

## 2.4 Losing Big Brother in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*

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### PROLOGUE

*Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2013) is a story-driven 3D adventure game by the Swedish game studio Starbreeze developed for Xbox 360, and also playable on Windows PC and PlayStation 3. In it, the two titular brothers are navigated through an epic, tightly controlled fairy tale world, travelling through enchanting villages, deserted battlefields, experimentation sites, caves and castles, in an attempt to procure medicine for their mortally ill father. Unlike any other games discussed, *Brothers* features what the makers call “co-op play in single player mode”<sup>1</sup>. This means that both brothers are controlled at the same time, negotiating their relationship on the level of gameplay. Most of the game’s puzzles require a combination of the brothers’ skills, resulting in an integration of gameplay progression, player character development, and environmental storytelling (May et al. 2014).

The game starts with the traumatic death of the mother and ends with a family grief scene at the grave of Big Brother Naiaa. When the game opens, we see the title in bold, meandering letters evoking associations

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1 Retrieved from Starbreeze studio’s Steam description on: <http://store.steampowered.com/app/225080/>.

to a Grimm fairy tale book, and resembling *The Path* (2007), a horror game interpretation of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Selecting ‘play’ from the menu initiates a cut sequence in which we see a blond boy kneel in front of a gravestone, overseeing a spectacular, montane landscape. We hear a slow, elegiac folk melody set in a minor key. The sostenuto strokes of a viola and the high-pitched female voice continue as a flashback gives us a glimpse into the context of grief: We see the boy stretch out his arm from a tumbling boat as his mother’s body is pulled away by the sea. This traumatic witnessing of maternal death will serve to establish the boy’s fear of water later on. He is pulled out of his reverie when his Big Brother calls him from off screen. As the camera pans to the right towards the boys’ house, we see Big Brother help the mortally ill father onto a wheelbarrow. Then, the camera swings over to the path leading from the house into town, showing the direction of gameplay progression and switching into ergodic mode.

The prologue starts. Two visual prompts appear, instructing novice players to control ‘Big Brother’ by using the left thumb stick and trigger button, and ‘Little Brother’ via the same controls on the right side. The two conspicuous handles on the wheelbarrow indicate that the brothers must be navigated to either side in order to transport the ill father to town. Some more obstacles are introduced on the way: There is a bridge controlled by a lever, which only Big Brother can operate. There is a ledge, which Little Brother can jump if boosted by Big Brother. These coordination exercises serve to establish Brother’s core mechanic of environmental exploration and contextual action (May et al. 2014).

As the brothers reach the medic’s hut, another cut sequence informs us about the game objective; travel to the Tree of Life to procure medicine for the perishing father. As to the reason why we do what we do, this is already a bonding motif: The brothers lost their mother already; they cannot afford to see another family member die. Furthermore, the endangered attachment figure is their male role model, marking the adventure as a project to bond over and restore a troubled sense of masculine identity (whether or not it succeeds is a different question). At its core, however, the game revolves around the sibling

relationship, and the way it is negotiated through the brothers' different skills and roles.

Game scholars Aaron May et al. have argued that that besides physical characteristics, *Brothers* uses contextual action to portray Nyaa's and Naiee's personalities (May et al. 2014: np). They observe that simultaneous real-time control over the characters enables the game to anchor their similarities and differences in environmental and social contexts. Not only does the brothers' reactions to ledges and levers differ; the game also contains a number of NPCs whose presence triggers specific types of action depending on the brother.

Based on these observations, learning to read *Brothers*' environmental cues is not only a means for progression. It is also a means for storytelling. That Big Brother is the only one able to push the lever means that he is stronger than Little Brother. That Little Brother will sneak through fences and iron bars does not only make him the "little one" but also the "bold one", the "sneaky one". This demonstration of storytelling through repetitive action challenges the well-established game studies assumption that pattern repetition and narrative are naturally opposed (Lindley 2002, Kirkpatrick 2011). Exemplary for this is Lindley's claim that "repetitive patterning involved in gameplay gestalt formation is found to undermine deep narrative immersion" (Lindley 2002: 203). In contrast to this, *Brothers* uses repetition to help us understand the brothers' personalities, and how they function as siblings in their cooperative brotherhood project.

If play is simultaneously also narrative, who tells the story? As players, we are put in the shoes of the brothers, but also slightly besides them. We are the lubricant facilitating the relationship between the brothers and the environment. We learn about them with them and through them, but their abilities are prefabricated, and we must learn to read, rather than build them. They are what Burn and Schott would call "heavy heroes" (Burn/Schott 2004).

## ATTACHMENT

In regard to fraternal bonding, the single player co-op setup comes with interesting opportunities for game design. Navigating two characters around affords a different kind of investment, both in gameplay and the relationship emerging between the characters. I will look at these dynamics in terms of four devices: synergy rules and mechanics, tandem controls, the spatial elastic bond, and markers of gender, suggesting that they articulate a notion of male sibling attachment.

### Synergy

On the level of rules and mechanics, efforts are made to characterise the brother relationship as synergetic. This is done through what May et al. (2014) have called contextual action. Contextual action, the situation-specific activation of a game object, can have two functions. On the one hand it can express a unique skill of one brother, as in the example of the lever, which only Big Brother can control. On the other hand, there are objects like the wheelbarrow which must be operated by both brothers at the same time.

Depending on the gameplay situations, these two functions of synergy must be combined to solve puzzles throughout the game. When it comes to unique contextual actions, these are always balanced between the brothers to make them contribute equally. For example, Big Brother's lever-handling skill is complemented through Little Brother's ability to slide through narrow fences and bars. We first learn these individual skills in separate occasions during the Prologue, before they merge into combination puzzles. Releasing the giant from the cage in chapter 2, requires a combination of previously learned contextual action vocabulary: Little Brother needs to sneak through the fence to steal the guard's key and lure him into the cage, while Big Brother is responsible for opening and closing the cage door. In order to master this symbiotic teamwork task, we first solve the puzzle conceptually by recognising what each brother can do, and then solve it spatially, through correct timing and action.

Figure 12: Screenshot of *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, a tandem contraption requiring simultaneous action



Source: Starbreeze Studios (2013)

The game also introduces situations in which synchronised movement is required. Unlike symbiosis, which emphasises difference and complementarity, synchronicity emphasises what is shared. At all stages during the game we encounter suspicious two-handle contraptions like the wheelbarrow intended to be operated by two brothers at once. The mentioned cave in Chapter 2 is especially sprinkled with two-person contraptions, such as the prominent crank lifting a platform in fig. 12. While the game does not obscure that these objects are made for two, their specific functions have to be learned and ‘practiced’ in order to solve the puzzle.

This also applies to social situations. At the end of the prologue, the boys meet a sleeping guard who must be convinced to lower the bridge. If Big Brother’s contextual action is used, the boy will politely address the man, which proves ineffective. If we act as Little Brother, the boy will pour a nearby bucket of water over the man’s head, waking him up and making him available for Big Brother’s more constructive approach. In social situations like this, the game elegantly couples problem solving with storytelling. By progressing through each puzzle, the players get to

explore each brother's strengths and weaknesses, and their teamwork abilities a bit more.

Over the course of the game, we learn that Little Brother is more childish, playful, and sneaky, while Big Brother is more serious, mature and solution-oriented. Again, nuances emerge from repetition, as in the case where numbers and algorithms express personalities (*FFVII*). I would argue that from this combination of symbiotic and synchronic tasks emerges a sense of equality. As players, we are repeatedly told that the brothers share not only space for action, but initiative, and that without mutual initiative, progression wouldn't be possible.

### **Tandem Controls**

*Brothers'* control scheme has been rightfully acclaimed for its intuitive use of the Xbox 360 controller and its mapping of both brothers' simultaneous actions. What could have been a confusing, hard-to-handle setup is made accessible through comprehensive spatial design, especially through the controller's narrative division into left and right hemispheres (fig. 13). Here, the designers took advantage of two features, the symmetrical layout of the Xbox 360 controller, and the fact that, unlike other controllers such as the Wii mote or the PlayStation move controller, it is intended to be held in two hands. This allows the game to map the brother characters to one respective side of the controller. Each of the player's hands controls one brother.

This mapping comes with a couple of narrative implications. First, the controller doubles as the 'collective space' of brotherhood. It mediates all of the siblings' actions. It is the 'platform' of shared efforts and achievements. In that way, the mapping connects the brothers. Yet,

Figure 13: control scheme of Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons



Source: author

secondly, the mapping also splits the controller space into two equally important halves. This means each brother has a specific role inside the collective space and can perform this role through a thumbstick (movement) and a trigger button (interaction) each. Unlike *Ico*'s mapping, *Brothers* distributes agency equally among the brothers, indicating an eye-level relationship. Even before we know specifics about each brother's action repertoire, we feel that they have a similar impact on the world.

Thirdly, although the same action buttons are used, the contextual actions of each brother are different. This underscores the individuality of Little Brother and Big Brother and offers opportunities for characterisation: Big Brother swims while Little Brother clings on to him; Big Brother communicates in serious ways, Little Brother is more cheeky and affectionate

Finally, the control scheme affects the way players manage the brothers on-screen. Since bigger brother is mapped to the left-hand side, and Little Brother on the right-hand side, it makes sense to align their positions to visually match this experience. The control scheme imposes a 'sibling constellation', which matches visual grammar conventions of presenting old, established information to the left (Big Brother), and future-related new contents (Little Brother) to the right side of the image.

Furthermore, the division between left/old and right/young coincides with the convention to map orientational action, like walking or adjusting the camera on the left, and initiative action, like fighting, picking up objects, interacting with people and commands on the right hemisphere of the controller<sup>2</sup>.

This characterises the brothers as ‘orientation’ brother versus ‘initiative’ brother, which is in line with the unfolding of the plot. In fact, as holder of the Tree of Life map, Big Brother is established as the team’s guide early on, while Little Brother will have to use his initiative to finish the adventure on his own. Arguably, these subtle connotations will only be accessible for players familiar with dominant mapping conventions of console games. For such players, however, Brother’s particular right/left division adds a nuance to the brothers’ character traits.

### Sibling Space

Like in *Ico* and *Shelter* (discussed in the following chapter), bonding rituals are realised inside the affordances of a 3D space. These two games feature different ways to regulate inter-body space, using an elastic bond (*Ico*) or a programmed invisible bond between the characters (*Shelter*). *Brothers* uses a combination of these devices. The invisible bond device is used to regulate the maximum distance between the character.

Like in *Shelter*, this produces normalcy: The brothers simply stick together because they cannot be apart. On the other hand, the player needs to interpret what to do within their defined ‘sibling space’. Again, an ideal solution emerges from the tightly authored puzzles, and the affordances of left and right controller space.

Contextual action allows the game to play around with different spatial constellations. While the brothers usually walk side by side, there

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2 Examples for this convention can also be found in both console games, *FFVII* (chapter 2.1) and *Ico* (chapter 2.2).

are situations in which one brother must take care of the other. Two examples are the swimming sequences, in which Little Brother has to hold onto Big Brother's shoulder due to his post-traumatic fear of water, and the campfire scene, in which Big Brother must fend off wolves with a stick, while Little Brother hides behind him.

These situations are similar to the shadow fight dynamics in *Ico*. Yorda, too, needs to be kept close, and like in the case of her demise, an attacked Little Brother means game over. However, there is a significant difference. In *Brothers*, both characters always actively take their roles, even the role of hiding behind a stronger brother, or fearfully clinging onto his shoulder. By comparison, we do not have to make Yorda's anxious jump, just to witness it through the perspective of *Ico*.

*Figure 14: Screenshot of Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons, the rope-swinging scene*



Source: Starbreeze Studios (2013)

The possibility to take both roles in the experience of sibling bonding is also important in the rope-swinging scene in chapter 3 (fig. 14). In this scene, the brothers tie a rope around their waist to secure each other while climbing the castle ruins. The sequence starts by jumping the brothers onto a ledge, holding both triggers. The rope will dangle loosely

between the them until one trigger is released, causing the respective brother to fall into the rope. The dangling brother is now free to be swung around, using his thumb stick. When he reaches the next grappling point, the player can cling on to it by pressing the trigger. Now the opposite brother needs to let go, while the other secures him, and so on.

Performing this swinging ritual is the climax of the brothers' trust exercises in a double sense. In a narrative sense, the brothers demonstrate their mutual trust by putting their lives in the hands of the other. On the ergodic level, these are the hands of the player, who is trusted to have mastered the controls at this point in the game. The successful coordination of the bodies requires literacy on which button directs which body. That the roles of dependable securer and exposed hanger are changing is additionally challenging, but it also reinforces the message of sibling equality: It shows that no difference in their personalities prevents them from experiencing times of weakness and strength; times which require being supportive, and times which require letting go and trusting in being held. The player is this lubricant holding the vulnerable brother as the strong other.

### **Gendered M/others**

Thirdly, the bonding project between the brothers is implicitly and explicitly also a gendered project. There are two ways in which the game others female characters in order to expedite sibling bonding as male bonding. The first kind of othering is used in the portrayal of the dead mother, who appears as a ghost at various stages in the game.

This presence of the ghost mother has two functions. First, she illustrates the possibility of parental loss, introducing the fear to lose the father too, and secondly, she is used to establish Little Brother's fear of water. In either role, she appears rather than acts (Mulvey 1999), and we are not encouraged to interact with her. Rather, her appearance impacts on the brother's mutual relationship: Due to Little Brother's trauma, Big Brother can offer a shoulder to swim both through water. In gameplay terms, the mother's life is traded for coherence of the swim mechanic, and to foster closeness between the brothers. The appearance of the

mother's ghost has no impact on gameplay itself. It only serves as decoration, and as narrative cue reminding us that the boys are bereaved.

The second type of female othering happens in the portrayal of the antagonistic spider woman in Chapter 4. Here, the woman does act, but it is a toxic action responsible for Big Brother's later demise. The spider woman first appears as young seductive woman who lures Big Brother into a cave, where she transforms into a venomous 'Spider Lady'<sup>3</sup>. Helped by Little Brother who is caught in a cobweb, Big Brother needs to subsequently pull out the spider's legs to "disarm" the woman.

This presentation repurposes the vagina dentata myth, in which a "mysterious, cavernous, unpredictable, dangerous" female must be destroyed (Raitt 1980). According to historical theologian Jill Raitt, vagina dentata tales often represent the normalisation, or eradication of dangerous female sexuality symbolically through the removal of teeth. The Spider Lady in *Brothers* does not only lose her legs through a cruel act of mutilation. This work is also done by a male teenager whose awakening sexuality was responsible for entering the spider's cave to begin with.

This penetrative act is punished by the game's sweeping moralising gesture; death from poison. Moreover, it confirms the castrating power of female sexuality in inducing real agency loss. Henceforth, Little Brother and the player have someone to blame for the loss of the brother.

## LITTLE BROTHER'S BURIAL CHALLENGE

*Brothers* is most explicit in how it expresses reactions to loss in gameplay. This is particularly obvious in the game's dramatic peak, the

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3 In the fan wiki, the female antagonist is referred to as 'Lady' or 'Spider Lady' despite having only six legs: [http://brothersataleoftwoons.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Lady](http://brothersataleoftwoons.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lady). This 'disability' underscores the Lady's characterisation as a monstrous other. When turning from a deceptive seductress into a spider, she turns into a deformed spider.

death of Big Brother under the Tree of life. It is instructive to take a closer look at the devices used during this pivotal moment, particularly the shift between non-ergodic cut scene and playable sequences. I argue that the composition and pacing of this sequence constructs a farewell ritual, which presents an alternative to game designers' tendency to model grief through Quick-Time Events (QTEs).

QTEs are linear cut sequences frequently interrupted by prompts demanding player input. In games such as *Batman: Arkham City* (2011) and *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014), this mechanic has been used to make the player 'pay respects' by holding a single button. This attempt to capture grief through a mechanistic, extrinsically motivated action has been mocked by players and game journalists who have called this the "Hold X to Pay Respects" mechanic (Hall 2014). *Polygon* journalist Charlie Hall points to the underlying irony of this device, noticing that "games like Call of Duty often try to straddle the line between respect for real soldiers and their losses, while also doing everything they can to romanticize the act of war" (Hall 2014: np). Just as war is trivialised by reducing it to rapid fire action, grief is depleted of substance by reducing it to a prompted QTE. One possible conclusion is that using interactivity to represent grief naturally leads to trivialisation (Grant 2011). This is challenged in the following burial scene in *Brothers*.

Leaving the spider web, a significantly weakened Big Brother has to be carried towards a slope that lands the boys directly at the Tree of Life, the designated goal of their journey. At the roots, Big Brother eventually collapses after handing Little Brother a flask and pointing him to fetch the wanted medicine via a short cut scene. This is the last time Big Brother is seen alive. As we navigate Little Brother up the Tree of Life, illuminated by a breathtaking, hope-inspiring *aurora borealis*, we are for the first time controlling a single brother. Little Brother's emotional landscape is expressed in three ways; through a spectacular, yet calm audio-visual surrounding, a smooth, unblocked path, and the spatial metaphor *up is good* (Lakoff/Johnson 1980). On the way into the tree's

crown, we pass a giant bird's nest which seems to belong to a griffin<sup>4</sup> we freed from a giant's cage earlier on.

Way up inside the tree's crown, we collect some of the desired medicine, sparkling in a fluorescent turquoise. From there, Little Brother slides down the tree, while the music stops.

As Little Brother lands on the ground, the first cut sequence starts: Little Brother approaches his brother's lifeless body and starts attempts to resuscitate him with a few drops of the medicine. When this measure fails, and Little Brother breaks down to cry, the high-pitched grief theme sets in, and the camera slowly zooms into a blackout. The next shot has an undeniable resemblance to *Ico's* post-loss low-angle shot exposing a changed environment. Like in *Ico*, it rains, a device which conveniently washes out saturation to match Little Brother's emotional state. We see him contemplate his loss, while the camera zooms out and Big Brother appears through a vision. While offering his embrace to the surviving brother, the camera takes time to pan a full circle around the siblings, and then Big Brother is gone. After a blackout, suggesting that the rain has subsided overnight, we find Little Brother put the final touches on what seems to be a freshly-dug grave.

A burial is about to take place, but instead of including it into the cutscene, the player takes over from there. In this critical moment, both brothers are framed in one shot, Little Brother facing the direction of the dead body in the distance. This visual composition suggests that Big Brother's body needs to be carried to the grave, using Little Brother's controls. While walking, we notice the slowed-down pace of Little Brother, as he puts one step before the other, shaking. When reaching

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4 According to heraldry, the griffin is a mythological animal, half bird, half lion, which carries medicinal connotations (Friar 1987: 173). It is fair to say that *Brothers* does not hold back in exploiting these. First, the griffin is wounded and locked up in a cage, pointing to the central theme of health in danger. Releasing the griffin is a collaborative effort. Finally, the griffin flying off signals the brothers might stand a chance procuring the wanted medicine.

Big Brother's npdy, the right trigger is held to pull the body across the ground, towards the hole. Once Little Brother grabs onto the corpse, his sobbing noises increase in an otherwise silent environment. Via an animation, Little Brother adjusts the position of the corpse before he leaves the pit, suggestively positioning himself in front of one of the conspicuous soil piles framing the grave. Gameplay ensues, and it is again the player who needs to initiate the placement of soil onto the body. This cannot be done in one go. Little Brother must be navigated around the grave in a monotonous ritual, pushing one pile at a time into the grave.

This scene represents bereavement as an active, material process. Big Brother's corpse does not disappear. It fills up space, functions as a game object, and must be taken care of by the player. Furthermore, the material act of taking care of the remains is presented as slow, menial task. Little Brother's walk takes time. He must push each soil 'object' individually into the grave, move on, push the next soil 'object', and so on. Thus, the effort invested in closure – the covering of the entire body – is framed as a journey, rather than single moment.

Furthermore, the 'burial challenge' is not time-based, as would be a QTE. It allows the player to grapple with the situation in their own pace. There are no explicit prompts about what needs to be done. It is left to the player to explore the situation and initiate action when they are ready.

Mechanically speaking, the burial isn't particularly exciting, but it is effective in communicating the boy's ordeal and effort. That Little Brother's actions are overly mechanical – putting one step after the other, pulling brother, pushing soil, one after the next – resonates well with the context of his recent traumatic bereavement: He just functions, and we are invited to suffer through this with him. Apart from that, the decision to not only display a dead child on screen, but to enable interaction with it, breaks with the trend to mystify child death through flowery symbolism (a red balloon in *Heavy Rain* [2010], a teddy bear in *Watch Dogs* [2014]), or silence it altogether, as in most of *The Sims*

titles<sup>5</sup>. In *Brothers*, we get to deal with a corpse and its transport from A to B.

The relevance of this portrayal is demonstrated best when we look at players' responses. "At least we have time to say goodbye", says YouTube star Joseph Garrett, whose Let's Play videos are targeted at a young audience. This is the moment in which he drags the lifeless body of Big Brother towards the grave. He continues:

"This is all because of that spider woman. We should have just left her when we saw her. We shouldn't have meddled in other people's business, you know, assuming that all the men were mean and they were trapping this woman. We should have just walked on by and we would have been fine."<sup>6</sup>

The meditative task of the burial leaves enough time for contemplation and regrets. There is space to gather oneself, work through what happened, and utter a first emotional response. In this case, the response is anger and regret to have fallen for the spider woman's tricks. Bonding around gender identity, the YouTuber confirms solidarity with his brother.

Another thing this comment encourages is the enabling of rape culture (don't meddle in other men's business), a reading which, through YouTube, becomes available as interpretative template for several thousands of viewers. To be fair, the construction of the spider woman's impact and Big Brother's death doesn't leave much room for speculation: The player is locked in a tight meaning system explaining causes and effects of Big Brother's death. This could have been different would the cause of death have been left more ambiguous. Rather than

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5 With the exception of the first *The Sims* title, the death of children is impossible. This is remarkable, since the game series is otherwise known to provide countless opportunities for killing characters.

6 Garrett's walkthrough can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUoHvcOfaCk>.

righteous anger, emotions could have included helplessness and emptiness.

## MECHANICS OF COMMEMORATION

The burial is followed up by another cutscene. The camera zooms out, overseeing the Tree of Life for the first time, while a soft guitar melody sets in, followed by a bird scream. We recognise this scream from the injured griffin we rescued before, and which now arrives to take Little Brother under its wings and offer him a ride back home. As an orchestral piece builds up into a crescendo, the griffin takes us across parts of the landscape, revisiting some of the places the brothers have visited together.

This short moment of remembrance ends in a sunset, after which we find Little Brother, completely alone in a rainy, stormy night. In terms of atmosphere, this might be the actual parallel to *Ico*'s transition from the castle into the cave. The camera briefly establishes that the medic's hut is within eyesight, but in order to reach it the boy needs to swim across the town's creek. Knowing about his phobia, and familiar with the fact that the boy requires his brother's shoulder to hold on to, this task seems impossible. The events to follow can be unpacked along the grief-theoretical concepts "inner representations" (Klass 1993), and "continuing bonds" (Silverman/Klass 1996, Packman et al. 2006).

When we trigger Little Brother's contextual action in front of the water and attempt to go inside, he will, as always, refuse. The player has to find out that, additionally, Big Brother's action button needs to be held. In the moment they do so, Little Brother overcomes his fear and enters the stormy waves, accompanied by his brother's whispering voice. Pressing Big Brother's button while swimming as Little Brother feels like remembering what the dead would have done were he here with us. Big Brother is needed, but he is gone, so Little Brother's only choice is to take over his role. This process is not straightforward but

involves a change in the controls. The player must understand that Big Brother's action repertoire is now embodied by Little Brother.

It is worthwhile taking a look back at Klass's (1993) inner representations and their purpose of integrating the spirit of the deceased in the life of the bereaved. After Big Brother is physically gone, his trigger button becomes his "inner representation", retaining importance in Little Brother's life. This importance is expressed through impact on gameplay. Using Big Brother's button to assist, Little Brother succeeds in swimming through the creek. This success is observable from the outside world by potential bystanders watching the game being played. However, Big Brother's presence can only be felt by the player pressing down their left thumb. They are the only ones to feel Big Brother's contribution to the things they do on screen<sup>7</sup>. This is not unlike the experience griever describe when talking about their dead loved ones: As "inner representations" they are tangible to the griever, while invisible to the outside world (Klass 1993).

The scene also evokes the concept of continuing bonds, the reluctance of a griever to relinquish bonds after bereavement (Silverman/Klass 1996). Compared to *Passage*, where continuing bonds is a choice of the player waiting for their own death to happen in front

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7 This does not apply to play contexts in which two players decide to play *Brothers* as multiplayer experience, holding the same controller. Following reports on fan forums, Big Brother's loss has been intense, because the positions of the fictional brothers on screen are directly mapped to the players' actual positions in space. The loss of Big Brother equals the loss of a player. What happens then? Does the 'dead' brother player remove their hand from the controller? Does their friend play on without them? Does the 'dead hand' stay on the controller in the hopes that something more will happen? Although the meaning of "inner representations" (Silverman/Klass 1996) might not be as pronounced in this constellation, the two-player setup seems to intensify the quality of loss. For a report of the two-player experience, see fuze 9's report on: <https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/684836-brothers-a-tale-of-two-sons/68812082>.

of the spouse's gravestone, *Brothers* characterises a sibling bond after death as necessary requirement for Little Brother to continue. This is in line with the importance of continuing bonds in the sibling loss literature (i.e. Packman et al. 2006).

Packman and colleagues (2006) have observed that the quality of a post-loss bond between siblings differs according to individual, social and environmental factors, such as sibling order, quality of relationship between the siblings, and the question how the loss happened and how it is negotiated in the family.

In *Brothers*, we see an unproblematic, supportive brother relationship, which has been constructed around complementary, non-rivaling abilities, a taken-for-granted physical connection, and a shared gender identity. What connected the boys further is the collective fear of losing the father figure, and the shared trauma meeting the 'feminine other' – the devious Spider Lady.

When it comes to sibling order, the game makes absolutely clear that we know what sibling role is lost with Big Brother. He has been the mature; socially competent one; the protector of Little Brother, the voice of reason; in short, his role model.

A factor identified as important in continuing bonds is that a post-loss sibling bond develops slowly over time, not as something that immediately arises at the time of death (ibid: 836). To craft a connection after death, siblings "puzzle over who they are now and how they are different without their sibling's presence" (ibid: 834-835).

In *Brothers*, the act of "puzzling" is taken literally, as players adapt to the new rules guiding the absence and presence of Big Brother. After his death, Big Brother is permanently absent on the visual level, but haptically present when Little Brother faces an interactive object that used to trigger Big Brother's contextual action. In a process of adaptation, players must find out that even in Big Brother's absence, his contextual actions can be carried out with Little Brother if the player presses both action buttons at the same time. Instead of using a prompt after Big Brother's death, the player is left to figure this out through experimentation. Thus, forging continuing bonds is portrayed as process

rather than straight forward command, i.e. “Press X to remember Big Brother”.

Thirdly, Packman et al. point out that continuing bonds are expressed through siblings continuing to think about their brothers and sisters at special occasions, during important life events, and might keep evocative objects reminiscent of the lost sibling (Packman et al. 2006: 833). In *Brothers*, this is expressed through game objects which Big Brother could operate, either in tandem with Little Brother, or complementary to his skills. Facing the lever after Big Brother’s death does not only evoke a memory of Big Brother’s loss but also his skill set, his character. On the level of gameplay, the need to think about and learn from him is naturally implied: The player either understands that Little Brother has to do what Big Brother would do, or he would not progress in the game. The notion of memory and personal growth are elegantly combined through a re-contextualised Big Brother button: Pressing it feels like stepping in Big Brother’s shoes, and thus like overcoming obstacles that were insurmountable before.

Packman et al. (2006) report that some siblings felt their experience facilitated the development of a sensitive outlook on life; and their learning had been enriched in the sense that they had matured and they felt better about their abilities to handle adversity” (Packman et al. 2006: 828, also Davies 2004). In *Brothers*, this growth is expressed most literally through the taking over of Big Brother’s tasks. With one brother gone, there is room for Little Brother to “expand” to the left side of the controller as well and slowly learn to become the more mature sibling. As Packman et al. point out “growth may begin even before the death” (2006: 828). Little Brother had ample opportunity to learn what one can do as a Big Brother, so when separation occurs, he is prepared and able to get on without the other sibling’s physical presence.

## **The Politics of Being Dead: Brothers Act, Mothers Appear**

Since *Brothers* is a game which brims with moments of death and trauma, it is worthwhile taking a look at the different choices to stage those moments. While Big Brother's death is clearly designed to matter to the player, a different choice is made for the mother, whose occasional appearance as a ghost has a marginal impact on gameplay. Instead, the mother's death is instrumentalised to deepen the boys' personalities as half-orphans. As a 'bonus', the game utilizes her dramatic drowning death as a tool to establish Little Brother's water phobia, and thereby add an exciting puzzle game element. When we get annoyed with Little Brother for struggling to enter the water, we can conveniently blame it on the mother.

Compared to this treatment, Big Brother, 'owns' one half of the controller, and is therefore given agency. He does not even need to appear after death. In fact, being dead as a mother and a brother is expressed via complementary strategies: Big Brother does not even have to appear as a ghost; his presence is firmly established on the haptic dimension of gameplay. By contrast, the mother is excluded from the controller to begin with. Her purpose is to add tragedy, not to own space.

Overall, *Brothers* incidentally creates a gender politics of being dead, according which male ghosts exert influence and female ghosts appear. The convention of the male gaze (Mulvey 1999, Berger 2008[1972]) seems to defy death. The subtle gender differences of being dead reflect in YouTuber Garrett's wording: When he promises his audience that Big Brother is not alone but protected by his family, he says that the mother "watches over us", while Big Brother is "there" with us.

Before Little Brother finds home, Big Brother's "being there" is demonstrated in two other instances; the lever, and the tandem ladder, both of which Little Brother activates with great effort when the player presses both triggers. These are objects which we have previously seen used either exclusively by Big Brother (lever) or through teamwork

(ladder). Little Brother has given his all, and, upon reaching the medic's house collapses on the floor.

In the game's final scene, Little Brother wakes up by the sea, next to a pile of pebbles, ready to play. We can either engage in a meditative round of pebble throwing – an activity celebrating the boy's new-won playful relationship with water – or we can make our way up towards the town. The weather suggests that things are back to normal, and when we take the first bend, we see father's silhouette at mother's grave. As the player approaches him, they notice a second, smaller gravestone, and when they decide to join father's grieving moment the last cut sequence starts. As the two characters face the graveyard, spectacularly lit through the tree's leaves, the game's melancholic theme sets in. This is the moment emotion overwhelms the father and he breaks down in tears, comforted by his remaining son. The camera pans into the sky, towards the mountains, and we see the griffin fly off for a last time towards the Tree of Life.

