

A Plague Tale: Innocence (Video Game)

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Available on Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. c.£30-45.

A Plague Tale: Innocence represents something of a capstone for the soon-to-be-obsolete current generation of game hardware; not just because it is among the last titles to be released for present gaming consoles, but also due to its clear influences from previous blockbusters. *A Plague Tale* is in many ways a bellwether of videogaming from the past decade. A third-person action-adventure game set during an apocalypse, *A Plague Tale* prioritises stealth over violence, à la *The Last of Us* (2013), emphasising mechanically as well as thematically, given that in *A Plague Tale* we are playing as children, the haphazardness of defending oneself. The game is framed around the conceit of escorting a vulnerable individual across hostile environments, again akin to *The Last of Us*, but also *BioShock Infinite* (2013) and *Resident Evil 4* (2005) before that. It also shares with its predecessors an uncomfortable juxtaposition of narrative and gameplay.

Set amidst a supernatural rat plague in fourteenth-century Aquitaine, catalysed by an alchemical imbalance, but nevertheless sustained by the mortalities of the Hundred Years' War, you play as Amicia, the elder of two siblings who flee their ancestral home after the Inquisition kidnaps their mother. Amicia's mother is an alchemist secretly pursuing a cure for the younger Hugo's congenital curse, which is inextricably bound to the plague, and which malefactors seek to weaponize. The game itself is a series of vignettes, each exploring narratively the loss of innocence due to plague and war as mutual constituents, and at the level of gameplay introducing bespoke environments, such as monasteries, corpse-strewn battlefields, and castles; and a gradually increasing arsenal of projectiles for Amicia's sling. An early chapter, for instance, sees the siblings travel through a hamlet, driven to witch-hunting, where the climactic fight with a bereft crusader first requires players to dismantle his armour using

stone missiles. Later chapters have players variously extinguishing and relighting torches to clear paths through swarms of rats.

For those examining popular depictions of apocalyptic waste, the most piquant element of the game will be its rats, for what story there is exists mostly in the form of noninteractive cutscenes, whereas the gameplay, linear as it is, constitutes its own alchemy where the rats are redistributed by the player as a putrefying force. These rats are capable of reducing enemies to mere matter by extinguishing the protective light, and in doing so the rats tacitly question with whom innocence truly lies. The rats for their part are blameless, simply the by-product of and feeding from man's excesses; certainly, the game makes a point of demonstrating that even children who hold something of a cultural monopoly over innocence can commit great enormities in extremis. Take for example, the game's fifth chapter, trekking across a battlefield of bodies, which closes with a pivotal moment where the majority of players will be channelled into sacrificing a wounded English soldier to the rats so that they may pass, unless they possess the requisite amount of incendiary ammo, which is unlikely on an initial playthrough. Potent as these moments are, their linearity undermines what spontaneity and sense of complicity they might otherwise have elicited. This is a criticism equally applicable to the game's exemplar *The Last of Us*. These are clearly games where the actual gameplay is subservient to the story its creators wish to tell, and as compelling as they can be, surely the *raison d'être* of games is to facilitate a sense of spontaneity; that the consequences of our actions and decision-making in the face of ostensible randomness are uniquely our own – why else are we here if not to participate in what promises to be a responsive drama?

Trivial though it may seem, a surfeit of single-use games is itself waste, environmental waste that threatens to take on the apocalyptic dimensions titles such as *A Plague Tale* revel in; for, like the rats resembling a sort of anachronistic medieval grey goo scenario, there is an endless perpetuity to games, a potential eco-crisis that threatens to erupt no matter how deeply buried. Videogames expand exponentially alongside the technology as it, too, in tandem grows with sophistication, requiring ever more time and resources – human as well as material – to develop. In the UK at least, plastic videogame cases and DVDs are recyclable only at select centres, which granulate the discs into polycarbonate; but waste the polypropylene film covering the case's paper inlays. This materiality of videogames like *A Plague Tale* bears mentioning because, in scholarly and journalistic circles alike, it receives scant attention. Indeed, games criticism too often obviates concerns over eco-friendly packaging, let alone the posthumous existence of games as disposable objects. For an industry whose

impetus for innovation is arguably led by the perpetual imminence of its self-imposed obsolescence, that is a pertinent concern; one to be cognizant of when examining videogames as ostensible escapist fantasies.