Game Narrative Review

Your name: Kristian Skistad
Your school: Dakota State University
Your email: Kristian.D.Skistad@gmail.com
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Game Title: Brothers - A Tale of Two Sons
Platform: PC
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: September 3, 2013
Developer: Starbreeze Studios
Publisher: 505 Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Josef Fares

Overview

Brothers - A Tale of Two Sons tells the story of two brothers seeking a cure for their terminally ill father. Their travels take them across grassy fields, icy seas, boundless skies, and through the war torn lands of the giants. Together, they embark on a journey filled with equal parts wanderlust and heartbreak as they discover the nature of their world.

Throughout the brothers' journey, not one whisper of intelligible dialog is found. Instead, the brothers express themselves almost purely through their mechanics. From their varied social skills to their differing methods of interacting with the world around them, their personalities can be understood and contrasted with one another. Beyond that, the world around them also holds its own secrets to be discovered, all through finely crafted environmental storytelling and player interaction. Brothers - A Tale of Two Sons does more than tell a story, it provides a narrative that could only be experienced through the medium of games.

Characters

- **Older Brother (Naia) -** The older brother, Naia. He is the more responsible of the two brothers. Though always willing to help those in need, he shows a greater focus on their own journey than his younger brother does. He cares deeply for his sibling, acting as somewhat of a role model to him in the absence of their mother.

- **Younger Brother (Naiee) -** The younger brother, Naiee. Much more rash than his older brother, Naiee is known to be the more mischievous of the two. Often pulling pranks on those around him, many lose patience with him, but some can't help but to be uplifted by his boundless spirit and energy. Naiee has been terrified of swimming ever since he witnessed his mother drown.

- **Brothers' Father -** Not much is known about the brothers' father, other than that both brothers care for him deeply, but he plays a key role in this story. He is very ill, which is why the two brothers set out on their journey to retrieve a cure. His illness acts as their call to action.

Breakdown

Brothers, as I will be referring to the game, starts off by presenting the player with their only controls: The joysticks for movement and the triggers for actions. The older brother is the left half of the controller, the younger brother is the right half. Already the game has presented the player with a new way to think about how they interact with it by putting a character into each of their hands.

After learning how to pick pick up each side of the cart containing the brothers' father, the player is tasked with transporting him to a nearby house. Doing so requires the cooperation of both brothers simultaneously, dropping the player straight into the game's core mechanic in a safe environment. Almost immediately the player will come across a lever. Because the younger brother will be the first to reach the lever, the player will most likely try to operate it with them. This won't work, as the younger brother isn't strong enough to pull it. This introduces the player to the concept that each brother will have their own abilities, without the need for a tutorial.

After the call to action is accepted by the brothers to find healing water for their father, the player must make their way through the town. In order to enter the town, however, they must traverse a small body of water. This is where the player is introduced to one of the most defining characteristics of the younger brother: He is terrified of swimming as a result of witnessing his mother drown. The player must make him latch onto the older brother, and then have the older brother swim across. This not only presents the player with the fears and flaws of one of their avatars, but forces them to experience the consequences of those fears.

While exploring the town the player may optionally interact with the townspeople. The results will differ depending on which brother the player uses to interact with them. The older brother will be more focused on where their journey will take them, so he will usually ask for directions. By contrast, the younger brother will often mess with the townspeople, usually by pulling pranks on them. Through this simple mechanic we can get a clear picture of both brothers' personalities.

The game takes the brothers' differing personalities a step further when the player encounters a sleeping NPC. Upon interacting with them, the older brother will simply shake them awake, to which they respond by promptly falling back asleep. The younger brother, being less polite, will pour a bucket of water on them instead, which keeps them awake. This sheds new light on the brothers' contrasting personalities for the player as they not only have an effect on the story, but an effect on the gameplay as well.

The mechanics presented above continue to expand as the game moves forward. The puzzles become more complex, and the player is given new opportunities to explore the differences in their two avatars through experimentation. During this time the player will seldom

come across another human being to interact with. Instead, it is the environment itself that tells a story by providing new mechanics and obstacles which also serve to further convey the personalities of the two brothers.

There are many ways in which an environment can tell a story. Often times this boils down to "What happened here?", though Brothers takes this a step further. The environment reflects the brothers' coming of age, progressing along side them. Though the player begins in a bright and sunny village, they eventually find themselves in a frozen tundra where mighty giants lay dead across the wartorn lands. Wanderlust slowly turns to shock and awe as the environment weaves a grim tale and leaves the player to deal with the aftermath of it. Each obstacle invokes new emotions from the brothers, all while providing the player with new stories to unravel and puzzles to solve.

It's in the frozen battlefields of the giants that we can really begin to see character progression through the use of environmental obstacles. Whereas the giant corpses are initially met with disgust by both brothers, this eventually turns to melancholy. This can be seen when they go so far as to drench themselves in the giant's blood to disguise themselves as the deity of a local tribe. It's in the progression of these environmental puzzles that we can see growth in the brothers, both emotionally and in terms of their resourcefulness. It also marks a progression in the player themselves as they begin to solve these more difficult puzzles.

During the final stretch of the game, the older brother will become mortally wounded, leaving the younger brother to fetch the healing water while the older brother sits beneath the tree of life. Upon returning however, the player will find the older brother has passed away. This leads the player into their next objective: Burying the older brother.

While the death and burial of the older brother in and of itself could be considered a sad moment, the emotional impact doesn't truly hit until the player leaves the older brother's grave behind. The realization creeps in on them: Their left hand is no longer needed, as only the younger brother remains to be controlled. This is further exacerbated by the level design continuing to be built around the idea of both brothers being present. In some sense a piece of the player was lost with the older brother, half of their ability to interact with the world stripped away from them. The player not only witnesses the loss felt by younger brother, they can feel the impact of it through gameplay.

Strongest Element

Brothers is at its strongest whenever the two brothers interact with the same object. We can see both mechanically and narratively how their actions differ. While the older brother may simply ask for directions, the younger brother may pull a prank. Where the younger brother hastily scales a ledge, the older brother struggles to climb it, relying on his younger brother to pull him up. When in water, the younger brother must hold onto his older brother to stay afloat,

due to his fear of drowning. It's the combination of these actions and the method of input that come together to form a cohesive narrative experience for the player.

Unsuccessful Element

The brothers themselves use fairly generic archetypes for their personalities. The older brother is stronger, more mature, and protective. The younger brother is brash, hyper, and optimistic. So while the use of mechanics to convey these character's personalities is something that highlights the strengths of the medium, the personalities themselves could be more fleshed out.

Near the end of the game the younger brother gains a new ability from the personal trauma of losing his brother which is reflected in the gameplay. Gaining such an ability through loss shows character growth not only through plot, but through mechanics. Placing small moments like this sparsely throughout the game could convey a greater sense of character growth, providing more depth to the two brothers and the bond they share.

Highlight

After burying his older brother, the younger brother makes his way back home to give the water of life to his father. On his way there, he encounters a deep body of water. Throughout the game, he's been too afraid to swim, relying on his older brother to carry him through. Now, and for the first time since his journey began, he finds himself all alone.

Try as the player might, using both buttons available to command the younger brother, they are unable to cross the body of water. It's at this moment, only through player experimentation, that they can discover the action button for the older brother still works. This allows the younger brother to swim. Soon after, you come across the same lever the younger brother wasn't able to pull at the beginning of the game. Sure enough, if you press the action button for the younger brother he is still unable to pull it. Pressing the action button for the older brother, however, allows the younger brother to successfully pull it and continue on.

This moment coincides with the game's theme that loved ones are always with you, even in death. It makes it present not only in terms of the story, but in terms of the mechanics. The story and mechanics, as well as the control scheme itself, are all blended together into a beautiful narrative moment that could only be delivered through the medium of games.

Critical Reception

Giant Bomb's Brad Shoemaker gave the game 5 stars, praising it for threading together gameplay mechanics and thematic storytelling. They also go on to talk about its environmental

storytelling, and well paced narrative that keeps you moving from place to place at a steady rate. They close by saying that Brothers manages to intertwine its themes and gameplay in a way that few others have.[3]

PC Gamer's Tom Senior gave the game an 85/100, expressing how the game manages to feel like a coop game while remaining single player. He goes on to talk about the effect the brothers personalities have on the gameplay, and describes the game's world as having a "Brothers Grimm ambience."[2]

IGN's Marty Sliva gave the game an 8.2 out of 10, noting the game's exceptional non-verbal storytelling methods. They go on to praise the way the character's personalities come to light through their mechanics, but criticize the characters themselves as being fairly generic. They felt as though the game's world was far more unique than the characters within it.[4]

Lessons

- **Narrative can be conveyed through mechanics -** Something our medium can do which no other medium can is convey a story through the actions of the player. Brothers does this by giving each brother different abilities and quirks that are unique to them. The biggest example of this would be the younger brother's inability to swim due to his fear of drowning. By playing to the strengths of the medium you are working in you can create something unique to that medium.
- **Dialog isn't needed to convey character -** There are many things we know about the brothers without them speaking a word. They define themselves through their actions and their own personal strengths. We can see this in almost every interaction in the game. Each action will be handled differently depending on the brother carrying it out.
- **The way the player interfaces with the game is part of the experience -** Though the control scheme is simple, it also plays to the game's strengths. With each side of the controller being dedicated to one brother it adds meaning to the input device. This comes to its peak at the climax of the game, when the player is able to use the older brother's action button even after his passing.
- **The world is its own character -** Often times we think of world building as a separate entity to character development. Brothers shows that the world itself can be treated as a character. It grows with the brothers, revealing its own quirks and personality as time goes on. It matches their own desperation and fears and, in some cases, personifies them. While not applicable to every narrative, it's another option in the designer toolbelt that shouldn't be ignored.

Summation

Brothers - A Tale of Two Sons is a game that prefers to show and not tell. Through the brothers' differing actions we can explore their personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. It not only shows these character traits, it gives them an impact on the gameplay. Brothers manages to intertwine story and mechanics in such a way that neither could cohesively exist without the other. In doing so it achieves a narrative that could only be experienced through the medium of games.

Sources

1. All images taken in game and from its cover art.
2. Senior, Tom. "Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons Review." *PC Gamer*. PC Gamer, 24 Oct. 2013. Web. 02 Dec. 2016. <http://www.pcgamer.com/brothers-a-tale-of-two-sons-review>
3. Shoemaker, Brad. "Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons Review." *Giant Bomb*. Giant Bomb, 19 Sept. 2013. Web. 02 Dec. 2016. <http://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/brothers-a-tale-of-two-sons-review/1900-589>
4. Sliva, Marty. "Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons Review - IGN." *IGN*. IGN, 06 Aug. 2013. Web. 02 Dec. 2016. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/08/06/brothers-a-tale-of-two-sons-review>