth. With dual wielded handguns (with the left trigger equating to your left hand and the right trigger to your right hand) and Uzi's, shotguns and machine guns all available, Jackie is well fit and able to defend himself. Within the first hour of gameplay, Jackie begins to manifest 'The Darkness' opening up a number of demon inspired attacks, including summoning Darklings, demonic guns and being able to generate blackholes. 'The Darkness' itself is activated by a button tap resulting in twin demon heads on tentacles leering over your shoulders. The demon heads can be used for a number of purposes including stealth attacks (including eating gangsters faces), opening doors and devouring killed enemies hearts to unlock further demon powers. The Demon heads are strangely good fun, especially when they occasionally bicker over which one gets to eat one of Jackie's victim's hearts. When the tentacles are activated, they gain Darkness powers by remaining in the shadows. If you stray into the light too much you'll hear a sizzling sound and the tentacles start to get agitated. Leave it to long to shoot out a light or get under cover and the tentacles will retract and take longer to regenerate.

As well as the more linear main storyline, Jackie can undertake side missions, unlocked by talking to Non-playable characters. This unlocks additional content and serves to break up the main story line adding a bit more depth to the game and the character of Jackie. The side missions are also quite varied:

they include being dared by an old woman to pick coins off a railway track before getting hit by a train to stopping a local hood from harassing a man who plays the harmonica in the subway.

One of the highlights of the game lies is summoning Darklings to attack your enemies for you. The Darklings come in four types, and each type has their own distinct personality. The berserkers for instance carry out melee attacks and also have a tendency to urinate on their victims...Whilst not overly intelligent and occasionally difficult to direct to targets, the Darklings are fun to use and also serve as easily replaceable cannon fodder which takes the heat off Jackie for a while. Other nice touches include the use of a pager to pass on information and keep in contact with both friend and foe alike and the fact that Jackie can use pay phones to unlock additional content.

The graphics in *The Darkness* are top notch, if not quite up to the same level as those in games like *Bioshock* or *Mass Effect*. Facial models are still of high enough quality that when the Demon heads growing out of your back eat someone's face your character actually grimaces slightly – a nice touch. Voice acting is also quite good although after awhile the rather exaggerated Italian American accents (especially of those of the senior citizens) do grate somewhat.

*The Darkness* is a good, solid action game that does exactly as it says on the tin. It's entertaining and whilst it probably won't win any awards and has little to offer in the way of innovation (after all, it is now becoming standard practice in FPS games to add additional powers to the main character, as also seen in *Far Cry*, *Quake 4*, *Bioshock*, etc) *The Darkness* has the excuse of deriving this plot point from the long running comic-book series on which it is based. This is an enthralling game with an interesting plot that really makes you want to experience what happens next. Horror elements are at its core of the game and whilst the game play itself is seldom overtly frightening there are definitely movements that will have you wincing in sympathy with Jackie's plight.

### ***Eoin Murphy***

*The Darkness:*

Graphics: 8

Gameplay: 7

Sound: 8

Replay Value: 7

Average Score: 7.5

***Hack/Slash – First Cut***

Writer: Tim Seeley

Pencils: Stefano Caselli

Colourist: Sunder Raj

(Devil's Due Publishing 2007)

What do Camp Crystal Lake, Elm Street and Haddonfield have in common? Good cheese? Excellent schools? A fully stocked knife shop? If you'd answered monstrous serial killers who just can't be stopped no matter what you hit, stab or shot them with then you'd be right!

Serial slashers have been a part of the movie industry for decades, harking back to the original slasher film *Black Christmas* (released in 1974, four years before *Halloween*) which saw a group of sorority girls taunted over the phone and then hunted down and killed. It was movies of this much-maligned subgenre which first introduced the idea of 'The Final Girl', the last survivor of a slasher attack who heroically sees off the monster only (generally) to die in the opening sequence of the sequel in order to start off a whole new series of murders.

Films such as *Scream* have taken this trend and revamped it, with the Final Girl taking an even more active role in the hunt for the slasher, regularly fighting back and making sure that the serial killer who's tried to eviscerate her for the last hour and a half really is dead and won't have wandered off after having been run over by a combine harvester.

*Hack/Slash* takes this idea a step forward and has Slasher attack victim and quintessential final girl Cassie Hack actively hunt down Slashers before they can reap massive body counts. She does this with the help of her partner Vlad (who could pass for a Slasher himself and acts as the muscle.)

Cassie was a quiet child at school who got teased because her mother was the lunch lady. Her mother, rather than reassure the girl and meet with her teachers to work out a solution, decided instead that the best course of action was to kill the kids involved and cook them for dinner. Unsurprisingly, the school wasn't pleased and contacted the police, at which point Mrs. Hack put her head in a pot of boiling soup and drowned herself.

Now, unsurprisingly even more unpopular, Cassie soon found herself having to fight her own undead mother who had returned to finish what she started. Suffice to say Cassie found herself feeling a tad guilty and after a while decided that she had to hunt down and stop Slashers before they can really raise the body count

*Hack/Slash* begins with an excellent concept: what happens when a Final Girl decides to pre-emptively fight back? Unfortunately, the execution of the idea is a lot less effective, relying largely on the depiction of partial nudity and on over the top scenarios. The first story in this collection involves an undead, mentally disabled vet's assistant who can bring pets back from the dead and use them to attack those that betrayed and murdered him. Aside from the moral implications of having someone who is mentally disabled as your first villain, using undead pets isn't exactly terrifying. For a start, any cat that's been buried under the ground for six months isn't going to be in much condition to attack a fully grown

human. Even if it did manage to crawl its way into the house the worst thing it could do would be get your clothes slightly sticky and smelling unpleasant (something most cats can do when they're alive...).

The comic also spends a lot of time focused in on the partial nudity of its female cast. Whilst this is a long standing tradition within Slasher films, it feels wrong in the comic book context, with the writers and artists seeming to focus on titillation rather than creating a strong and innovative story, something which is needed not only to sell issues but to keep the reader interested. There are only so many partially dressed women you can look at before you start to get bored. With the inherent flexibility of the genre, a lot more could have been done with both the story lines and in subverting genre clichés, instead of relying on the depiction of sexy schoolgirls and improbable deaths.

The tongue in cheek approach employed by *Hack/Slash* is most effective in the final story of the collection, which features cameos from other comic writers, including Steven Niles who wrote *30 Days of Night* (the film version of which was released in November 2007) and Robert Kirkman (the writer of *The Walking Dead*, reviewed in Issue 1 of the *Irish Journal of Horror and Gothic Studies*.) Each one of the cameoed writers and artists is butchered at a convention by a comics obsessed slasher (who has something in common with Kuato from *Total Recall*).

*Hack/Slash* feels like a concept that could have made an interesting contribution to the horror comic genre by taking the final girl concept to the next stage of its evolution, but instead, its light hearted approach to Slasher films reads more like that used in hackneyed and unimaginative films like *Jason X* rather than that seen in classics like *Halloween* (the John Carpenter version not the awful Rob Zombie version). It leaves the reader (at least this one) feeling drained and just a tad disappointed.

If you're after a light hearted read with plenty of half-naked females on display, try *Hack/Slash*, but if you want more depth from a horror comic try reading something genuinely challenging and thought-provoking like Alan Moore's *From Hell* (which also has plenty of nudity and all the Freemasons you could shake a stick at!) instead.

**RICO RAMIREZ (Buenos Aires Correspondent)**

## *Doomed*

IDW Publishing, 2007

Artists: Various

Based upon stories by Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, David J. Schow and F. Paul Wilson

*Doomed* is a modern-day attempt to emulate the pleasures and the terrors of 1950s horror comics such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Shock Suspense Stories* (a wonderful collected edition of the latter was released by Gemstone publishing last year: I highly recommend it). Created by artist Ashley Wood and editorial director Ted Adams, *Doomed* the comic book debuted last year and this collected edition reprints the first four issues. Fittingly, many of the best stories in the anthology are adaptations of tales by Robert Bloch and Richard Matheson, two of the 1950s finest and most influential horror fiction practitioners. Because Bloch and Matheson wrote most of their short stories of the period for the then thriving magazine market, their tales tend to be slick, tightly plotted, and sharply punctuated by suitably ironic, gruesome, or chilling conclusions. At their finest, such tales are like the horror equivalent of a triple espresso, and, happily, their recent adaptations in the *Doomed* comics tend to be handled with style and aplomb: little has been lost in translation. The starkly atmospheric black and white artwork which illustrates each adaptation suits the mood and the timbre of the source texts much more closely than more obviously gruesome colour artwork would have done.

The collection kicks off in fine style with the excellent “Blood Son” – based upon Matheson’s story of the same name – which is about a disturbed young boy who believes that he is a vampire. It’s an interesting companion piece to Matheson’s most famous vampire story, the classic novel *I Am Legend* (1954), and the adaptation here by Chris Ryall and Ashley Wood captures the spirit of the original text perfectly. Each issue of the comic book features one tale each by Matheson, Bloch, Schow and Wilson, and of the more modern authors, Wilson’s work generally comes off best here. Still perhaps best known for his novel *The Keep* and the famously dodgy Michael Mann film adaptation of the same name, Wilson has for several decades been writing short stories as good as anything the genre has to offer – tales such as “Soft”, “Buckets” and in particular, “Foet” come to mind – and it’s good to see his work getting some much deserve exposure here. Wilson has an ability to simultaneously evoke both pity and revulsion which is showcased to great effect here in the story “Faces”, which is about a horrifically deformed and terribly lonely mutant woman who commits brutal acts of murder, and is in many ways reminiscent of Matheson’s 1953 classic “Born of Man and Woman”. Wilson’s original story haunted me long after I read it at an impressionable age, and whilst Rufus Dayglo’s artwork here isn’t quite as horribly evocative as the images Wilson’s prose conjured up (how could it be?), it’s nevertheless a pretty good effort. Another standout Wilson adaptation here is the gory “Pelts” which has also recently been adapted for the small screen as a Dario Argento-directed instalment of the “Masters of Horror” television series.

Spatterpunk pioneer David J. Schow’s work also provides the basis for four of the stories here, and these are probably the weakest in the collection, perhaps because Schow’s slyly self-referential and often densely humorous source stories are a lot less linear and more self-indulgent than those of the other authors featured, and therefore rather more difficult to approximate in comic book form. Still, “Visitation”, adapted by Ivan Brandon and Andy MacDonald, is a solid, atmospheric little tale, even if ultimately a tad predictable.

The adaptations of Matheson which stand out most in the *Doomed* series, and in particular “Legion of Plotters”, his brilliant tale of a man so insanely irritated by the petty annoyances caused by people around him that he comes to believe that it is all part of a vast conspiracy designed to drive him mad. As someone who has a particular loathing of people who loudly eat vast tubs of popcorn in the cinema, or who incessantly sniff whilst on the bus, I can empathise. The ironic final words of Matheson’s original – “No motive found for wild attack” remain as grimly amusing here as they were half a century ago. “Children of Noah”, which also ends on a grim note, is another effective adaptation.

Robert Bloch was generally a somewhat less accomplished writer than Matheson, despite his vast output, and his characteristic fondness for weak puns is seen here in the Alfred Hitchcock presents-style tales “Fat Chance” and “Ego Trip”, both of which conclude with rather obviously ironic reversals of fortune. Nevertheless, one of his better stories does provide the basis for what is probably the most chilling tale of the collection, “Final Performance”, which concludes with a memorably devastating revelation, greatly helped by Chris Ryall’s stylised, shadowy artwork.

Ultimately then, this is a compelling, immensely readable collection – a real treat both for those already familiar with the authors and the stories featured, and a fitting introduction for those who are not. *Doomed* inevitably makes one think of other writers whose work would be suitable for comic book treatment: I for one would love to see the same accomplished team tackle stories by the likes of Dennis Etchinson, Shirley Jackson and Ray Bradbury, for instance. Roll on volume two!

***Kelly Grant***