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19/9/18

### Brigador: Bringing a Dramaturgical Lens to Games

Since its inception, game studies has pushed for studying the processes games use as the primary mode of interpretation. *Procedural rhetoric* refers to the meaning derived from a game's systems. Games cited for their procedural rhetoric have been classified as part of a proceduralist movement for their desire to put the emphasis on their systems, using their representational elements to convey only the most necessary context (Bogost). While focusing on these games has provided a useful base for the discussion of procedural rhetoric, readings of games emphasizing the representational power of their systems (Treanor and Mateas 1) as a difficult but necessary process to advance the methodology's development (Treanor and Mateas 12). As part of the exploration of proceduralist readings, a performance component was sometimes necessary to help guide the interpretation of a game's systems (Treanor and Mateas 9-12). With a few notable exceptions, dramaturgical methodology and knowledge are often forgotten in game studies in spite of the number of parallels between theater and games. This paper will demonstrate the efficacy of combining dramaturgical approaches with proceduralist readings to better understand the extent of the expressive power of game systems and expand games' ability to include sophisticated content.

### AN EXPLANATION OF DRAMATURGY

Dramaturgy has its roots in Aristotle's *Poetics* as a form of dramatic criticism and as a field that has steadily grown with modern theater. Unlike the critic, the dramaturg is not only

concerned with analyzing a completed production but in informing the production process. In *Ghost Light*, Chemers provides a succinct description of the role: “A *dramaturg* is a member of the artistic team of a production who is a specialist in the transformation of a dramatic script into a meaningful living performance” (5).

This approach to theater understands that a script isn’t a finished product. Instead it’s a structure to be fleshed out by a given production. Dramaturgy itself must focus on performance and text equally. To a game designer this is a familiar problem, illustrated by Liz England with “The Door Problem” which include simple questions like “Are there doors in your game?” to usability questions like “Can the player open every door in the game? Or are some doors for decoration?” These questions are of a performative nature just like the questions of stagecraft and direction. The representative elements in games and theater must be conveyed using some type of system, even if it’s a virtual one. Chemers could almost be asking game design questions when he asks if Macbeth can see the dagger appearing before him (Chemers, *Ghost Light* 72)

The lifecycle of a theatrical production, like the questions above shares procedural similarities with the journey of a game from concept to release. The time from “prototyping” to “ship date” is analogous to a production’s rehearsal period. Both even have some form of prereleases, early access or betas for games and previews for theater, where player/audience feedback and reaction can still be incorporated before the official release/opening night. The ubiquity of the internet has even managed to make the post launch environment of a game much closer to the actual opening of a theatrical production through the shift towards digital distribution.

In the production of any digital media, even if the goal is innocent fun, decisions about how to implement the script or design document must be made - these are, by definition, dramaturgical decisions. As Treanor observes in *BurgerTime: A Proceduralist Investigation*:

Convincing meaning derivations may have nothing to do with the author's intent...partially because relatively few...consider processes as a representational component for authorial expression...and also because procedural systems...cannot be said to mean any *one* thing (3).

Traditionally, it is a production's dramaturg who is central to exploring these kinds of questions. As a medium grows and evolves so too does its need for deeper knowledge bases, hence the increasing prominence and understanding of a dramaturg's role in theatrical production (Chemers, *Ghost Light* 6). While it's still possible for a single developer to make a game, time, money, and scope often dictate the need for specialists. Like theater's technical advances creating the need for specialization, game development has grown its own specialized roles though unfortunately the "dramaturg" per se is not one of them, yet.

Theater and games are alive and their processes require careful examination during and after production. Though the language surrounding *systemic dramaturgy*, dramaturgy for interpreting the aesthetic architecture of a cultural product (Chemers, "Phronesis for robots" 366), betrays its heavily theatrical and Aristotelian origins, the desire for something akin to proceduralist readings is evident. Below is an exploration of what a dramaturgical reading of *Brigador* entails.

## ANALYZING BRIGADOR

*Brigador* is an isometric mech simulation originally released in 2016 by Stellar Jockeys. Like the old combat simulation games from the 1990s including the *MechWarrior* and *Freespace* series, players choose a loadout for their vehicle before each level and have a limited pool of health. The standard set of objectives is to destroy a number of marked targets, vehicles, or buildings inside a given city district.

## BRIGADOR'S FRAMING

The oppressive government of Solo Nobre has fallen once the player starts the game and has descended into the throes of chaos. The lack of leadership has allowed revolutionaries to capture numerous districts. Additionally, the affluent members of society, the Spacers, have taken advantage of the chaos and have begun pillaging the city.

The player's role is a mercenary hired by the Solo Nobre Concern (SNC) whose goal is, ostensibly, to bring order and prosperity back to Solo Nobre. The SNC hints at who they are, admitting to being forced off the planet by revolutionaries led by Great Leader, once the player accepts their contract. While life under Great Leader was still awful, the player's employer is even less interested in the welfare of its would-be subjects. This is reflected in the game's systemic focus on destruction as well as its cast of characters.

The question of role itself is rather prominent in *Brigador*. The most obvious, and procedural, avatar is the player's chosen vehicle with the pilot being more framing focused. Each of the pilots represent the traditional cyberpunk idea of focusing on the people on the fringes of

society (Monahan). All their backstories carry an element of otherness to them and are the reason for the SNC's interest. The contract and SNC are all the more insidious thanks to the pilots always being pulled from one of the city's occupying forces. Without these details, the pilots would simply be a difficulty system, nothing more.

Framing the player as a mercenary then frames the payment system and *Brigador's* omnipresent earnings amount functions identically to an arcade score, save for its presentation. This is especially true considering what is displayed at the end of levels, more a financial report than a traditional score screen. Bumping into a building will damage it, earning the player a few dollars. Even this simple action serves multiple purposes. First it rewards players for engaging with the core destruction system of the game by tying a portion of their reward to their penchant for destruction. Second it serves as both a reminder that the player is in fact piloting a vehicle and to add some amount of minor feedback to all interactions with the environment. Third it calls into question the player's role as a hero, their motivations, and the SNC's shaky justifications for its actions.

#### PROCEDURALIZING A PLACE

As David Will points out in "Brigador and the Art of Sky-High Storytelling", *Brigador* embraces its grid based levels and assets instead of disguising the layout, making it feel like a new, rapidly built city. Descriptions of the districts the player visits often describe how the district's founding or conversion to its current use. The aggressively utilitarian structures reinforce this idea of an authoritarian government that never quite had the means to permanently control its citizens.

Not only do the art assets give Solo Nobre visual character, the very nature of having completely destructible environments makes each space its own systemic personality. Residential areas communicate their density with both the physical layout of buildings and their durability. The industrial areas are often full of explosive structures, making them one of the few places where collateral damage isn't always something to shrug off — a misplaced shot can have catastrophic consequences. The volatile nature of these areas points towards a lack of preparedness for revolution, or even dissidents within the military. After all, a single rogue vehicle is capable of destroying swathes of districts on a whim. Instead, preparations were focused on threats from beyond the walls.

The sometimes random placement of orbital defenses again points to the government's focus on expediency over safety and security. More guns means more defenses and reinforces the isolationist attitude of the government mentioned in the game's opening. Whoever was in control of these, presumably working, weapons pointed at the sky, allowed a group known for violence and hatred of those they deem inferior, into Solo Nobre. The almost immediate breakdown of the government is operationalized, ironically, by a lack of systems, by the guns never firing even as the player encounters more Spacer forces as they play.

Like the guns, ammunition depots are scattered throughout each district, with the occasional exception. Curiously the depots are far more likely to be surrounded by houses and other structures than their destructive cousins, the orbital guns. This plays into the game's themes of chaos in a power vacuum as the player will likely repurpose these structures for their own use. They can turn what was once a reminder of the presence of the government, and even of the

relative safety of living in Solo Nobre, into the ultimate expression of these institutions' failure, destroying everything they built.

Rewarding the player for the depots' destruction again calls back to *Brigador's* framing and the SNC's motives. Unlike the SNC, the occupying forces make sure to keep the depots intact as they have a very clear strategic value. One could argue that removing these strategic buildings will remove enemy forces faster and restore order sooner, but this ignores part of the game's systems. Emptying a depot isn't good enough for the SNC, they must be destroyed. If there was to be any occupational force, destroying the depots wouldn't be encouraged. It's enough to make the war machines less dangerous by removing their supporting infrastructure. As long as goods and money flow through the city, nothing else matters.

## CONCLUSION

*Brigador* may seem dissonant but it isn't concerned with whether violence is justified. Instead it wants players to experience how broken systems perpetuate themselves. Whatever the SNC was before, they created Great Leader and in turn Great Leader created the SNC and the player's participation will no doubt create another Great Leader. This is why it is so focused on destruction and why there is no way to stop it. Without its text, *Brigador* would be just another power fantasy. Without its carefully chosen systems, *Brigador* wouldn't be able to immerse its player so deeply in its immensely broken world.

Without studying the relationship between *Brigador's* systems and representational elements, much of *Brigador's* value beyond pure entertainment wouldn't be as clear. Readings like this one are only the beginning of what dramaturgy can bring to games. With dramaturgy

being brought to games early in development, it would be far easier for games to have their messages resonate with players without the need for as much heavyweight interpretive work on their end.

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