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MIGUEL CESAR  
University of Edinburgh  
miguelcesar90@gmail.com

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# Playing with the Player

## Agency Manipulation in *Shadow of the Colossus* and Japanese Computer Games

### ABSTRACT

Questionings and meditations on agency in Japan are far from being a recent phenomenon. We can go as far as to challenges to human fate and control over their lives in the ancient Buddhist tradition, or to more contemporary uncertainties about individuality and social responsibility in highly industrialised and mercantile globalized contexts risen in the 1960s. Such disbelief on how much control do humans have over our own actions was further explored in the *Lost Decades* (1990–2010). The relevant changes were due to the context of deep crises (economic, social and cultural) and the supports of these discourses, the media that allowed these explorations. This paper studies how agency has been challenged through the use of the videoludic medium. It explores the medium's meditation on players' and designers' responsibility, and the capacities of computer games to propose meaningful existential and ethical experiences. To do so it focuses on the 2005 game *Shadow of the Colossus*, how it manipulates agency, player's expectations and reflects a context of liquid categories, values, morality and ontological boundaries.

**KEYWORDS:** *Japan, agency, ontology, morality, anthropology*

### INTRODUCTION

Games do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, to study the 2005 game *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico) examination on the relation between players and the videoludic medium, this paper situates it within the wider intertextual conversation that links it to contextual worries of contemporary Japan. One of the main themes interrogated by *Shadow* is the concept of agency and its links to moral responsibility, power, and control within video games. In this essay, I argue that *Shadow* does not only speak to and about agency and games but also about the human condition and its complex and conflictive relation to evil.

To support such an argument, this paper examines *Shadow's* questioning of the capacities and limitations of video games as experiences, focusing on its design and the relation between gameplay mechanics and the narrative that is subtracted from it. With this aim, the paper is divided into two main sections. The first section situates *Shadow* within the sociocultural and political context from where it originates, that of XXI century Japan, and the polyphonic conversations on agency and video games. The second section examines how the game designs an ambiguous and complex relationship with the players through the figure of Wander, their avatar and the protagonist of the story. The section draws from methods such as content analysis, design theory, and retentional economy, which are introduced below.

### **SHADOW, A VIDEO GAME OF LIQUID JAPAN**

In 1991, the economic bubble created during the 1980s decade burst. Stagnation and recession set in and companies began to restructure, merge, downsize or disappear (Kingston, 2010, p. 24). In this context of economic crisis, youths were particularly hard hit becoming the “lost generation” in the first of Japan’s “Lost Decades” (Allison, 2013, p. 29). Furthermore, the destruction of the workplace and its space as socialisation put an end to Japan’s dependency culture built and sustained during the Postwar decades on two pillars: family and corporate belonging (Allison, 1994). While men socialised within companies women and children did it at home, based on an ecosystem of knitted affect, care, duty, and belonging (Nakane, 1967). Thus, human attachments and bonds were structured around differentiation and hierarchy, defining every social relationship. Family from the household as well as the affect of dependence (*amae*) were transferred to the workplace (Takeo, 2001).

However, by the end of the Lost Decade, Japan’s dependency culture had lost its profitability and advantage for the big corporations and the conservative governments. Seen as a burden for economic development and companies’ competitiveness, neoliberal ideologists advocated for its dismantling and began such a process. But the accusation went deeper, as these reformers accused the dependency culture of creating unhealthy “interdependent relationships that hinder individuals from exercising initiative and developing entrepreneurship” (Takeda, 2008, p. 156). The so-called “Iron Triangle” of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), bureaucrats, and big corporations that has played a central role in the institutionalisation of the idea of a middle-class country (Chiavacci, 2008, p. 6) raised a new banner lionising for “risk and individual responsibility” (*risuku to jiko sekinin*) (Allison, 2013, p. 28). Under this new metanarrative, the government asked its citizens to become strong and independent individuals “capable of bearing the heavy weight of freedom” (in Miyazaki, 2010, p. 243).

Nevertheless, the interdependencies and bonds that once tied Japanese society together were, by the end of the Lost Decade, undone or deeply diminished, leaving many people unprotected, adrift, and hopeless. During the 1990s, the

middle-class country and super stable society that Japan once thought to be was led to a general sense of malaise, unsureness, and existential anxiety (Giddens, 1984). This state has perdured, and a decade later the same trends have persisted. With the economy showing no signs of improvement, new crises spread across the country, worsened by three main shocks. In 1995, a 7.2 on the Richter scale earthquake devastated the city of Kobe causing over 6,200 deaths. Almost a third of the city was destroyed, leaving thousands of families homeless (Iida, 2000). A year later, a group from the religious cult Aum Shinrikyō committed a series of indiscriminate attacks in Tokyo's underground train using sarin gas, killing and injuring over 5,000 people (Iida, 2000, p. 426; Kingston, 2010, p. 29). The news spread across the country, deeply harming the myth of Japan's internal security while increasing the sense of a nation in collapse. In addition, two years later, the country was shocked by the "Young A" murders. The "Young A" of Kobe was a case in which a 14-year-old boy committed a series of murders against other students from his school (Iida, 2000). The boy, coming from a middle-class ordinary family, left a confession note in which he blamed the education system, his family, and the adult world that had turned him transparent (Iida, 2005, p. 234). Consequently, as Anne Allison argues, "the very fabric of everyday life at the turn of the twenty-first century seemed to be getting ripped asunder" (2013, p. 30). This social malaise has hit the youth hardest of all and, by the end of the decade, a new form of mental health issue spread across Japan: the *hikikomori*.

Hikikomori are young adult (mostly) men in their teens or twenties who decide to seclude themselves in their rooms for periods of over six months or even years (Hairston, 2010, p. 311). They have developed a fear of social interaction with the outside world, deciding to stay in their room, (Kotler, Sugawara, & Yamada, 2007, p. 112). Hikikomori withdraw from all physical contact (Hairston, 2010, p. 311). They also quit school and have no job, presenting a challenge for psychiatry since the awareness of the new phenomenon (Teo, 2010, p. 178). Although the number of Hikikomori has risen to 1% of the Japanese population (Todd, 2010, p. 135), there is the suspicion that an undetermined but higher number of cases have not been reported yet due to shame and overprotection (Malagon et al., 2010, p. 558; Teo, 2010, p. 181).

In that deeply troubled context, bonding, creating links, and connecting to people became a difficult and uncertain struggle. This increased a deep state of ontological insecurity that manifested in the lowest childbirth in years (1.34%), a decline of the population, and the number of suicides steadily increasing for more than a decade (Allison, 2006; Allison, 2013, p. 30). In that landscape, different discourses lionised the individualistic enterprise praised by neoliberal ideologists. Self-help books, TV dramas, and a whole literature on how to become independent and self-sufficient teach the benefits of learning to live alone happily. This literature, however, contrasts with more than a decade of inter-medial discourses warning about the vanishing of society, the pain from the disappearance of social connections, and the dangers of isolation and loneliness.

It is in this context that different discourses draw from a recurrent theme in Japanese literature to examine contemporary concerns about individualism and community. That theme is what I have called Essential Boundaries Transgression (EBT). The EBT refers to narratives in which characters journey to the land of the dead to resurrect a loved one. It appeared as late as in 711-712 in the '*Kojiki*'. The EBT has since then been used by authors to discuss themes such as life and death relations, morality, attachment, or power relationships. In the Second Lost Decade (2000-2010), the theme is used as a proxy to pay close attention to two main concepts: individualism and communalism (Cesar, 2019). Thus, the EBT stands as human-made structural narrative to discuss, through a familiar theme, contextual worries. In the case of *Shadow*, it gives the game its main dramatic tension, the one moving the story forward. It is the aim of this paper to examine *Shadow*'s use of the EBT to interrogate the role of agency in the videoludic medium and how it challenges players' expectations on the experience of playing video games.

To that end, this essay approaches *Shadow*'s engagement in contemporary Japanese debates on agency through a three-stage analysis. The first part applies a textual analysis focused on formal-aesthetic premises. This approach centres on structural and aesthetic aspects that pre-structure the consumption of the game, but do not control or determine it (Eichner 2014, p. 175). This analysis is based on identifying the patterns of appeal formed by the text, which guide its polysemic potential by incorporating the audience as integral to meaning-making (Mikos, 2001, p. 62). Here, instead of drawing solely from the figure of the ideal or implied reader, it focuses on the reading formations and specific dispositions, media preferences and reading strategies it designs. To do so, the text is contextualised within its specific polyphonic, diverse, and heterogenic ecosystem, in this case 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. This is, therefore, incorporated in the second level of the analysis, which examines *Shadow* as inserted and interacting with the main debates, worries, and hopes of Japan's Lost Decades.

This first stage follows the methodology designed by Mark J. P. Wolf (2007) that focuses on graphics, interface, algorithm and interactivity, and Mike Schmierbach's (2009) content analysis approach. Wolf defines graphics as a changeable visual display on screen, the interface as the boundary between player and game, the algorithm as the program controlling the game, and interactivity the player actions and responses in the game (Wolf, 2007, p. 24). On top of that, Schmierbach proposes to structure and cut the gameplay into different stages to be studied later. Building on that analysis, this essay's examination on the design of the game draws from James Ash's (2012) concept of affective design, which focuses on the modulation of affect and attention in video games. Affective design builds on Bernard Stiegler's (2010) *retentional economy*, which studies the transmission of human knowledge through the relationship between affect and attention in our memory. When applied to video games, affective design examines the techniques designers use to captivate and ma-

nipulate attention. The aim is to understand how designers modulate affect to ensure a successful gameplay experience, one that is fun and meaningful.

Attention focuses on how games are designed to be experienced as they capture and manage players' emotions through sensory design (Thrift, 2006, p. 286) by appealing to the senses in different ways (Berlant, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). As Shaviro (2013) argues, they are machines for generating affect, to extract value from the affective relation between players and game.

The second stage of the analysis aims to incorporate the dimensions of media production and reception by integrating mediality and textuality with media consumption (Eichner, 2013, p. 175). This builds on communication studies by situating reception and semiotics in its socio-cultural context, and framing the agentic subjects through social action (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987; 2009). This not only places video games within their context but it also helps to account for the hermeneutic and semiotic processes in which players participate while consuming it, understanding culture as a dynamic and negotiated construction, as well as a net of interconnections, meanings, and discourses (Geertz, 1973).

To study how *Shadow* constructs through its gameplay an interrogation on neoliberal discourses and their relationship to moral responsibility, control, power, and agency, the next section examines the game's mechanics and the narrative subtracted from them. The section focuses on *Shadow* as an exploration on existing within, at the margins, or outside the community.

### TO PLAY AND BE PLAYED: *SHADOW* AS A MEDIAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGE

*Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005) is an adventure game published right in the middle of the Second Lost Decade. *Shadow*, however, seems to have maintained its actuality and relevance, as it has been remastered twice, one for the PlayStation3 console (2010) and for the PlayStation 4 (2018). One of the reasons comes from *Shadow's* actuality, and its still unravelled mysteries. The game proposes an ambiguous and complex experience to the players, by mixing elements from open-world adventure, heroic games, and romantic literature while, at the same time, challenging and interrogating them, its narrative genre, and the videoludic medium itself.

In *Shadow*, the players' avatar and protagonist of the story is Wander. He is a young warrior who journeys to a forbidden land to resurrect his dead love, a young girl called Mono. In a cryptic cutscene, players are told that this place was once inhabited by a being who could bring the soul of the dead back, but the trespassing is strictly forbidden. Upon reaching the palace at the centre of this land, Wander is told by Dormin – a supernatural force – that he can revive his dead lover but the law of the mortals prohibits such transgression. To do so Wander must destroy the idols found in the shrine by killing sixteen Colossi, incarnations of the idols who are scattered across the land. Finally, Dormin warns Wander that the prize to pay for his wish will be high.

Wander's quest starts by locating the first colossus using the light from his sword guiding him to his enemy and revealing the weak spots on the immense body of the adversary. Once the colossus is killed, black fluid tendrils exit its body and enter Wander, showing the corresponding idol implodes in the shrine. Upon waking in the altar room, Dormin reveals in riddles to Wander how to defeat the next colossus. The process is repeated sixteen times but, in the middle of Wander's quest, a group of riders, a priest and some warriors, enter the forbidden land to stop him.

Right after defeating the last colossus, the riders enter the altar room with Lord Emon, a priest who wears a mask resembling the one shown to the player in the introduction cutscene. When the last idol collapses, Wander's body is transported back to the altar room. Corrupted with horns and uncanny marks, Wander is told by Lord Emon that he has been used and possessed by the devil. Wander is turned into a shadow and a colossus himself. Dormin is resurrected and reunites his separated body parts by borrowing Wander's. Emon and his soldiers seal the demon by creating a portal of white light that sucks Dormin in, returning Wander to his original form. The bridge collapses, sealing the land as Mono wakes up. She finds a crying, horned baby at the spot where Wander disappeared. The baby is taken to a hidden garden at the top of the castle where wild animals greet them.

There are two main aspects of agency effectual for the mechanics and narrative of *Shadow*. The first is the unravelling of the story by the players as they complete one mission after the next. The structure of these missions is constant and repeated throughout the whole game, each comprising of two main events. First, players are told about a colossus they must defeat, its locations, and some of its characteristics. This information is cryptically provided by Dormin and precedes the exploration phase. In this exploration, players use a magical sword to interact with the world by following the light that points to the exact location where they will find their enemy. There are only two aporias – problems to be solved – that the players need to recognise: the location of the next colossus and how to reach it. The first task is relatively simple and uneventful. During these lonely rides on horseback, players do not encounter major challenges in an empty land lacking side-missions or NPCs with whom to interact (Ciccorico, 2007). Once players have successfully reached the colossus, the battle with their foe begins.

This phase is pleasurable as space is appropriated by the players who unrestrainedly navigate through the Ancient Lands, explore the digital environment, operate and manipulate the land, experiencing immediate response to their commands. The horse is responsive, there are no restrictions of movement beyond the balance between material and formal constraints (Mateas, 2004, p. 25). In *Shadow*, the mechanic possibilities imitate the logic of the world outside the game – gravity is a major challenge to movement and combat. This constructs a mimetic representation of the connection between the Ancient Lands and the players' world as their agency is constrained by the laws of physics and their abili-

ties and knowledge of the world, the skills and the game challenges. Restrictions to agency relate to everyday life as they are also informed by *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2009), structure (Giddens, 1984), knowledge resources, and our relations to other individuals, groups, and institutional agents (Eichner, 2013, p. 114).

With regard to the battles against the colossi, these offer a small number of choices in order to solve the aporia and meet the condition for victory: the player must stick their sword in the bright blue symbols on the body of the foe to kill it. In order to do so, players need to locate such blue spots and figure out how to reach them. The agency of the player over the game is directly constrained by the avatar's resources: a sword, a bow, and its stamina. However, there are no choices between killing or not the colossi if they wish to progress with the game. Although players can withdraw at any point from the battle, recovering their stamina and health bar, they will find themselves in that same mission. This lack of choices presents one of the main contrasts between the apparent freedom within the game world and the actual constraints of *Shadow's* narrative structure and its restrained mechanics.

This mechanical restriction relates to the ethical proposition of *Shadow*. As argued by Miguel Sicart (2009), *Shadow* exemplifies a closed ethical game design, in which players cannot implement their values beyond the mechanical restrictions of the game (p. 214). Consequently, players are not given the agency to contribute with their values to the game itself but to morally reflect upon the determined ethical choices and events. Thus, players in *Shadow* have to adapt to these values, experience their otherness, and the disempowerment of not being in direct control over their moral action within the game. Simultaneously, *Shadow* creates a reflective experience as players reflect on the values the game is presenting to them, mechanically forcing them to play by the rules. This is further stressed by *Shadow's* fluctuation and manipulation of players' agency and control over the game.

One of *Shadow's* main mechanics in relation to agency fluctuation and closed ethical design is the futile interactivity recurrently used throughout the game. This mechanic refers to scenes in which players are given control over the avatar while the outcome is mechanically and narratively predetermined by the game design (Fortugno, 2008). For instance, after the defeat of every colossus, players are chased by black tendrils projected from its corpse. While players might run, hide, and try to escape, they are always caught by the tendrils. Futile interactive is not only a recurrent mechanic with narrative consequences, but it also structures the dramatic tension that constitutes the premise of *Shadow*, as the whole game and narration is an experience of futility due to agency fluctuation and to the disempowerment of players.

Consequently, *Shadow* presents a major contrast on its structure and distribution of agency. On the one hand, *Shadow* introduces a world of openness and freedom of movement without any map restrictions or zones that need to be unlocked through game progression. On the other hand, the order of the colos-

si, the activation of missions and quests, and the players' imprisonment within the Ancient Lands shows a highly restricted and scripted structure, with a very confined range of actions within the predetermined and straightforward organisation of the events. This structure may produce some contradicting situations as the game has a strict order in which players should defeat the colossi. Therefore, players might visit the site of a future battleground but, if it is not within the corresponding order pre-designed by the game, the relative colossus does not appear. This has a mechanical explanation, as the players' stamina increases after each battle, some fights would be nearly impossible due to the unmet requirements from players who have not obtained enough power to defeat that enemy. For instance, visiting the nest of the fourth colossi before defeating the third would not activate the fight and the colossus would not be revealed.

Thus, through this dichotomic relationship between open-world and linear story progression and range of possible actions, *Shadow* fluctuates and manipulates the players' freedom, control, and sense of agency as a transformative force. This alternation between endowing and snatching agency away from the players has to do with *Shadow's* inner examinations of the sociocultural role of the medium. While agency might be one of the main characteristics of video games, or even the main pleasure of playing them (Adelmann, & Winkler, 2009; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2010), the term is still highly debated within academic enquiries on both the ontology of video games and its phenomenology (Eichner, 2013; Klevjer, 2012). For instance, one of the founding definitions of the medium comes from Espen Aarseth (1997) who argues that one of the pleasures of cybertexts comes from acting out power on the text which leads, in turn, to the experience of agency. With agency being such a central defining feature of video games, to modulate players' control or their illusion of exercising transformation into the game world is key to *Shadow's* meditation on the medium, as it is, therefore, experimenting and interrogating one of the core elements of what makes computer games. *Shadow* plays with the idea of increasing players' control and sense of immersion. While some scholars understand agency in videogames as 'the more, the better' (Harrel, & Zhu, 2009, p. 1), *Shadow* explores the scepticism and debate on absolute free agency, its illusion, and even the phenomenological, semiotic, affective, and narrative impact of mechanically restricting agency. Therefore, *Shadow's* manipulation of players' agency directly influences its experience, hermeneutics, and overall decoding. This is performed in the game through affective design, to which I now turn my attention.

The manipulation of attention in *Shadow* is mainly performed through affective amplification, which is the designers' attempt to generate and then modulate between affective states. In *Shadow*, this modulation is done through manipulating agency and players' control over the game and their required attention at each stage. As I have previously discussed, *Shadow* designs different situations when players have control of their avatar, Wander, but not over the outcome



of his doomed and scripted fate. This is an attempt by Team Ico to amplify the affective impact specific scenes will have over the players (Fortugno, 2008; Suttner, 2015). Thus, while scenes such as the tendrils that enter Wander could be presented through a cutscene, having the players control Wander's body and actions increases their experience of such sequence as directly happening to them. Furthermore, by offering players control over Wander while he is being punished, the game amplifies the connection between the two.

However, as mentioned earlier, *Shadow* is not a game punctuated by futile interactive moments, but the whole game is based on such affective design. After all, the game gives players enough interactive capacity to proceed in the story. On the one hand, the game offers a free open world; on the other hand, it constrains the progression of the players and their ethical choices forcing them to transgress the laws of mortals (Sicart, 2009). *Shadow* is a game about the responsibility of having agency to impact the world, but also about the morality of doing something just because you are told to do it. Ultimately, *Shadow* is a game that challenges the medium for its capacity to examine one of the most recurrent themes about human nature: evil. In fact, *Shadow* is a game that attracts players into doing something the game constantly reinforces as unethical, dangerous, and morally irresponsible.

To do so the game combines and shifts between mechanics that increase both voluntary and captivating attention. The term 'voluntary' refers to the design of games which attract players attention, while their 'captive' quality keeps players engaged regardless of their intention (Ash, 2012, p. 12). This is achieved by different features of the videoludic medium such as narrative, mechanics, community engagement, and so on. In the case of *Shadow*, the narrative serves both as an initial attraction, a way to get the players to engage with the game, and as a structure to keep the players engaged. As previously discussed, the narrative of *Shadow* presents a theme familiar to players: the EBT and the fight against death. This theme is approached by *Shadow*, offering the audience the possibility to actively participate in the quest to defeat death, to be agents in the rebellion against mortality and the respect of human limits. The premise is then altered by the strict structure of the game while, at the same time, hints are scattered across its progression to increase the ambiguity and complexity of the story. Consequently, there is an epistemological gap between the players and the game, as crucial information about their quest, their avatar, and Dormin are hidden from them. Thus, the only way to unravel the story and to complete the narrative puzzle is to keep playing expecting more clues and the eventual end of their quest.

On top of that, mechanically, *Shadow's* design uses different affective tools to modulate and keep the players captivated and motivated to engage with the quest. One of its main mechanics is progression, achieved by developing, moving forward toward unknown futures within the game's context (Ashton, 2011; Ash, 2012). Progression is achieved in the game by defeating the co-

lossi, unlocking new missions and getting closer to the completion of the quest (Jakobsson & Sotamaa, 2011). This is connected via scripted events, which reinforce affective amplification by both rewarding players and punctuating their achievements (Ash, 2012, p. 18). Thus, scripted events reward players by unlocking a new piece of the game's narrative, offering more information about its mysteries. This amplifies the sense of progression and moving forward. This is particularly relevant in *Shadow*, as the game emphasises a cyclical sense of time-space revisiting (Pérez Latorre, 2012; Cesar, 2019).

Progression makes up for the lack of other rewards in the game. There is no levelling up in *Shadow*, nor do players receive new items, skills, or powers. The only reward is the sense of achieving new levels of mastery by defeating the colossi and uncovering new information about Wander's quest, the world, and the impending end. Anticipation and expectation for these events and the information they communicate activate a specific mode of attention by amplifying perception and memory (Stiegler, 2010; Ash, 2012). In addition, scripted events mark the transition from one stage of the mission (exploration) to the other (combat) and vice versa. This juxtaposition of one affect state to another, marked by moments of pronounced slowness and others of intense speed, aims at emphasising the affect by means of contrast and modulation. In conclusion, scripted events encourage players to focus on the present while shifting between different attentive states of perception and memory. These states punctuate both the development of the story and the progress of the players who are, therefore, rewarded for their engagement and mastery of the game.

To sum up, this section has examined how players' agency is manipulated in *Shadow*. It has focused on how the game's mechanics and narrative work to modulate affect and its impact on agency and the ambiguity of a game that, as I argue, plays with the players toying with their expectations. *Shadow manipulates players' expectations* in relation to adventure games and epic narratives in order to critically reflect the complex and fragmented discourses of agency in the fluid context of Japan's transitions to the XXI century.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Shadow* is a game with ambiguous and contradictory messages. This ambiguity stems from its narrative and mechanics which directly influence the construction of agency, its communication to the players, and its examination within the context of Japanese videogames. In *Shadow* this fluctuation of agency from the players and over them is designed through the modulation of affective states drawing from a combination of mechanics and narrative features. *Shadow* thus problematises not only the ambiguity and complexity of its core theme, the EBT, but also of the role of video games as both communicative devices and experiences. As any other product, *Shadow* is not originated in a vacuum and it is to be framed in the fluid sociocultural and historical context of XXI century Japan. *Shadow* stands in the liminality of a time of changes and transition, as its

design confronts neoliberal discourses lionising individualism and self-responsibility as well as the praising of community and solidarity.

Future work on agency in *Shadow* should profit from focusing on audience reception and online discussions about the ambiguous experience the game offers. Researching online forums and the dedicated community aiming to decode the entirety of the game, would shed light into *Shadow's* hermeneutics and its impact on the audience.

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