

# Meaning Through Performance: Transgressing Boundaries in Shadow of the Colossus

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The theme of life and death relations is a recurrent concern in Japan. One of the forms it has taken is that of Essential Boundaries Transgression (EBT) meditation. This refers to narratives in which characters journey to the land of the dead (physically or metaphorically). This paper explores *Shadow of the Colossus* (SOTC) (Ico Studio 2005) and its engagement to this Conversation and its meditation on the role of the videoludic medium as creator of experiences. To do that it draws from different approaches focused on how attention and affection are constructed and modulated (Ash 2012), the role of game's performativity (Jayemanne 2017), the aesthetics of games for their experiencing (Kilkpatrick 2011) and the construction of agency in a game dealing with loss and trauma (Smethurst 2015). I discuss how the game was designed to be experienced using the abstract figure of the "implied reader" (Pérez Latorre 2012) as a tool aimed to understand a generalized player. This does not ignore the possibility of alternative and challenging readings but focuses on how Ico Studio constructed a game that will create particular experiences through its design, mechanics and narrative.

*SOTC* opens with the ambiguity characteristic of its whole narrative. It informs about the forbidden lands where the dead can be revived, but this is strictly forbidden. Then *Dormin*, an enigmatic voice, tells that to resurrect a dead person we must kill sixteen colossi inhabiting those lands. From then on, the game starts with a simple two-staged pattern. First, you find the colossus guided by the Ancient Sword through lonely rides across deserted lands. Once you find the colossus a violent encounter occurs. Using a stamina bar, your bow and the sword you reach the weak-spots of the giant and kill it. Then you wake up in the castle and start again.

This paper focuses on the relationship between the construction of meaning within the thematic frame of the EBT through the capacities and limitations of the videogame medium. To do that it explores the game with two intertwined questions: what is the experience Ico Team has designed in relation to the dramatic tension of EBT? and: what can it tell us about the use of the videoludic medium as an engagement to the wider Conversation on life and death? Three approaches are then developed to answer such interrogations.

The first approach deals with the construction of affective design, the relation between affect and attention and its effects on technical memory (Ciccorico 2007; Stiegler 2010a). As Ash argued (2012) games are designed based on techniques to modify affect, an essential feature for the success of any product. In that regard amplification modulates and adapts different contexts of meaning (Depraz 2004, 14) through specific techniques to alter affective states (Ash 2012, 12). Amplification also refers to the aim to temporally keep affective states and relates to the types of attention a videogame generates that manifest either aversion or attraction and are modulated by affective design within a specific bandwidth, understood as the modulation of affect to structure attention.

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All these concepts relate and help understand the experimenting videogames perform with player agency and interactivity. It is this capacity what allows the medium to work and explore psychological and cultural dimensions in ways no other can (Smethurst 2015). There, two major debated feelings in game studies guide the dramatic tension of *SOTC*: trauma and guilt. Both emotions stand at the core of the experience to resurrect a dead lover, a quest that unchains great violence, world disruption and a feasible apocalypse. Around these tensions the gameplay develops challenging cognitive features (Ciccorico 2007).

On this regard, *SOTC* presents two main differentiated patterns to complete the game: the lonely rides and the defeating of the Colossi (Pérez Latorre 2012). During the lonely rides the game focuses on the finding of the next Colossus. It is a long and empty journey lacking challenges or distractions. The player is given time to relax, wait and think. This is an opportunity to think about the following encounter, about what you might find but also that you are the aggressor, the trespasser and the murderer (Ciccorico 2007). The only clear thing is that you must kill the Colossi to complete your quest and the game. But nothing else is sure, ambiguity and unsureness reigns in these lands.

Ambiguity permeates the morality of the quest and the hero's actions. This ambiguity is a central feature of *SOTC*'s aesthetic attraction. These long and desolated rides leads the player to reflect on the isolation of the story linking both theme and structure (Juul 2005, 15). In its cognitive self-reflection, the player is forced to take time to respond to the story-world structuring through memory the narrative of the game (Ciccorico 2007). More and more the player inherits Wander's psychological baggage as the quest unravels its darkest dimensions. It is then when trauma, loss and guilt take a central role. Guilt for our trespassing, our murders and the disruption of a foreign land. Memory, both within the gameplay experience and outside it is thus critical for the player's engagement. This links to the relation player-avatar in which the former transcends the latter as he brings his own experiences into the game, an engagement that will be remembered after the gameplay ends. The gaming experience and its meaning does, therefore, not start neither finish with the game.

*SOTC* is embedded in an intertextual and polyphonic Conversation. As it works with the character assumptions and previous experiences, it participates into the debates and themes in which is embedded, proposing a particular engagement to the EBT Conversation and its ontological context. Life and death are surrounded in the game with moral interrogations in a phenomenological landscape in which everything melts into air and nothing solid remains (Berman 1982). But *SOTC* also explores the capacities of the videoludic medium to engage in such recurrent Conversation. It questions the possibilities and limitations of games and their role as deeply integrated parts of its social and cultural context (Larsen 2012).

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