

Bonding with Horses and Other Animals in Breath of the Wild

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INTRODUCTION

In the game *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017), systems were put in place to incentivize players to bond with wild animals, with a special emphasis on horse taming. In a franchise where wildlife used to be considered as an adversary to beat, this paper considers the role played by behavioral mechanics to bring life to this open world game. Through a semiotic analysis of the possible interactions with animals in *Breath of the Wild*, this paper proposes that variable and identifiable behaviors are favorizing bonding with players while the more generic and repetitive mechanics are desubjectifying the animal object and reveal their artificiality. With the horse-taming feature, *Breath of the Wild* is trying to find balance between a system based on free-play, designed for evoking emotions and emergent storytelling and a useful transportation method. For the latter, the system suffers the comparison with other transportation mechanics present in the game. On the other hand, the livelihood of the open world in *Breath of the Wild* is very tied to the conduct of the wildlife of Hyrule and its way to interact with Link. In conclusion, this paper will propose ways to push further attachment with artificial agents with mechanics favorizing emergent play.

A REVIEW OF BONDING MECHANICS IN OTHER GAMES

With a special focus on non-speaking and non-human characters, this first part is a “ludic-literature” review of other games featuring systems designed to invite the player to bond with a game entity. This first part is an overview of the workings of bonding in *The Last Guardian* (Japan Studio, 2016), *Tamagotchi* (Bandai, 1996), *The Sims 4: Cats and Dogs* (Maxis, 2017), *Nintendogs + cats* (Nintendo, 2011) and *Pokemon Sun and Moon* (Game Freak, 2016). The goal of this part is to understand better how *Breath of the Wild* integrates existing ideas that have been around for some time and how it eventually differs from them.

UNCANNINESS AND ANIMALITY

This section asks the possibility of an uncanniness of the non-human and specifically of the animal. To what extent can realism be pushed when trying to imitate animal behaviors. In this part, the article will focus on the hunting mechanics in *Breath of the Wild* and how the realism of the wildlife’s reactions to the player’s presence makes them

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walk a fine uncanny line between empathy and cruelty. On another hand, this section will be centered on how *Breath of the Wild* differentiates the behaviors of potential pets and animals that are designed to be hunted. The paper posits that this visible distinction – while serving the ergonomics of the game as a system – blurs the immersion of the player and exposes the structure of the game, its artificiality.

HORSE SYSTEM

Beauty Lies in the Imperfections

This part is centered on the horse-taming system. The fact horses are not immediately ready to be ridden is bringing a lot of organicity to the construction of a relationship with the animal. The agency of the artificial agent and the unpredictability of the controls' responsiveness during the taming phase is building a sense of 'personality' of the animal. However, it may be argued that a fully trained horse, by falling entirely under the control of the player, loses their specificity and becomes impersonal.

Naming, Accessories, and Personalization

This sub-section will deal with personalization and appropriation mechanics around horses in *Breath of the Wild*. It will analyze the role it plays in the projection of a personality on the virtual animal and in the emergent storytelling. The case of dogs, with which bonding is possible but for whom no equivalent appropriation mechanics were implemented will be used comparatively to understand the specific effect of those systems on bonding.

DESIGNING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENT AGENTS FOR THE PAIDIA

In artificial intelligence, an intelligent agent is an autonomous object which can observe an environment through sensors and act upon it with actuators. In videogames, both abstract systems and characters can be artificial intelligent agents. This section will wrap-up the efficiency of some mechanics in inviting the player to bond with the animal and the limitations of others. From a Design perspective, it will propose potential efficient approaches to create recognizable artificial agents whose conduct would be inviting for emergent affective play. The concept of freedom being quite central in the design of *Breath of the Wild*, the section will explore ways to design systems that give ground to a mode of playing akin to the *Paidia*, free-play in Roger Caillois' words. (1958)

CONCLUSION

Through a semiotic analysis of the behavior of wildlife and horses in *Breath of the Wild*, this paper identifies the emotions and specificities conveyed by those non-human artificial agents. By observing the affordances of the taming system with different animals and especially horses, the article focuses on finding the frontier between bonding and desubjectifying in order to propose artificial agent designs that empower even further emergent storytelling and virtual bonding with artificial agents. After all, it is emotional attachment that creates the mental anchors we use to tell our own stories. Loveable artificial agents may be one of the keys for richer storytelling using solely the gameplay.

BIO

Frederic SERAPHINE is currently a Ph.D. Student at the University of Tokyo. The focus of his research is on the semiotics of interactions in videogames and how it may be used to enhance artificial intelligent systems. Previously, Frederic SERAPHINE obtained his

master's at Paris 8 University and was trained in Game Design at ILOI (The Image Institute of the Indian Ocean) in Reunion Island.

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