

Braid and the Bomb

Creating Political Meaning with Time Travel

Lachlan Marnoch

Video games are meaningful. It is very difficult to play a video game without taking some form of meaning from it, whether that meaning has been created through the player's interactions with its world or whether it has been conveyed through discursive techniques. Increasingly, games are being used as a medium to make a deliberate political statement, often through the method of proceduralism. Other games, considered constructivist or weakly procedural (Skolnik, 2013, p. 147), allow the player to build their own meaning. The video game *Braid* (Number None, Inc., 2009) doesn't fit firmly into either category, appropriating elements of both strong and weak proceduralism.

Most of the discussion around *Braid* has focused on its innovative gameplay and puzzle design, its striking visuals, or its status as an independently-funded game. There has also been a good deal of speculation on its deeper meaning. This essay will specifically explore the ways in which *Braid* creates meaning and how it fits into procedural theory.

Braid uses its strict rules and mechanics to establish a metaphorical meaning, which is open to interpretation. This seems immediately contrary to the ethos of proceduralism. Proceduralism is a theory concerning the ways in which the rules of a game can create meaning and promote authorial intent (Skolnik, 2013, p. 147). Skolnik (2013, p. 151) proposes that strongly procedural games have a fixed set of rules and a limited number of possible actions, which are used to define the author's meaning. Meanwhile, weakly procedural games have an open rule set and either an open meaning or one that is defined more by the game's semiotic content (that is, the implications of the narrative, sound, and art) than its mechanics.

Braid does have fixed rules and a small number of actions available to the player. There is only one way to solve every puzzle and complete every stage. So how are these rules used to affect meaning?

The game, a puzzle-platformer, allows the player to reverse time as often as he likes: for example, to undo Tim's (the avatar's) death. This mechanic is the core of the game, and is used in a number of novel ways as it goes on. The player is allowed to make as many mistakes as he wants, and he can simply undo them without consequence. He is given very little freedom in the actions he must perform to solve a puzzle or clear a level, but he is given unlimited freedom in discovering those actions. This contrasts starkly with other platformers, such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D4, 1985), in which dying too many times resets the entire game. Jonathan Blow, the game's designer, intended *Braid* to be a deconstruction of trends in game design (Vadukul, 2009). The intentional forgiveness of the player's mistakes could also have a deeper implication. The player has to use his errors to learn about the game world, to learn how to solve a puzzle and traverse a level. In this way the game promotes the idea that, not only should a person should be forgiven their errors rather than repeatedly punished, but that mistakes are a crucial component of learning (Jagoda, 2013, p. 746). This concept is reinforced by the symbolic content of the game, which this essay will explore more deeply later on.

By indicating its underlying connotations with this kind of subtlety, the game sidesteps what Skolnik refers to as “simulation fever”, in which the player rejects a game’s message because of its lack of mechanical accuracy in simulating a realistic system (Skolnik, 2013, p. 61). *Braid* has no pretences about being a simulation, with its warped rules of time and space and painting-like artistic style. So even though the message of forgiveness is implied rather than directly addressed, perhaps *Braid* succeeds in propagating it where a more strongly procedural game would fail.

In this sense, in the fact that the deeper meaning of the mechanics is not made explicit to the player, the game is weakly procedural; but in the way these mechanics are constructed, in that they revolve around a limited number of potential actions and that there is only a single play-style, the game is strongly procedural.

This metaphoric interpretation of *Braid*’s rules would be easy to dismiss if it were not for the deeply metaphorical nature of its other aspects. The meaning created by *Braid*’s rules can only be considered thoroughly alongside that of its non-mechanical content. *Braid* uses this content to create a meaning, of which there are multiple interpretations, in a way that can be considered weakly procedural.

Braid rejects the conventional storytelling methods used in games (Arnott, 2012, p. 434). It does have a plot, but it is largely communicated through figurative language. The story and gameplay of *Braid* are completely separate until the final level: the narrative is told in blocks of text at the beginning of each world, documenting Tim’s struggle to find the Princess.

The Princess, whom Tim doggedly pursues, is in fact an allegory for the atomic bomb, perhaps more widely representing scientific discovery, and Tim is a member of the Manhattan Project, the team who built the first atomic bombs. There is a good deal of evidence for this interpretation, not least of which is the inclusion in the final level of a well-known description of the first nuclear tests, including the famous quote “Now we are all sons of bitches” (Jagoda, 2013, p. 757). The backgrounds of the worlds become increasingly apocalyptic as *Braid* progresses. In the final level, the Princess is found at last, and she helps him negotiate the last sequence of puzzles; but time was actually in reverse, and it is revealed that the Princess was not aiding Tim, but running from him. The player is left with the sudden revelation that Tim was the monster all along, and the Princess didn’t want him to find her. In a secret ending, when Tim finally touches the Princess, she shakes uncontrollably and there is an explosion sound effect as white light consumes the screen. He found the bomb.

Braid not only uses these final events to turn the “damsel-in-distress” trope on its head, but to put forth a complicated system of ideas. Taking the Princess as a metaphor for the atomic bomb, the last moments of the game act as Tim’s epiphany: by trying to save the world, in designing the atomic bomb with good intentions, he has in fact doomed it. The game uses allegory to explore the guilt of these scientists, through the exploration of Tim’s psyche seen in the game’s text, but its ultimate attitude towards them is a matter of differing perception. One might take the game to be anti-science. Perhaps Tim’s ability to reverse time is a reflection of his desire to take back the thing he has created, the atomic bomb, and acts as a counterpoint to the reality. Nuclear weapons can never be taken back. In that sense the game could easily be a warning against the dangers of meddling with atoms, of playing God.

However, the game can just as easily be saying the opposite. Jagoda (2013, p. 759) proposes that the deliberate obscurity surrounding the game’s plot, in tandem with the atomic bomb metaphor, is an allegory for the furtiveness of the Manhattan Project and the ongoing secrecy surrounding

military build-up during the subsequent Cold War, and even to this day. He goes on to suggest a link between this secrecy and modern-day developments such as computing and the Internet, which have their ultimate roots in military research. In a fantastically post-modern twist, this mingles the guilt of Tim and the Manhattan Project scientists with the guilt of the player himself, enjoying *Braid* thanks to technology that arose from desires just like those driving the atom bomb. Where do the consequences end? To what extent can the positive outcomes of a scientific endeavour (nuclear energy, a greater understanding of the universe) be separated from the horrifying consequences (Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Bikini Atoll)? Perhaps, in this way, *Braid* is promoting forgiveness, of science in general or just of the atom bomb scientists, which reflects the interpretation of the game's rules discussed earlier.

Although this interpretation seems to stand out as at least plausible, it is just an interpretation. There are multiple ways in which the game's meaning can be read. This, and the fact that much of *Braid*'s meaning is generated through semiotic content, seems to suggest a weakly procedural game; however, the way the meaning is also conveyed through the game's rules and mechanics is a hallmark of a strongly procedural game.

Interestingly, Jonathan Blow, the game's designer, has stated that there are indeed multiple interpretations of the game's narrative (Dahlen, 2008). In an abstract way, this supports the idea of strong proceduralism, which connotes authorial intent in meaning. Blow intended for the game's meaning to be interpretative, so in a sense it is a strongly procedural meaning.

Braid seems to fit somewhere on the spectrum of procedurality proposed by Skolnik (2013, p. 161), combining elements of both weakly and strongly procedural games. I would argue that in general it is weakly procedural, while its strict (and at the same time not so strict) game rules, usually considered a facet of strongly procedural games, are used to encourage the player to ponder the game's meaning with greater depth.

The game's politics are far from definite. Even when they are found, it is not certain whether the player's interpretation is what was originally intended. In this way, *Braid* may imply a novel approach to the construction of meaning: guiding the player procedurally toward a set of possible meanings, and then allowing him to pick the one which resonates most profoundly with him. *Braid* has demonstrated once again the flexibility of the video game as a form of art and as a platform for political discussion.

Bibliography

- Arnott, L. (2012). Unraveling Braid: Puzzle Games and Storytelling in the Imperative Mood. *Bulletin of Science Technology and Society*, 32, 433-440.
- Bogost, I. (2006). Playing politics: Videogames for politics, activism, and advocacy. *First Monday*. Retrieved October 26, 2014, from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1617/1532#b2>
- CBS. (2012, August 13). *Jonathan Blow on future of video game industry*. Retrieved from CBSNEWS: <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/jonathan-blow-on-future-of-video-game-industry/>
- Dahlen, C. (2008, August 27). *Game Designer Jonathan Blow: What We All Missed About Braid*. Retrieved October 30, 2014, from The A.V. Club: <http://www.avclub.com/article/game-designer-jonathan-blow-what-we-all-missed-abo-8626>
- Jagoda, P. (2013). Fabulously Procedural: Braid, Historical Processing, and the Videogame Sensorium. *American Literature*, 85(4), 745-780.
- Nintendo R&D4. (1985, September 13). Super Mario Bros. Japan.
- Number None, Inc. (2009, April 10). Braid. USA.
- Skolnik, M. R. (2013). Strong and Weak Procedurality. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 5(2), 147-163.
- Vadukul, A. (2009, September 4). *What made "Braid" a Punk-Rock Video Game? A Look Back at the Innovative Title*. Retrieved October 2014, 30, from Rolling Stone: <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/what-made-braid-a-punk-rock-video-game-a-look-back-at-the-innovative-title-20090904>