

Time for Braid: A Philosophical View of a Digital Game

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“Tim is off on a search to rescue the Princess. She has been snatched by a horrible and evil monster,” (Blow, 2009, World 2). Braid begins on a very straightforward path. The protagonist of the game is on a mission from the beginning of the opening text. The path is outlined and so is the cause of these events “This happened because Tim made a mistake,” (ibid.). What the mistake is, however, is not clear. The player (who controls Tim) thus follows the path that is laid out in order to retrieve the Princess. While doing this, the player discovers more about Tim and the Princess' relationship and the events that led to the kidnapping. I will analyse the game in terms of design and the content of the story whilst also showing some of the philosophical inclinations of these aspects. Having said this, if you wish to play the game in the future, do not read the following because this article is riddled with **spoilers**.

Game Play

The game starts from World 2. There are six worlds in all (1-6) and each world reveals more of the story. The game is essentially a puzzle platformer, a type of game where the player solves puzzles by traversing different types of obstacles. A particularly interesting feature the game has is that the game play and the over-arching story revolves around the reversal of Time. Most of the puzzles are solved through reversing time using the Shift key. The story is fragmented throughout the game. The player receives bits and pieces of the story

depending on the world's theme and begins to piece them together, much like the puzzles within the game-design itself.

Furthermore, fragmentation is a theme that runs throughout the game itself in terms of time. Time is something manipulable throughout, in fact, the player cannot finish most of the puzzles without manipulating time in some way. Time, within the puzzles themselves, becomes fragmented in terms of past, future and present. The past, present and future do not run along as they are traditionally conceived. An example of this is the player beginning the journey in World 2 and finishing the game in World 1. Thus, time takes on an over-arching cyclical structure. When the player discovers Tim's past and how the Princess is kidnapped, the story becomes more intricate and seemingly simple aspects of the overall game and story become complex in hindsight.

The Story

The puzzles and stories of World 2 to World 6 revolve around finding the Princess. The themes of the worlds are centred around their relationship which involve Tim lamenting about time passed. The themes are as follows: World 2: Time and Forgiveness; World 3: Time and Mystery; World 4: Time and Place; World 5: Time and Decision; World 6: Hesitance; World 1 is simply labelled '1', where everything all began (Blow, 2009). Each of these themes denote both the story and the puzzle that the player encounters.

As the player progresses throughout the game, Tim's own absurdist existentialist crisis is also pieced together. The player

learns of Tim's past decisions, his fears and the desperation he feels because of his want to be reacquainted with the Princess. Time weighs upon him: he is both troubled by it in terms of his past and yet cannot achieve his goal without his ability to reverse instances of time (Tim can only reverse time up to a certain point, making him unable to reverse his mistake).

There is also a sense of entrapment that becomes more obvious in hindsight. Time is a trap which Tim cannot escape from. However, as the story progresses, even the Princess becomes a trap for Tim. In World 3 this becomes more obvious, "Tim needed to be non-manipulable. He needed a hope of transcendence. He needed, sometimes, to be immune to the Princess's caring touch," (Blow, 2009, World 3). "Her benevolence has circumscribed you, and your life's achievements will not reach beyond the map she has drawn," (Blow, 2009, World 3). Moreover, as the game goes on, the player encounters the troubling question: Does the princess even exist? In World 1, which is the final world, the player discovers that she does, but this discovery is still unsettling. The player realises that the "horrible and evil monster," (Blow, 2009, World 2) who captured the Princess is none other than Tim himself. The whole game was spent trying to kidnap her once again from the person who rescued her in the first place. The commentary about their relationship takes a completely different tone of voice, "One things remains clear: the Princess turning sharply away, her braid lashing at him with contempt," (Blow, 2009, World 2). The title 'Braid' even takes on new meaning in this context. Thus, the player discovers that Tim is also trapped within obsession.

Braid and The Myth of Sisyphus

In hindsight, the game poses an implicit commentary about free-will or whether there is a deterministic path that is outlined by the game itself. All the puzzles are structured in such a way that there is only one solution to them and Tim's path leads him back to the inevitable (Dahlen, 2008). Moreover, the game leads you back to where you started from: right back to the start screen from which you can start to explore the worlds. Time also becomes cyclical in this respect and Tim's actions also take a repetitive turn: his lamentation and his desperation. This is almost reminiscent of the trap which Sisyphus found himself in. Sisyphus was punished to roll a boulder up a mountain only to watch it roll back down again and to repeat the process (Camus, 1955, pp. 75-76). This is comparable to Tim's situation. He is trapped within these worlds only to find himself repeating the mistake that he avoids to even consider as his own. Both Tim and Sisyphus are punished for their mistakes, for trying to take something that was not theirs to take. And both face time as some sort of confinement. One can clearly see the absurdity of Tim's situation, the futility of this repetition and desperation, however, can we conceive of Tim as Camus had conceived of Sisyphus? At which point could we ever claim a release or happiness for Tim? If, as Camus had proposed, there is absurdity, then at some point there must be some happiness or release because absurdity and happiness are two sides of the same coin (ibid., pp. 77-78). Here I would have to view Tim even more closely to Sisyphus. I can only imagine Tim as having some sort of release when he begins his "search" for the Princess once more, just as when Sisyphus looks upon his rolling rock and begins his journey once again to retrieve it and move on

uphill. Tim has his past mistake behind him and he begins his search within a quasi-heroic framework. As the game progresses, he moves closer to facing his mistake and the absurdity once again.

I would not like to overlap the myth of Sisyphus and Camus' commentary so closely with Braid and its protagonist. However, there are similarities that I could not help but notice during my play-through of the game. Sisyphus was punished because he stole from the gods and he was guilty of many things throughout his existence: theft, manipulation, deceit so on and so forth (Skidmore, 2015). However, one may still feel sympathy for Sisyphus who is given such a futile task. Moreover, it would be a stretch to say that Sisyphus was simply evil. Similarly, the game makes the player reflect upon the story and the play-through as a whole when one arrives at the ending. In World 2, the kidnapper was described as “a horrible and evil monster,” (Blow, 2009, World 2) but one does feel some sort of sympathy for Tim. The player had tried to achieve the goal of saving the Princess and throughout the game the unreliable narrative comes into motion. The player believes that Tim's intentions were just and perhaps even admirable. In this way, I would be very apprehensive of dismissing Tim as evil.

Both Sisyphus and Tim have fatal flaws that result in suffering. In the case of Sisyphus, it was overreaching for immortality and for Tim it was the obsession for the Princess which drove him into delusion. Furthermore, both cannot escape in death. Sisyphus acquired his immortality and faced an eternity of a futility. Tim's ability to rewind time similarly assured that death would not catch up with him. Having viewed these comparisons, I would still

not like to stretch the similarities too far. My wish in comparing the two is to show the absurd position in which the player finds Tim. Moreover, the complexity of the character needed to be developed. When the game begins in such a straightforward fashion, one does not anticipate the distinction between good and evil to become as blurred as it does. To iterate, I would not hesitate to call Tim's actions horrible, but I would not go as far as to call them evil. The whole commentary comes into question in this respect.

The game as a whole deals with philosophical aspects both within the story and throughout the game-play through the way it deals with time and space, both separately at instances and as space-time within different Worlds (Dahlen, 2008). The universe of Braid questions time as it is typically conceived of and allows the player to interact with time in an alternate fashion. Moreover, the overarching story portrays the dynamics of psychology, the notion of fragmentation and the unreliable narrative. The form and content of the game are very much complimentary in terms of accentuating this fragmentation. Even in the epilogue, one cannot feel as though they have deciphered the game completely and that there may still be much more to Tim than what is initially perceived.

∞ **References**

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