My System to Shock: An Introduction

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If ever there was an easy way to illustrate supply and demand, then surely it must be people writing about video games.

Everybody and their cousin has an opinion on video games, and the internet makes it gloriously easy to give people a forum for those discussions, which is a good thing. If video games are to be taken seriously as art, then they need a healthy (i.e. not toxic) and diverse discourse; for what is art without art criticism? But how does that relate to supply and demand, you ask?

There are probably tens of thousands of people who fancy themselves all manner of media critic. I am but a voice among that unholy chorus. With such a huge supply of opinions to choose from, it is really a reader's market. You, gentle reader, can find an endless supply of reviews, essays, and deconstructions on games, movies, and everything else.

From where I sit, this changes the relationship between critic and reader into something like finding a new hair stylist: you assume that one person is generally as skilled as the rest, and then try to find a personality and style that aligns with what you want. This is why I'm using my first piece with Dirge to talk about *System Shock 2*. Because if you want to get a sense of my style as a critic, there's no better place to begin than with a game that I hold up as a masterpiece of the medium.

The year was 1999. Ken Levine was a sophomore game designer, and the name Electronic Arts didn't evoke images of a publisher luring innocent game studios into dark alleys with a wink and a curled finger before clubbing them senseless with bureaucracy and unreasonable deadlines. It was a time before DLC and "fix it after release" software patches were *de rigueur*. That's when a friend of mine loaned me his copy of *System Shock 2*, and I had a liminal moment as a gamer.

System Shock 2 scared me in a way that Hollywood movies never could. A lot of this is due to things broadly categorized as "atmosphere" and "player immersion." In modern games, discussions about immersion and atmosphere are usually married to inquisitions into the quality of graphics and the impact of branching decision tress on the overall story. As a product of the 90s, *SS2* could only lean so heavily on laurels of its visuals – strong as they were for the day. Player choice was also a more subtle thing, far removed from the "click here to hero" mechanic BioWare has made famous of late. *SS2's* aesthetic, the thing which let it build a pipeline into my nightmares, lived in its audio.

From a narrative point of view, *SS2* is a journey from order to chaos, and sound is a constant reinforcement of that descent. The highest point of order is found during the player creation stage. The game's prelude sees players inducted into the military of the 22nd century. Choices on their branch of service and initial assignments are accompanied by the sounds of boots falling on clean decks. Safe, reassuring, voice-overs explain career options with the comfort of a guidance councillor. Friendly droids provide lessons on maintaining a firearm or channeling psychic energy into a concussive force. Everything is clean, comforting, and functional. All this changes when players are assigned to the von Braun, Earth's first FTL-capable starship. Thus begins the game, in earnest, and the narrative arc into the chaos of the unknown.

Upon awakening from cryogenic suspension, players find the von Braun a ghost ship. The few human survivors are infested with alien parasites, begging to be killed as they madly charge at the player. The friendly droids from before are transformed into suicide bombers – though they keep their C-3P0-like affectation. Footfalls and the whoosh of automatic doors echo through the ship's blood smeared corridors, reminding players that they are pilgrims in an unholy land.

Xerxes, the ship's rogue AI teases the player with an invitation to surrender their flesh to "the many." Voice recordings from the crew and cybernetic ghosts make the gamer feel like a voyeur into the private lives of people who lay gutted on the deck. The hum of the engines is interrupted by the audible sensor scan of turrets intent to gun down any non-parasite infested human they find. The sound design makes the von Braun a living hulk of science and biology gone oh-so-terribly wrong.

It's a lonely and imposing space. Voice logs and directions from the player's guide are a welcome respite from the isolation. It is in those moments of exposition that the game weaves its narrative tapestry. *System Shock 2* becomes a microcosm for debate on cybernetics and bio-hacking. It questions what it is to be human and what it is to be alive. It also augurs how Ken Levine would write all the rest of his games that end in the word "shock," but that's a story for another day.

Atmosphere is *System Shock 2's* thin end of the wedge; it's how the game did more with less compared to modern games. Atmosphere transmits the game's narrative arc, allowing it to subtly chip away at the player's armour of cynicism and disbelief. A few hours into the game and every unknown sound is something to fear. It connects to a primal fear of the unknown. This, more than anything else, is what made the cyberpunk 22nd century of *System Shock 2* a real and accessible place, rather than a comically overblown farce teetering on the very edge of good taste (e.g. *Bioshock Infinite*).

Now, gentle reader, you know a little more about my style and what I look for in a video game. Here's to hoping this is the start of a beautiful friendship.