Bioshock Infinite: Solid, but no Revolution

By Nick Vollmer

By now, you've probably read or at least glanced at an article that raved about Bioshock Infinite. It's been out for a week, and the web has been buzzing with positive reviews for this latest offering by game designer Ken Levine. Nearly every review I've read has been singing the praises of the game's story, political messages, setting, and gameplay. So it might come as a surprise to you when I say that Bioshock Infinite didn't win me over. In fact, after a single play through on hard mode, I was severely disappointed, and after playing through one more time to catch anything I might have missed, my opinion of the game only lowered. There are many things about the game that are truly awesome, but there are too many ways in which I felt this game was lacking to give it the near perfect scores that many reviewers have. In the end, I give Bioshock Infinite an 8 out of 10 which to me means that it's a solid (though not flawless) game and fun, but nothing revolutionary.

Let's start with the things that Infinite did right. First and foremost, the level design is outstanding. Every area in the game feels uniquely designed and offers a way to complete it that is different than any other part of the game. The city is gorgeous, there are never any issues with draw-distance, and there is more to look at than there ever was in the original Bioshock. Irrational Games did an outstanding job of building levels that are both fun to look at and stand out from anything you've ever seen in a shooter before. There are several moments in the game where the story bored me, but the level design alone kept me enthralled. More than just looks though, the areas are *useful*. Any given battle required that I figure out how to effectively use cover and position myself to best use my chosen abilities against my foes.

And the powers are surprisingly well-balanced. In many games (including the original Bioshock), I find myself relying primarily on just a couple of powers after experimenting with new abilities just enough to decide on my favorites. In Infinite, not only are all of the powers useful to some degree in almost every situation, but I found myself strategically changing which ones I was using to suit each circumstance. Even more impressive though was the fact that the powers work great together, and their combined usefulness can be further increased by the gear I equipped. I loved lifting enemies into the air and blasting them off edges, or swarming them with burning crows. Large amounts of effort was clearly put into this part of the design and it shows.

Elizabeth is also a great feat of programming. For the first time in a game, I was rarely upset with my companion, and she was useful more often than not. At least in hard mode, she becomes a new system for refilling life and magic that allows the flow of battle to continue without having to search around mid-fight. Another way to look at her would be like having an extra special ability that triggers randomly and sometimes saves you in a fight. Through using her, Irrational manages to extend battles while still keeping up the tension through uncertainty over whether or not you will survive. Elizabeth is also rarely repetitive and usually has interesting things to say.

I also have to say that this game is just fun. I enjoyed playing it and looked forward to each new segment. It also kept me thinking and gave me something to talk to friends about which is never a bad thing.

These things make Bioshock Infinite a solid game and would have earned it a nine if some of its flaws hadn't bothered me so much.

So let's move on to where the game falls short and the things that in my opinion keep it from being anything truly special. First, the materials that Elizabeth can summon into battles annoyed me far more than they helped. These are things like extra cover, ammo, and turrets. More often than not, I didn't need to summon these things and I preferred to use the awesome powers I already had. The design decision to show what you can summon as a shimmering mass that was often in the middle of the battlefield didn't work for me. These things were distracting and prevented me from aiming through them at my enemies. Unfortunately, enemies didn't have this same problem and could shoot me while I couldn't even see them. It seems like it would have been simple enough to add a button press that told the game I didn't want these things and got the shimmering mass out of the way. Or maybe they could have made the visual for them more transparent and thus allow players to shoot through. Either way, it was annoying as hell whenever I didn't want to summon something in. Luckily, there are enough places where it isn't an issue to keep the game fun, and they can be neat additions when you do want them.

My next complaint is a series of little things that made no sense to me in a game with such a long development cycle. These pulled me out of the immersion of the game world, and in a game with such brilliantly designed levels, this was nothing short of a crime.

First little thing: when enemies die, you often get health or magic replenishment items off of them like coffee, cake, or pineapples. Who keeps these kinds of things in their pockets? Why not just rename them something that made sense since there is never a graphical representation of these objects anyway? The same thing applies to things you get out of a "box of chocolates" or a "box of caramels." How the hell does a pineapple even fit in there?

Second little thing: throughout the game, I was always trying to shoot, push, or use my powers on things in the environment, but not once did the game let me. I frequently wondered why there were so many things in the game that I couldn't interact with at all, but that almost begged to be interacted with. I don't feel like they should even be there if the game won't let me play around. I could shoot bottles and birds in Playstation 2 games, so I don't feel that there is much of an excuse for not being able to in Bioshock Infinite.

Third little thing: the foreboding feeling of Rapture is gone, and the game does little to make up for it. While fitting for its time period, the music doesn't inspire much emotion, and the moral quandary of the little sisters is missing as well, leaving emotional involvement a bit lacking.

The final little thing that bothered me was why can you buy powers and guns from public vending machines in a city where peace and religion rule? Why are they selling them when they are

dealing with what begins as a minor rebellion? Isn't this like arming your enemies? And if everyone has these things, why aren't people defending themselves? In Bioshock one, they made sense. Here, they just make the city feel more fake. A street merchant giving out the ability to possess people for free? Come on.

This brings us to my biggest issue: the story. The very beginning seems to promise something amazing, but then the first three quarters of the game are practically a drought of relevant information. Instead, it constantly hit me with questions, but it didn't ever promise that I would receive an answer by giving me a few minor answers here and there. It just withholds everything important until its final act. This made for several points in the game where the actions of the main NPC characters didn't make sense to me (or I could imagine several better plans they could have gone with) and thus failed to be believable. The sound clips that were so important to the story of the first Bioshock are often boring and add very little to the overall story until you get close to the end of the game. Instead, (and I know there are a few exceptions) they give you clips of people's stories that you've never met and that have no effect on the game as a whole. Their placement doesn't usually make sense either, and the developers seem too preoccupied with making these clips demonstrate the problems with 1912 racism to actually have these say anything relevant to what is happening in game or even expand the believability of the city. They certainly didn't give answers to anything I truly cared about until far too late in the game. The movie clips did the same thing. This made the pacing of the story feel off to me, and caused me to lose interest until the final act. It also made the city feel fake, and after my awesome and largely believable experience in Rapture, this was particularly disappointing.

The NPCs don't help with this at all. Everyone in the city seems like a lame cliché, and once I realized that I couldn't even talk to them and that they weren't responding to my presence in any kind of believable way, their presence made me feel like I was running around in a large, animatronic Disney ride. Why aren't they afraid when I run up with a gun? Why aren't they discussing things that I recently decimated in their city? Again, in a game with such a long development cycle, I just didn't understand. I would say these things are too difficult or not cost effective to program, but Dishonored recently did it and did it well.

All of this I could excuse if the ending tied the story together in an amazing way. And before you claim that I just don't understand its complexity or that I missed something, know that I have studied theories on multiple dimensions and that I read science fiction religiously. I spent hours discussing Infinite's story with highly educated and intelligent people. I read countless articles online that claim to have put it all together in a way that worked. I understand what it is trying to do and what most people think it does. At first the twist ending was awesome, but then once I stopped to really think about it and discuss it with people, it breaks down. I got a group together just to try and find ways to make it work and despite coming close on several occasions, we could never make everything jive. There was always one nagging detail that wouldn't work.

Sadly, in trying to present a high concept idea, the game loses its character development throughout and moment to moment believability. The city, while pretty, just hasn't been thoroughly thought through and properly detailed to make it a realistic place. At Infinite's conclusion it asks you to

believe that characters acted in ways that the game leads you to believe they would never act. It presents you with a backstory that should have been filled in throughout the entire game. It info dumps on you instead of strategically pacing itself. And where the original Bioshock had political relevance, Infinite fails in this regard as well. Racism is presented, but there is no genuine discussion on it or proposed solutions. Just, hey, racism is bad, especially in 1912. There is exploration of religion, religious segregation and cultism, but again, they are almost solely presented as bad things and a true dialogue of the subject is never developed.

What makes me the most upset is that Infinite's story is so close to amazing, but that its power and relevance are lost in the lack of meaningful details and interactions. For a game all about a meaningful choice, not one of the decisions that are presented in the game actually have any meaningful or lasting effect. I played through twice just to be sure. Again, maybe this could be explained away as me expecting too much, but Dishonored did it. So did Deus Ex years ago. And if Mr. Levine wants his story to have impact, explore free will, and be told in a way that only videogames can tell it, then choice should be an absolute necessity.

I believe reviewers need to step up and start demanding that games do more and pay attention to the details, otherwise games will never be able to properly claim their place as art and will always be considered a diversion. Bioshock is beautiful and a great game, but it loses its impact in the details.

For all its faults though, Bioshock Infinite is fun and its core systems work remarkably well. Play it for the level design. Play it for the abilities. Play it for Elizabeth. Play it to experience single player shooter mechanics that are the top of the genre. Just don't expect anything more than a shooter and don't expect anything truly groundbreaking. For that, turn to Dishonored.

I know this review leans more bad than good despite me giving the game an eight. If you want to hear more about the great things Bioshock Infinite does, there are plenty of articles out there that elaborate. I agree with many of them. I genuinely enjoyed playing this game, and its core elements make it a solid and enjoyable experience. I played it through twice. I just can't agree that the single player experience is the revolution in gaming that everyone claims it is, and without any sort of multiplayer, there is nothing else to raise Infinite's score.

Final Score: 8/10