

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Braid*
Platform: Xbox 360
Genre: Puzzle/Platforms
Release Date: August 6, 2008
Developer: Jonathan Blow
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jonathan Blow

Overview

In *Braid*, the player takes the role of Tim, a man that is on a quest to save a princess. As in many platforming classics, the player knows very little about both Tim and the Princess, but *Braid*'s storyline becomes clearer as the player progresses through the game's puzzle-filled levels. Each of the game's worlds sheds some light on Tim's backstory, his relationship with the princess, and the reasons behind his desire to rescue her. In *Braid*, each level starts in a room filled with books, where the player can read about Tim's past, and the events that led to his current situation.

Braid's uniqueness relies on its deep story, its perfect blending of narrative and gameplay, and its analysis of an interesting topic: the inevitable passing of time and the concept of causality attached to it. Unlike many other platforming and puzzle games, *Braid*'s main focus is on the story, putting the gameplay elements to the service of storytelling and the game's narrative.

Characters

- **Tim**

Although Tim is the main character, the player knows very little about him or his circumstances. Every one of Tim's attributes is relevant when trying to understand *Braid*'s story, and reflects the dissonant nature of the game. One of Tim's most noticeable attributes is his silence, as well as his inability to react to anything but pain, making him an eerie and strange character. In addition, Tim's appearance completely clashes with the environments that surround him. Tim's attire is both elegant and realistic, something that does not fit most of the game's worlds, which set in a fantasy universe filled with incredible creatures. Even his hair, of a strange bright red, seems to be out of place. To add to this contrasting

effect, Tim keeps a smile of satisfaction and contemplation throughout the whole game, even when he is facing dangerous enemies and challenging puzzles.

- **The princess**

As it happens with Tim, the player knows very little about the Princess, and only at the end does the player see her for the first time. Through the game's story, the player learns that Tim and she had some kind of relationship, and that Tim made a mistake at some point. Although the goal of the game is to rescue her from an "evil monster", the player quickly learns that Tim might have never met her before.

- **The evil monster**

As with the princess, the player learns about the evil monster at the beginning of the game, but only gets to see him at the end. Surprisingly, the monster does not look evil at all. Not only that, but he strongly resembles Tim. This is not a random fact, and fits the game's conclusion, that implies a strong link between the monster and the main character.

Breakdown

Braid conveys the story to the player in three main ways: through the art, through the gameplay and through the small storybooks at the beginning of each world. Starting with the art, Braid's fantasy-like environments, play a big role in its narrative. Tim starts the game in an unknown city, where the player can only access one building. This building, that could represent Tim's real home, has a modern architecture and style, but it is unclear whether it belongs to the current time or to a not so distant past. Once in the building, the player can explore six different rooms (including the building's attic), each of which has a door that leads to one of the game's six worlds. The game's environment changes completely once Tim enters any of these worlds. After entering a room, Tim finds himself in a fantasy world, where strange bodiless creatures walk around, clouds are platforms that he can step on, and ornamented cannons shoot fireballs at him. Tim's serious and realistic appearance seems to fit the outside part of the building, but feels out of place in any of the building's rooms. The worlds are not trying to represent Tim's life faithfully, but they are rather a representation of Tim's memories. Every time the player travels from "reality" (the building) to a fictitious world (one of the rooms), he is accessing Tim's mind. Each of the rooms brings back a memory about Tim's past and his relationship with the princess. Tim's memories and imagination distort the story, presenting a distorted version of Tim's past life.

The connection between art and narrative does not end with Tim's character and the game's environments. Each of the rooms' doors has a painting above it, which relates to the story told in that world. The painting frames are originally empty, but the player can fill them in by collecting puzzle pieces scattered around the game's worlds. The puzzle pieces that the player needs to collect to see these paintings are a metaphor in themselves: the story of the game is a puzzle that the player needs to solve. The paintings are not key to understanding the story, but they support it and shed light into some of the key elements of Tim's personality.

Not all of Braid's narrative elements are as subtle as the art, and the game has other more straightforward methods to convey the story. When a player enters a new world, he finds himself in a room that contains several books. The player can read the content of these books, which explicitly explain part of Tim's story through text. However, the books usually contain vague metaphors and references that are not clear at first glance, forcing the player to connect the dots and to figure out the connection between the books' events and the game's storyline.

Regarding the gameplay, one of Braid's differentiating elements is the perfect fit between game mechanics and storytelling. In Braid, the game mechanics are the ultimate way of expressing Tim's feelings and desires. Tim's time-related powers are directly connected to the game's events, and they are key to both solving the game's puzzles and understanding Braid's story.

In addition to using the art, the gameplay, and the books as unique narrative elements, Braid also succeeds at presenting a deep storyline that slowly unveils as the game progresses. In Braid, the player starts knowing very little, and it is not until he enters the first world, that he gets a vague sense of what is happening in the game.

Entering the first room is a confusing experience in itself. The first thing players see when they enter this room is the title "2- Time and forgiveness", which indicates that players have just accessed world two, rather than world one. World one, as it turns out, is not the first world of the game, but the last one. The game is challenging players to make sense of a complex story without telling them a key part of it: the beginning. After the confusing world title, the player gets to read the world's introductory books. In this "first" world called "Time and Forgiveness", the player learns that Tim used to have some kind of relationship with the princess, but he made a mistake that pushed her away. Tim is now looking for the princess with the intention of undoing his mistake, as well as saving her from what the books call an "evil monster". Interestingly enough, the power that Tim gets in this world is the very physical representation of his desire to fix his mistakes. In "Time and Forgiveness", Tim can travel back in time, effectively undoing any mistakes he made during the level. The painting on top of the world's door adds to the "mistake" theme, providing a cryptic reference to a moment that Tim would like to take back. The painting shows a woman –maybe the princess- reaching for a bottle of wine. However, upon reaching the bottle, the woman fails to grab it and instead knocks it down. Within seconds, a small mistake in the woman's actions has led to her spilling the wine. The lesson is clear: some decisions that take seconds to make, lead to mistakes and unforeseen consequences, which are impossible to take back. Tim's new power lets him change the cause-effect mechanism, effectively removing the damage of wrong decisions, without removing the knowledge acquired from them.

After "Time and Forgiveness", the player gets to enter world three, "Time and Mystery". The story explained in this world is a lot more obscure than the one told in world two, and it mixes past and present events. "Time and Mystery" tells the story of Tim's time-related powers, which he obtained in the previous world, and their effect on his relationship with the princess. The books explain that Tim's ability to go back in time have led to a perfect relationship with the Princess, by allowing him to undo any of his mistakes. Tim, the books mention, lives for the Princess, and all of his actions show his desire to make her happy. Tim does not get a new power in this chapter, but instead encounters a new kind of game entity: green-glowing objects which are not affected by

the passing of time. These objects stay the same even when Tim is going back in time, remaining in their present state as if time was flowing normally. The objects, like any other element in Braid, relate to Tim's story, and their inalterability represents Tim's desire to be free from the Princess' influence. The importance of this chapter relies not only on the story, but also on the fact that the narrative switches from past to present. Until now, the player thought that the relationship between Tim and the princess happened in the past. However, in world three, the story refers to a power that the player acquired a few moments ago. Maybe Tim's relationship with the Princess is not a matter of the past, but is part of the present, and the player is witnessing it right now. Maybe, it has not even happened yet. The painting on top of this world's door also reflects Tim's desire to escape. It portrays him as a sad young man, holding a glass a wine. It could be that Tim used alcohol as a way to escape from reality and from the princess's reach.

After "Time and Mystery", players move on to world number four. This world, known as "Time and Place", gets into the topic of nostalgia and the remembering of the past. The books in this chapter talk about Tim's childhood and memories, mentioning that Tim dreaded to be around his family, due to the arguments that usually took place at home. An important hint for understanding the game's plot hides in one of the books at the beginning of the level. In the third book, the game mentions how Tim has improved since his university years, and has become a more confident person. The book ends with an interesting sentence: the change in Tim's personality, the book explains, is bringing him closer to the Princess, *if she exists*. This simple sentence is an important revelation: the princess that Tim is trying to rescue, the princess that he shared (or will share) moments with, might not even exist. What the game is trying to tell the player is that this princess might not be someone, but something. The princess, after all, might just be a metaphorical representation of Tim's aspirations. The new mechanic in "Time and Place" has to do with the before mentioned nostalgia. In this world, Tim can control time with his movement. By walking forward, Tim can make time move forward, and by walking backwards, he can make time move backwards. Anytime Tim moves, the player can hear a lullaby playing in the background. In this case, Tim's movements and their effect on time represent Tim going back to his childhood memories. This idea is reinforced by the world's painting, which shows Tim's old room in his parent's house.

World number five introduces a story element that is as revealing as it is confusing. Called "Time and Decision", the level reveals that Tim decided to leave the Princess at some point in their relationship. The surprise comes, however, from the last words that Tim says before leaving her: "I have to go save the Princess". If he is with the princess, why does he say these words before leaving her? Are there indeed, two princesses in the game? Is there a metaphorical princess, a goal that Tim is trying to pursue, and another one, a real person, that Tim neglected to rescue the first princess? Although hints to answer these questions appear in world one, the game leaves the final interpretation to the player. Tim's power in this world supports the idea that two princesses (either real or metaphorical) might exist. In "Time and Decision", Tim can create a clone of himself, which repeats his past actions. While his clone repeats his past mistakes, the real Tim can take the right path and avoid damage. As it happened with the previous chapter, the painting in "Time and Mystery" shows a part of Tim's personality, but it is not specially revealing story wise. The painting shows Tim in an unknown city, where he seems to

have found something, a glowing object that might very well represent the ring he finds in world six.

World number six, “Hesitance”, is the “last” world of the game before the player reaches world one. The level explores Tim’s feelings toward the princess in more depth, a talks about how, after looking for the princess for a long time, all of Tim’s thoughts and actions have started to revolve around her. Whether the princess is metaphorical or not, Tim feels as if he has married her: she is always in his mind. Her constant presence is a big burden on Tim’s life, and it has started to affect his relationship with the people around him. A wedding ring serves as a metaphor for Tim’s obsession with the princess: the ring is always with him, just like her. Being around the ring has a negative effect on Tim and his surroundings, making the environment feel heavier, and making everything, including time, move slower. The painting in this chapter is not as revealing as the ones that came before it. It shows Tim as a child, surrounded by people but not interacting with them. He seems sad and immersed in his own thoughts.

After completing all worlds from two to six, the player finally gets the chance to access the first world of the game. This world does not have a title, and its story is unique. For the first time, the world’s books seem to be talking about a real person facing real events. The use of metaphors and fantasy elements is considerably less frequent than in other chapters. Both this last world, and the Epilogue that comes afterwards, describe Tim as some kind of scientist, who is looking for something that the game refers to as “the princess”. Small hints about what the princess is, are scattered among the texts in these two last chapters. If the players collected all of the secret items in the game, they discover a terrifying truth. The princess, as suspected, might not be a real person, but just a metaphorical representation of Tim’s project as a scientist: the invention of the atomic bomb. His obsession with the bomb, might have affected his other personal relationships, including one with a real world woman, the other princess, whom he neglected to pursue his scientific goal.

The gameplay, as always, supports all of the ideas presented in the chapter. In this last world, Tim sees the princess and the evil monster for the first time. Although at first glance, it seems like the princess is asking for Tim’s help, it is soon clear that she is running away from him. Tim is not the savior that the player saw throughout the game, but a monster instead. That “evil monster” that the books talked about, is the one that helps the princess “run away” from Tim. Being that the chapter is labeled as world one, it is very possible that the events in this world do not actually represent the end of the story (the rescue of the princess), but the beginning of it. Tim is indeed a monster, which is about to create a mechanism intended to hurt millions of people. This mechanism (the princess) is running away from him, but not for long.

Strongest Element

Braid’s strongest element comes from its subtle narrative elements, like the art or the gameplay. Unlike many other games, each small artistic detail in Braid helps with both telling and developing the story. The dissonant environments set the overall tone of the game, and warn the player that the game’s universe might not be a real place, but just part of Tim’s mind. The paintings above each one of the rooms’ doors give small hints about Tim’s personality, without revealing too much, and reward the achievers that try to find all of the puzzle pieces. The gameplay also supports the story, and Tim’s special

abilities help the player make the connection between the books' stories and Tim's present, past, and future.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite Braid's attention to detail and its power to tell a story through untraditional elements, its most revealing storytelling mechanism is the books. Players that ignore these books, just focusing on the game's puzzles, gameplay, and art, are very likely to miss most of the meat of the story. To them, the game might seem to be about rescuing a princess, even when Braid's story goes far beyond that. The main problem with the book's mechanic is that it requires the player to make the effort to read. In a world as mysterious as the one presented in Braid, players feel an urgent desire to explore, to know more. The books are a challenge in the sense that they can break the game's pace, because they force players to stop, sometimes for a very long time, and read. Since the text they present is usually cryptic and long, the player can easily feel exhausted after reading, and not dedicate enough time to reflection. Overall, in a game with such a heavy art and musical component, the books feel like a slightly underwhelming resource for telling the game's complex story.

A good alternative approach could be to take advantage of Braid's art and use it to further explore Tim's past. Putting illustrations in the worlds' backgrounds, or adding small cut scenes at the beginning of each level, would help with reducing the amount of information that the books need to convey. This method fits better with the rest of the game, since it uses an element already present in Braid (the art) and at the same time provides a good way for the player to learn about Tim's story in an effortless way.

Highlight

The best moments in Braid come from the first episode, which the player gets to play at the very end of the game, and from the Epilogue that follows. Up until this point, the player sees Tim as a knight that is looking for his beloved princess, whom someone evil has captured. However, the last episode shows Tim in a completely different light: he might not be the rescuer, but the monster itself. He is not whom the princess wants to meet, but whom she is trying to avoid. That evil monster that the game has been talking about is no one but Tim, the game's hero. If that revelation was not enough, the epilogue adds more shock to the mix. The princess might not be real, but just a representation of Tim's obsession with his research, and of his desire to find a way to develop the atomic bomb. Not only is Tim a monster, but he is in the search of a monstrous mechanism.

These two chapters completely challenge the player's interpretation of the story up until that moment, and allow the game to remain interesting from beginning to end. Although the player can figure out most of the key story elements before world 1, it is almost impossible to make full sense of Braid's complex story without knowing the two simple facts presented in the last two worlds. With these plot twists, the game forces the player to reconsider all of his previous, providing a powerful end that keeps the player thinking and reflecting.

Critical Reception

The game came out to critical acclaim, and at the time was the highest rated game for XBLA on Metacritic.

Most reviews praised Braid's innovative gameplay, saying that although it might be inspired in other games, it allowed for the creation of unique puzzles and challenges never seen before. Dan Whitehead from Eurogamer, praised Braid by saying that although games like Prince of Persia had the "time-rewinding" mechanism, the time mechanic was only part of Braid's foundation, and that his other powers were what really made the game challenging and complex.

Many reviews also focused on the fine line between games and art, with Braid's beautiful environments and music being a big part of many critical reviews. Xbox World Australia, for example, touched this topic by saying "Braid is a beautiful game and an amazing experience, and whether or not you think games can be considered works of art – or if it even matters – you simply owe it to yourself to play Braid". Many other critics had similar views, and mentioned that regardless of whether the player likes the game or not, Braid is art. Seth Bland from DarkZero, for example, said, "The fact is, Braid is art. There, I said it. Not only can it be appreciated aesthetically, but it was clearly created with the intention of the finished product being a work of art."

Braid's deep and complex story also received praise from many critics. Gaming Age mentions in their critique that "The story of Braid is definitely open for interpretation, and there's subtext aplenty for players who want to debate what the story could possibly mean.", remarking that although there is a great story in it, Braid also offers enjoyment for those who don't fully understand it. Other critics focus on the perfect blend between Braid's mechanics and plot. Ryan David, from Giant Bomb, said, "I eventually found the game's story and the way it plays against the gameplay to be academically interesting, and the game's final payoff is terrific".

Lessons

- There is not a right way to tell a story. Telling a story from beginning to end is just one possible approach, but there are many other ways. A game can tell a story from end to beginning, it can skip parts, or it can only reveal fragments of it.
- As with some books and movies, it is not mandatory to explain the story in detail and explicitly, and it is all right to leave some (or most) details of the story to interpretation.
- Dialog and text are not the only way to tell a story. Developers can use many other resources to communicate with the player, such as art, music or gameplay. These mechanisms encourage the player to think, and to pay attention to detail in order to understand the game.
- Gameplay can be there to serve the narrative, and not necessarily the other way around. The usual game structure, of gameplay with a complementary story that explains it, is not the only one. A game can revolve around a story, and the gameplay can emerge from the events that take place in the game.
- Simple mechanics can lead to very complex puzzles. It does not matter if the game's mechanics are present in other games, but rather if the game uses them in

a way that is innovative and surprising to the player. Going back in time is nothing new to the game's industry, but Braid's puzzles make players feel like they have never seen anything similar before.

Summation

Braid, as opposed to other games, is a story disguised as a game, and all of the elements in the game serve the story and the characters. From the art to the music and the narrative elements, Braid constantly gives hints on what the story is about, and reveals key details about its character's personality. However, whether players understand Braid's story or not, they can still enjoy the experience. Its unique use of time-based mechanics, its challenging puzzles and its beautiful environments, can attract and entertain a broad audience. Only the more analytic players, the ones that want to go beyond what the game seems to offer on the surface, can understand Braid inherent beauty and its reflection on topics that are not so common in games nowadays, such as love, relationships, and the inevitable passing of time.