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Fraternal Feelings

How *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* Affects Players Through Gameplay

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Abstract—Video games are well known for their interactive aspects. Through gameplay, players are given options to control characters, perform actions, and make decisions. These interactions typically impact a player’s degree of success at the game. In games with characters and narratives, the interactions might even inform the player of character traits and abilities. Close-reading reveals how *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* steps further down this path by having the player control two characters at the same time. Interactive elements illuminate and distinguish the two protagonists for the player, contributing to the effectiveness of the game’s conclusion. Additionally, the unique intertwining of narrative and interaction design has implications for games as an artistic and story-driven medium.

Keywords—video games; narrative; play; interaction; controls

I. BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

A. About the Artifact

The video game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (hereafter shortened to *Brothers*) was developed by Starbreeze Studios and was first released in August 2013 [1]. It is currently available as a downloadable title for the Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony PlayStation 3, and Windows PC [2]. *Brothers* was well received by the gaming press, receiving a metareview score of 90% [3]. It earned multiple nominations, awards, and placements on ‘best-of’ lists, such as winning the 2013 VGX Award Show’s “Best Xbox Game” and being placed on Kotaku’s “The 12 Best Games on Xbox 360” on December 9, 2013 [4, 5]. *Brothers* tells the story of Nyaa and his younger sibling Naiee [6]. After their father falls ill, Nyaa and Naiee set out to retrieve a medicine. Their epic quest takes them through many diverse environments, where they meet and interact with a cast of characters. Characters speak a fictional, abstracted language that is unintelligible to the player. For most players, the game takes about three hours to play from start to finish, which includes a prologue, seven chapters, and an epilogue.

Brothers is categorized as a top-down puzzle/action/adventure game [1]. This genre is shared with games such as the *Legend of Zelda* and *Pikmin* titles [7, 8]. The player is able to see the character(s) being controlled, unlike games where a first-person perspective is used, such as the *Portal* series [9]. From a gameplay standpoint, *Brothers* is unique in that it requires the player to control two characters simultaneously. Starbreeze Studios refers to this as “[cooperative] play in single player mode” [6]. A player controlling multiple characters in a

game is nothing new. A common feature of the Role Playing Game (RPG) genre is a party of characters controlled by the player. However, the player typically issues combat commands to the characters one at a time. *Trine*, another title in *Brothers’* genre, has the player controlling three characters, but they are cycled through so that only one character is ever being controlled at once [10]. It is rare for a game to require the independent control of two characters simultaneously in real time.

For the Xbox 360 version, *Brothers* is played with a standard Xbox 360 controller [6]. Each of the controller’s joysticks controls the movement of one of the brothers. A button for each brother causes the associated character to perform contextual actions, such as manipulating a lever or picking up an object. The player solves puzzles by correctly sequencing the contextual actions of the brothers. For example, in a puzzle from the game’s prologue, Nyaa boosts Naiee up a cliff face so that Naiee can let down a rope. Nyaa then climbs the rope to join Naiee at the higher elevation. The player continues to encounter puzzles of varying degrees of difficulty throughout the game, culminating in the game’s final sequence.

B. Placement in Theory

Chris Crawford details approaches to building stories for interactive digital media [4]. *Brothers’* interactions are a cross between what Crawford dubs the ‘kill em if they stray’ approach and the ‘obstructionist’ approach [11]. In ‘kill em if they stray,’ incorrect actions by the player lead to failure. An example of this in *Brothers* is when the brothers are hanging from a ledge in chapter 4. If the player releases the character’s action button, the character falls to his death, the game loads from an earlier checkpoint, and the puzzle is re-attempted. The ‘obstructionist’ approach is when a player encounters a puzzle that must be completed before advancing [11]. Nearly all puzzles in *Brothers* fit this category.

Marie Laure Ryan proposes a two-dichotomy system for evaluating digital media interactivity [12]. One dichotomy is Internal/External involvement. Internal is the player putting themselves in the world by a first-person perspective or controlling an avatar. External is the player having a god-like perspective from above. *Brothers* falls on the internal side of this scale, though it is interesting that the player is controlling two avatars. The second dichotomy is Exploratory/Ontological involvement [12]. Exploratory is the player navigating a system without impacting the plot. Ontological is the player

making decisions that alter the virtual world. *Brothers* is mostly exploratory because the only choices available to players are either temporary failure (choosing to have a character die reloads a saved state from an earlier checkpoint) or side activities that don't impact the plot.

II. METHODS

A. Close-Reading Process

We used a close-reading methodology, relying on disciplined documentation of repeated gameplay interactions. For this research, we played the Xbox 360 version of *Brothers*. The software version of the console and game were current as of December 13, 2013. We played the game through in its entirety, with researcher observations listed chronologically and split into a series of categories that are referred to in the analysis section. *Gameplay* denotes action shown in interactive portions of the game. The player controls the action of character(s) during these sequences. *Cut Scene* denotes action shown in non-interactive portions of the game. For example, when a video clip is shown to the player. Typically, the game's display added 'letterboxing' bands to the top and bottom of the screen to signify these moments of non-interactivity. *Gameplay* and *Cut Scene* are mutually exclusive, and together they make up 100% of the game (aside from the menu and options screens).

Nyaa Interaction, *Naiee Interaction*, and *Joint Interaction* denote spots where characters can contextually interact with the environment, Non-Player Characters (NPCs), or other objects. For example, character interaction may pick up a gear or pull a lever. These interactions usually require the use of the *right trigger* (RT) or *left trigger* (LT) buttons on the Xbox 360 controller, except where otherwise noted. *Joint Interaction* denotes that both trigger buttons must be pressed so that both characters act on the same location/object. For example, a heavy gate might require both Nyaa and Naiee to push on it to be opened. Annotations were made for actions that produced a result that didn't help the characters progress (Dead End) and actions that obstructed the proper character from performing the action (Failure).

Prompts denotes when the game provides on-screen instructions to the player. This only occurs three times, all during the prologue, and it is intended to help novice players learn the controls for the game. Finally, *Notes* denotes instances where special attention or categorization is required. A copy of the observations is currently available at http://www.dtc-wsuv.org/amay/BrothersAppendix_2014.pdf

B. Theory-Driven Lenses

A disciplined close-reading methodology requires a set of analytical lenses to organize and focus gameplay observation into usable data for analysis and understanding. Here are some of the key analytical concepts we have utilized in this process:

Henry Jenkins makes a case for the need to include spatiality in discussions about games and stories [13]. He discusses how games are often heavily reliant on physical or imaginative space to work, and this impacts the story for players [13]. Using the board game Monopoly as an example,

Jenkins points out how players think of the narrative as, "I rolled the dice, moved the seven spaces, and landed on your hotel-laden property, leading to bankruptcy" over and above narratives such as, "a fortunate chance card draw gained me some capital to invest in my properties" [13]. Physically moving the tokens around the board is important. Similarly, the movement of Nyaa and Naiee through the world is important to players of *Brothers*. Many fantastic, diverse environments are encountered between the beginning and end of the quest. Players use these environments to describe the action, contextualize on-screen information, and recount their adventures. However, macro-level movement just doesn't fall within the scope of this paper's argument. For this reason, most of the examples used to illustrate points will be drawn from the prologue and epilogue of the game, sequences that share much of the same environment.

Eric Zimmerman defines four terms critical to digital video games: narrative, interactivity, play, and games [14]. His definition of narrative, borrowed heavily from J. Hillis Miller, has three components [14]. First, an initial state is changed, leading to insight. Second, narrative isn't just the events as they occur, but their personification through a medium. Finally, this representation relies on patterning and repetition. For this paper's discussion of narrative in *Brothers*, mostly the first component of Zimmerman's discussion is adopted. The game presents default states, changes those states, and the characters (and player) learn through them. Narrative will be considered distinct from, though certainly influenced by, interactivity.

Zimmerman's definition of interactivity focuses on four modes of narrative interactivity [14]. For this paper's discussion of interactivity in *Brothers*, Zimmerman's third mode of interactivity is referenced. This mode includes the user's overt participation such as clicking or following rules. Our analysis is focused on the player's engagement in explicit interactivity by moving joysticks and pushing buttons. This can also lead to Zimmerman's first mode (the player's button pushing leads the text to leave an imprint), and possibly even the fourth (after the player's button pushing, they may seek out others who were impacted by the game).

III. ANALYSIS

A. Conveying Characteristics

Nyaa and Naiee are portrayed to the player and distinguished from one another in many ways. The older Nyaa is taller and has more mature, close-cropped dark hair, where the younger Naiee has longer, tousled lighter hair. Nyaa has a deeper voice than Naiee's child-like, high-pitched voice. None of this is revolutionary. However, one of the primary advantages of *Brothers'* one-player cooperative approach is that it allows distinguishing character traits to be shown to the player through gameplay. In six instances throughout the game, the smaller Naiee's action on a large lever fails to budge it. Nyaa's action on the same levers activates it, showing that Nyaa is stronger than Naiee. Similarly, in seven instances throughout the game, the smaller Naiee can slip through gaps in a fence that Nyaa cannot fit through. This shows that although Naiee is weaker than his older brother, his small stature has advantages. These aren't the only instances that

showcase the physical traits of the brothers, but they help highlight how the features are discovered and utilized by the player during gameplay. This communicates traits more comprehensively than if the same information were shown passively. For example, a cut scene could be used to show Nyaa lifting something Naiee could not. Or, even less transparently, the game could outright list the capabilities of each character to the player (e.g. “Nyaa can lift things Naiee can’t” or “Nyaa has a strength of 20. Naiee has a strength of 10”).

Physical traits aren’t the only characteristics *Brothers* portrays through interaction. Nyaa and Naiee’s personalities are also conveyed through contextual action throughout the game. An instance near the end of the prologue highlights this. A raised bridge is attended to by a sleeping NPC. Nyaa’s action on the NPC attempts to gently stir the man from his slumber, but fails. Naiee’s action on the NPC douses the man with a nearby bucket of water, jolting him awake as Naiee laughs. Immediately thereafter, Naiee’s action on the NPC fails to convince him to lower the bridge. However, Nyaa’s action on the NPC shows the man their map and the man relents, lowering the bridge and clearing the path. This sequence shows Naiee to be mischievous and perhaps a bit impatient, though ultimately successful. However, it also hints at consequences for childish action and the need for authoritative explanation from Nyaa. More personality traits revealed to the player through interaction in other instances include Naiee’s curiosity, Naiee’s affinity with nature, Nyaa’s protectiveness, and the boys’ joint caring for life.

These traits are often reinforced through the game’s cut scenes, but the point is that their inclusion in the gameplay impresses on the player to a greater degree because of the added interactivity. *Brothers*’ unique feature, being able to play both characters simultaneously, enhances this for two reasons. First, we are more effective at distinguishing between objects (or people) when they are adjacent in space. Other games let you play as multiple characters, but the lack of simultaneous, on-screen control makes discerning differences in traits more difficult.

Secondly, playing as both characters simultaneously enables the joint contextual actions. This is where action from both Nyaa and Naiee in the same space are required. These joint actions can be thought of like a tag-team move, and they can convey different information about both characters. In an example from the prologue mentioned above, joint action on a cliff face causes Nyaa to boost Naiee up to a ledge that is out of reach to either character individually. This maneuver shows the older sibling’s trait of greater comparative strength (Nyaa boosts) and the younger sibling’s trait of lower comparative weight (Naiee is boosted). A similar mechanic is used in other games, but never with a single player controlling multiple characters. For example, *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* also uses contextual actions to allow multiple characters to reach higher elevations than they could individually, but multiple players controlling one character apiece carry out these actions [15]. These joint contextual actions in *Brothers* also serve as a convenient example of how the characters cooperate with one another to complete tasks. Nyaa and Naiee’s teamwork is essential to the successful

fulfillment of their mission, and the player controlling both characters as they overcome obstacles nicely illustrates this.

B. From Characteristics to Emotional Impact

While the ability to convey character traits through play is important, the greatest advantage of *Brothers*’ system is in how the gameplay can lend emotional weight to the story. Certainly, building fleshed-out characters is part of the equation. Allowing the player to enact Naiee’s affection toward animals or Nyaa’s protectiveness of his little brother leads to emotional investment. Repetition of these mechanics over the course of the game ends up reinforcing the character traits, converting a discovery (“Oh, look, Naiee cares about animals”) into an expectation (“I bet if I move Naiee to this animal and interact, a positive reaction will result”). For a concrete example of this, consider the large lever puzzle element. After the first couple of chapters, any time a player encounters a familiar large lever, they know that the solution is to have Nyaa interact with it, because Naiee is unable to. The brothers’ physical traits (Nyaa is strong, Naiee is weak) are simultaneously expected and reinforced. An example of this reinforcement involving joint interaction is the cliff face puzzle element. The player knows that the solution is to perform a joint interaction with both brothers, with Nyaa boosting Naiee to the upper platform. Nyaa’s strength and Naiee’s stature are driven home.

Although this expectation seems mundane, the ability to subvert it is extremely powerful. Near the end of the game (in chapter 7), Nyaa is mortally wounded. In addition to the typical emotional impact (“One of the characters is really hurt!”), the player is now faced with the mechanical turmoil of only controlling one character when they are used to controlling two. The shift is subtle at first. After Nyaa is injured, Naiee supports him and leads him out of a cave. Only one of the controller’s joysticks (Naiee’s) is affecting the movement of both brothers. The game contextualizes this to the player because one character is aiding the other’s movements. In the next scene, Naiee must complete a task individually. Again, the singular controls make sense contextually because Naiee is adventuring while Nyaa stays behind. Near the end of the chapter, Nyaa dies, leaving Naiee alone to complete the quest.

Before explaining how this traumatic event is communicated to the player through gameplay, it is important to first acknowledge that the process of creating a gameplay expectation and then revoking it for dramatic effect is not unique to *Brothers*. For example, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* features a gameplay mechanic of rewinding time [16]. Though available for most of the story, this ability is revoked for the game’s finale. The player’s sudden lack of ability to correct their mistakes heightens the dramatic tension and requires increased concentration. Jerry Holkins, popular games industry writer and co-creator of the web comic Penny Arcade, wrote of the experience that, “...it’s like walking a tightrope. I literally tingled in my extremities at the end...” [17]. Combined, these two facets are intended to increase the satisfaction of successfully completing the game. *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* achieves its impact by creating a hole. *Brothers* achieves its impact by creating a hole *and then filling it*.

Naiee's fear of water and inability to swim is a recurring aspect throughout the game. The opening cut scene includes a flashback of Naiee watching his mother drown while he is unable to help her in the boat. At several points in the game, the brothers find themselves dropped in or needing to cross water too deep to wade through. In these instances, the player triggers Naiee's action on Nyaa, causing him to cling to Nyaa's back as Naiee swims. This mechanic is important enough to warrant one of the game's three *Prompts* when it occurs for the first time in the prologue. The swimming element occurs four more times throughout the game, with the last one occurring during the epilogue, after Nyaa's death but before the completion of their quest.

This final swimming scene is where the figurative hole gets filled. A cut scene sets the stage: Naiee is discouraged by the fact that he has to cross water, a visage of his dead mother appears and comforts him, and he enters the water as the cut scene ends. Naiee will drown if the player doesn't do something, but the button for Naiee's action has no effect. It is the button reserved for Nyaa's contextual action that allows Naiee to swim. In the game, Naiee is figuratively drawing on his dead older brother's strength to proceed. For the player, Nyaa's action button is literally keeping Naiee alive. The scene is successful because *Brothers'* designers introduced a mechanic that embodied the characters' traits, repeated that mechanic throughout the game to reinforce the traits and create an expectation in the player, and then subverted the mechanic by allowing a dead sibling's action to empower the living.

Before the completion of the game, this subversion is repeated for two more elements previously discussed. First, activation of a large lever is required to move a platform. Naiee's contextual action fails to budge the lever (consistent with the rest of the game), but if the player presses Nyaa's action button, Naiee is able to wrestle the lever into position. Second, a cliff face must be scaled to reach higher elevation. Naiee's contextual action fails to scale the rocks, but Nyaa's leads to Naiee taking a running start and vaulting up.

Together, the subversion of these three elements can have an incredible impact on the player. The game mechanics themselves are designed to affect the player, plus the story's impact being delivered narratively. The player still watches a cut scene of Naiee grieving over Nyaa's body and still hears the sobbing, but they are also playing the loss of the character.

IV. CONCLUSION

Brothers uses an innovative design to communicate emotion through an additional interface channel. Video games operate through audio, visual, tactile, and interactive means. As players, we hear sounds, see sights, feel feedback, and perform actions. Bizzocchi et al argue that a game's interface can be

'narrativized' in order to directly support story experience [18]. *Brothers* confirms this, showing how a well-designed interactive channel can indeed carry an emotional payload. Individuals, groups, and companies interested in impactful video games would do well to study *Brothers'* design and consider similar approaches for their own titles. As well, *Brothers'* successful combination of emotion and gameplay may reveal a potential area for future study.

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