Game Narrative Review

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Overview

Waves gently tumble at the feet of a tall cliffside. Atop it lies a single tombstone that rests underneath a great ash tree. While the morning grey settles in, a young boy walks to the cliff and kneels by the lonely grave. As the boy remembers his trauma, violent coughing from his father interrupts his thoughts. The young boy looks to his dying father and mutters his final farewell to the tombstone, bearing a tremendous load on his heart, for the thought of burying another woeful grave beneath the ash tree terrifies him.

Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons is about the story of two brothers who must trek across the land in order to obtain the cure to their father's illness. Similar to Frodo and Sam taking their first steps outside the Shire, the pair embark from a peaceful village, unprepared for the treacherous path before them, and find themselves into a boundless and unknown world. The pair seek help from all manner of creatures on their journey, all while making a few friends, and helping a few strangers along the way. As they continue deeper and face mounting perils, the pair of brothers must ultimately rely on each other to save their dying father and protect the only family they have left.

Brothers is an adventure game that places the player within a fairytale-esque setting with rolling hills and strange creatures in a style reminiscent to European folk tales. The story is a classic hero's journey that does not deviate too far in traditional structure, and covers themes such as, trauma, reliance, and loss. However, what sets *Brothers* apart from any other adventure game is that it evokes these themes in an innovative and medium-specific way— by associating tactile sensations with specific characters, and in turn, evoking emotion through active physical interaction. In other words, the game embodies the *"Do, don't show."* philosophy, by relying on its mechanics as the primary conduit of emotion and meaning.

Characters

Main Characters

   Naiee: *Naiee is associated with the right side of the controller, with his movement binded to the right analog stick (RS) and interaction binded to the R2/RT button.*

   Naiee is the younger brother, the one who is still able to see the world around him with a youthful mind. Naiee is playful, curious, and more laid back than his older brother, often able to laugh with strangers and examine new things he encounters with a genuine childlike joy.

   In one of the first scenes in the game, however, Naiee is shown watching helplessly as his mother drowns in the ocean. This memory constantly haunts Naiee, and the incident has left him with the crippling fear of swimming, needing to latch onto his older brother whenever they traverse across deep water. His mother's death has also led him to a fear of resentment from his brother and father, and this fear manifests in his dreams. Despite this past trauma, Naiee has been able to maintain his childlike nature, thanks to his older brother who has taken on the role of his protector.

   Naiee is smaller and physically weaker than Naia and is unable to pull large levers or heavy loads by himself. However, certain paths can only be accessible by Naiee due to his smaller size. Naiee's shortcomings are never portrayed as a hindrance in the game, since his older brother's own unique capabilities complements Naiee's weaknesses. Naiee is also equally capable to his brother at scaling walls and hanging from obstacles.

   Naiee's Unique Capabilities
   - Squeezing through narrow bars
   - Being boosted up tall cliffs

   Naia: *Naia is associated with the left side of the controller, with his movements binded to the left analog stick (LS) and interaction binded to the L2/LT button.*

   Naia is the older brother and the more focused and level-headed of the two. Naia is the one to both carry the map and to approach strangers first, functioning as the mentor to Naiee. Despite giving off the impression of being more mature, there are hints that underneath the surface Naia is still only a boy who has frantically taken on the role of a man.

   Since the death of his mother and his father's illness, Naia had chosen to act as the caretaker for both his younger brother and his dying father. By taking on this role, Naia had effectively given up the chance to live out the rest of his youth, and the only hope of getting the

chance back is by saving his father. This inner conflict is only hinted throughout the game, but it becomes most relevant when the pair encounter a woman from their journey, who tempts Naia away from their original path.

Since Naia is older and larger, he is capable with more physically intense tasks. Some of his unique capabilities are centered around his physicality, however certain heavy items still require both brothers to move together.

Naia's Unique Capabilities
- Pulling Large Levers
- Swimming
- Carrying heavy animals/objects

The Father: For most of the game, the father is bedridden with a deadly disease, and there are only a few scenes that present his character outside the context of his illness. The father serves as the catalyst for the entire journey, but saving him would represent different things for both brothers. For Naiee, saving their father would mean exoneration from the guilt he feels about being unable to save his mother. For Naia, it would mean being relieved from being the caretaker, and the capability to live life on his own terms.

The Mother: Other than the initial flashback, the mother only appears as a ghost or in Naiee's dreams. When she does appear as a ghost, she is only present for a few seconds, often endearingly calling to Naiee and giving him encouragement before vanishing once again. She is never seen around Naia, however, since the mother's character functions primarily in the context of Naiee's guilt towards her. Her death serves as a bleak reminder of the potential fate of their father, and a constant source of guilt from Naiee.

Breakdown

Setting the Tone

In the opening menu of *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons,* the player is introduced to the frame of a humble cliffside where a young boy kneels silently in front of a tombstone. Within the first few seconds of loading up the game, this somber frame immediately communicates the tone of the game and prepares the player for the scenes to come. The player will also hear part of the game's soundtrack, which is a blend of a shrill melodic wail from a woman and a low violin that feels heavy and sorrowful. Establishing this tone early is important, especially since the player will encounter scenarios with death, suicide, and other serious themes throughout the game, as early as the first cutscene.

It also becomes apparent that the game noticeably lacks any vibrant colors, with greys and olives dominating the color palette. The developer's decision to desaturate the color palette functions as a deliberate stylistic choice with a profound effect on the overall tone of the game. This color choice is a departure from most modern fantasy styles, which traditionally use diverse mixtures of bright colors that create an iridescent quality, to a more grounded and classic style. It means that even in the most idyllic parts of the game, environments feel layered with a subtle coat of apprehension. This feeling of apprehension helps to also form a subtle juxtaposition with the game's beautiful and inviting environments. As the player goes through the journey, it reinforces the feeling that therein lies an unyieldingly beautiful world in the face of grim and unforgiving events.

Traditional Narrative Design

As mentioned earlier, the overarching structure and the themes that *Brothers* employ are not much different from traditional literature or film. In fact, story beats and metaphors overlap heavily across all different types of media. It tends to be the "packaging" of these story elements that differ across mediums, though which still manage to create unique experiences of variety and magnitude. The narrative of *Brothers* fits perfectly into the paradigm of the Monomyth[1], as well as the three act structure, especially since the game can be finished in just over two hours. The game also employs traditional literary devices, such as foreshadowing, metaphor, etc.

The initial parts of the game is staged in a small settlement, with homes and buildings scattered around, and is where the player meets the two brothers. The setting is built to be an embodiment of the *Ordinary World*, a quaint and safe place where the protagonists live a simple life. When the brothers bring their father to the doctor, they are informed the only cure to their father's illness is the water from the Tree of Life, and their *call to adventure* begins. It is also in this setting where the grave and the ash tree will foreshadow Naia's eventual death and burial under the tree of life, and with the tree functioning as a symbol for family, much like a family tree.

As they navigate through to the fringes of their settlement, they encounter their first *supernatural aid*, a sobbing troll. As they approach the troll and show them their map, the troll offers to carry them through the rocky terrain. Accepting the troll's aid is the pair's *crossing of the first threshold*, as they literally would be unable to return down the same path without the help of a troll. They will also find themselves in *the belly of the whale*, as the troll places them in a perilous cave.

A notable scene in the story is when the pair approach the remains of a burnt down house. As they walk by, they see a singed man standing by a noose underneath a tree, who tries to hang himself. If they go near the man, they will find the covered up corpses of the man's family, who

presumably died in the fire. This side path is completely optional, and some players may actually miss the scene if they continue along the path, but if the player chooses, the player can actually save the man by untying the rope. Afterwards, the man will sob endlessly, unless the player enters a path that leads into the burnt house, and returns a music box. Once they do, the next scene will be of two graves buried underneath the tree, with them paying respects to it. Once again, the familiar grave underneath the tree and by the cliffside foreshadows Naia's death and burial beneath the tree of life, and reinforces the symbol of the tree as the symbol for family.

Towards the end of the second act, the save a woman who seemed to have been the sacrifice for a tribe. The woman and Naia seem to have romantic chemistry, however Naiee becomes increasingly suspicious and urges Naia to not follow her. The woman represents the *temptation away from the path*, and also represents Naia's desire to abandon the role of caretaker in favor of his own potential life. The woman then transforms into a giant spider and the pair end up fighting the spider in a climactic fight.

Through sheer luck however, they stumble upon the tree of life, which turns out to be an immense ash tree with white leaves. As Naiee gathers the water from the tree, his brother dies from a mortal wound during the fight, and Naiee buries his body. This is presumably the second time that Naiee must bury a body beneath an ash tree, and fulfills the fate that was foreshadowed earlier in the game. When Naiee returns home, he reaches a body of water that stands between him and his dying father. Naiee overcomes his fear of swimming and *crosses the return threshold*. When he finally brings the water to his father, Naiee has become the *master of two worlds*, by mastering both the external conflict of his long journey, and his internal struggle with guilt and self-doubt.

Gameplay

The gameplay of *Brothers* revolves around controlling both brothers through obstacles, and playing with the brothers' complementing strengths and weaknesses in order to solve puzzles and traverse across environments. Nearly the entirety of the puzzles are centered around the co-dependence of the two brothers, since several mechanics require brothers to rely on each other, and would be impossible to do alone otherwise. This style of gameplay has been coined as "single-player co-op" by some reviewers, which is a quite accurate illustration of how the gameplay works.

Brothers further reinforces this single player co-op gameplay through its unique control mapping. The entire left side of the controller controls Naia, while the entire right side of the controller controls Naiee. The left and right analog stick controls the two characters separately, and the L2 and R2 buttons are the character's respective interaction button. This control scheme allows each brother to have their own distinct movement and interaction, as opposed to having

controls where they move and interact in tandem. On a keyboard, the characters are still mapped to be distinctly right and left-handed (WASD = Naia, Arrow keys = Naiee). These controls present a layer of mechanical challenge as well as the existing logical challenges to overcome obstacles, because controlling two distinct characters on a single controller during puzzles can be very mechanically complex.

The most daunting mechanical aspect of the game is the distinct movement of the brothers. Controlling both analog sticks (or both movement keys) is still a relatively new control concept, and can take a while to get used to. The interaction button, on the other hand, is extremely intuitive, and although it is very simple, the game manages to present many diverse uses for only a single button. For example, under different contexts, the interaction button during puzzles can allow a character to climb, pull a lever, push an object, carry an object, etc.

In all the environments, there are objects or people that either brother can interact with using this button. Each brother will have their own unique way of interacting with the object/person. For example, upon approaching an inventor, Naia will discuss the logistics of flying, while Naiee will play rock-paper-scissors with the inventor. The contrast in their interactions characterizes the brothers in an interactive way, and provides a lot of subtle depth to each of the brothers.

Another type of interactable object are benches, which are scattered throughout the world. Characters can take a momentary pause to view the surrounding landscape on benches, which help mediate the pacing of the story, being placed in a way to give a breather from long segments of puzzles. Benches also sometimes overlook puzzles the player has just completed, evoking a sense of accomplishment, while other times they provide a wide view of their next destination, giving a sense of direction and purpose.

The Mechanics of Narrative
While most adventure games rely on some form of dialogue or narration to deliver information, in *Brothers*, the characters speak in an unintelligible language where the only words with recognizable meaning are the brother's names. The player can still garner information based off of the gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice of characters. While the skeleton of semantic meaning is still present in the game's language, the intent is for language to remain in the background, while the meat of the story is expressed through the world, the events, and the gameplay.

Brothers has a unique relationship between its gameplay and its narrative, because in many ways, its gameplay contextualizes the narrative of the game. Normally for most games, this the other way around. For example, in *Call of Duty*, the story will always give some

explanation of why the player is shooting bad guys, but the gameplay never serves an explanation of the story and its themes itself. In many games, the story serves only to give context to an engaging gameplay mechanic. The exceptions to this would include simulation games, where stories can emerge from playing around in the sandbox of a world. However, *Brothers* is not an emergent narrative, yet it still successfully contextualizes its narrative through its own mechanics.

One way it does this is through the game's control scheme. As the player masters the feeling of controlling both brothers together, a physical association with each character begins to form. In other words, the left hand starts to *be* Naia, and the right hand starts to *be* Naiee instinctively. This feeling of physical association is maintained beyond the puzzle segments, where they are most strongly formed, and into the mundane exploration of the environment as well, through the juxtaposition of each of the brothers interactions with objects and people.

The most important detail is that this feeling of association lends itself to be a physical conduit for narrative. As the player gets naturally better at the controlling the brothers within the game, and as the brothers increase their bond throughout the journey, the player is able to subconsciously feel that bond through the increasing acuity between their left and right hand. It also creates the *opposite* of cognitive dissonance, which is cognitive harmony, where the gameplay and the narrative consistently agree with each other.

However, the game goes further than simply creating a physical metaphor for the growing bond of the brothers. During the last act, when Naiee climbs up the world tree by himself, this is the first part of the game where Naiee accomplishes something by himself, and this is also the first time where the player can only use one hand on the controller. This scene comes directly after the climactic moment, when both brothers needed to be in absolute synchronization to defeat the spider. Since this is towards the end of the game as well, the player would have developed a strong mechanical connection between their left and right hand. When the player controls Naiee, the game is meant to feel strange and almost incomplete, as if walking while missing a limb.

As the player realizes that Naia has died, the following sequence creates one of the most powerful emotional moments in the game. The game has the player to live out Naiee's grief, by having the player drag Naia's body into a grave and bury him under the dirt. This moment cements Naiee's loss into the player's psyche, since now the player has actually lost something too, the use of their left hand in the context of the game. Throughout the entirety of the game, the player has relied on their left hand accomplish tasks and to navigate through the world, but now they are unable to, just like how Naiee can no longer rely on his older brother. This physical

sensation of 'loss' blends with the emotion in the scene and adds even further contextualizes the loss Naiee feels.

Brothers uses this tactile sensation to contribute to the narrative in a medium specific way. Its mechanics build upon the existing narrative and deepen the players emotional understanding of the story through active physical interaction. The game accomplishes this with a predefined and cohesive narrative, which means that a story does not necessarily need to be open-ended or superficially influenced by the gameplay to achieve medium-specificity.

This agreement of tactile sensation with emotion beats in the story is how the gameplay further informs the story. It is an act of placing gameplay in the foreground as a narrative device, because within *Brothers*, the themes of loss and reliance are not presented separately from the gameplay, but rather are inextricably tied to it. The gameplay reinforces these themes through the distinct associations between the player's hands and the characters in the game. The changes in the controls construct a metaphor between the story and the gameplay, and they also add meaning to the story in ways that words or dialogue would be unable to.

Strongest Element

The game is at its strongest after it subverts the player's expectation and reveals that Naiee is the true protagonist of the game during the moment of Naia's death. As Naiee copes with his brother's death in the following scenes, the game becomes a coming of age story, and all of the subsequent scenes suddenly have a new meaning. This part of the storyline is elevated by its adherence to the themes and symbolism it suggests towards the beginning, such as the symbol tree and the reoccurring images of graves by the cliffside. The gameplay also takes you along Naiee's inward transformation by having the player act out the burial and the swimming scene of the story. In a sense, the game's mechanics magnify Naia's moment of transformation, which was set up by the symbols and events of the story, leading to a strong emotional impact at the end.

Unsuccessful Element

The most important aspect of the game is building the distinct character associations for the player's controls. It is the foundation of the emotional impact towards the end of the game, and if the player does not build a strong mechanical association with the controls, then the emotional effect will be significantly reduced. Therefore, its biggest weaknesses are when the player takes long extended breaks away from the game. While the game is not necessarily meant to be played in one sitting, the game is most effective when the player is accustomed to its controls. If a player loses their physical association with Naia and Naiee and picks up the game towards the end once more, the player won't necessarily feel any sense of loss. It is also possible

that for certain players, a mastery of the controls never forms, and the controls will remain feeling clunky and awkward through the end of the game.

Highlight

While the burial scene of Naia carries a lot of emotional weight, the most compelling part of the game is when Naiee returns home, signifying the turning point in Naiee's character arc. What makes this segment of the game compelling is because it is the culmination of the themes reinforced within the gameplay, by using the feeling of loss that has been established and taking it through its natural progression in the gameplay.

At this point in the game, the player has already lost Naia, and now only controls Naiee. When Naiee approaches a body of water, the player is reminded that Naiee is unable to swim without his brother, and if they try to navigate Naiee into the water, he will turn around. But, either through playing around with the buttons, or through slowly realizing it, the player can press the L2 button, which is *Naia's* interaction button, and Naiee will push through his fear and begin to swim. It is a brilliant and emotional moment, because it recaptures the same physical sensation associated with Naia, and as you hold the button, Naia's faint voice can be heard calling out to his brother. Then Naiee approaches a lever that he would normally be too weak to pull alone, and will fail to pull it when interacting with it normally. But once again, Naiee overcomes this obstacle through *Naia's* button. For the third and final time, Naiee faces a ledge that is too high for him to jump, and once again fails to reach it. Through pressing *Naia's* button can Naiee finally pull the strength to reach the ledge, and save his father, thus completing the brothers' quest.

It is in these moments where the player also realizes that the gameplay mechanics they learned throughout the game still matter. It as if for Naiee, the lessons he has learned from his brother also still matter. After Naia's death, the left part of the controller up until this scene feels like dead weight, as if the player is still carrying the same burden of Naia's death as Naiee. Through the press of the button, however, it creates a new purpose for the memory of Naia, and a new purpose for the controls that once belonged to him. The player will realize this at the exact same moment that Naiee realizes this which is the epitome of cognitive harmony in games.

That button press also speaks volumes about what it truly means to lose someone. When the game takes you back to old obstacles, it carries the strange emptiness of realizing that the daily motions of life will never be the same. Returning to those obstacles without Naia is almost like having an extra chair at the table, or filling the bowl with food out of habit. The game informs the player of those nuanced feelings of grief through the interaction with those obstacles, and furthers the player's understanding of loss. It also sends another message, that the memories

we share with the ones we love will always stay with us. And, the game unpacks all of those emotions in just a single button.

Critical Reception

The critical reception of *Brothers* has been overall positive. TotalBiscuit regarded *Brothers* in his review as his "favorite game of all time".[2] He stated that *Brothers* is the first game that has made him cry, and was the "most powerful and compelling experience he's ever had with video games." He lauds the game for its marriage with game mechanics and storytelling, as well as the breadth the emotional responses the game evokes.

The game has a metacritic score of 90%, with reviews applauding the game for its personality, groundbreaking gameplay, and immersive environments.[3] In Marty Silva's review for IGN, he says that "Much of Brothers' charm lies in its keen skill at non-verbal storytelling." However, he criticizes the game for its "ultimately frustrating controls", and rated the game an 8.2/10. [4]

Lessons

- **Don't reinvent the wheel**
  - Traditional literary devices as well as classical structure have existed for hundreds of years. Do not be afraid to use these devices to elevate your story, because they have add depth to all varieties of story across all forms of media. A good story is not about novelty of structure, it is about the quality of the execution. Symbolism, metaphor, foreshadowing are all still good ways to add depth and hidden meaning.
- **Gameplay should contextualize the story**
  - The gameplay should not act separately from the story, but rather comment or enhance on the themes of the story. Gameplay should still be engaging, but not at the expense of creating a cognitive dissonance between the game's mechanics and the story. Games should utilize the power of metaphor to build mechanics that have something to say about the story and build gameplay loops that reinforce established themes within the narrative.
- **Use tactile interaction to evoke emotion**
  - Active physical interaction is one of gameplay's unique strengths, and is a tool seldom used to convey emotion. Create control schemes that enable the player to build a connection with the controls, and play with how changes to these controls could make a player feel a certain emotion. After a certain story beat or moment, any interaction can have a completely new meaning to the player both mechanically and storywise.

Summation

  Brothers accomplishes telling a classic story through its medium-specificity. It uses ground-breaking techniques to evoke emotion in new ways, through its clever use of physical metaphor. The game's events and world build the narrative themes, but it is the game's mechanics that have something to say about these themes, and enable the player to explore feelings of loss in a virtual environment. What *Brothers* manages to successfully achieve is something all games should strive for, a harmony of mechanics and narrative, where both elements elevate each other and contextualize each other to give profound insights into the human condition.

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