

## Videogames as Cultural Ecology: *Flower* and *Shadow of the Colossus*<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Lehner  
University of Augsburg, Germany  
alexphil92@web.de



### Abstract

In this paper, I discuss videogames as a form of cultural ecology using the examples of *Flower* (2013) and *Shadow of the Colossus* (2011). As foundation for this thesis I deploy Farca's "Emancipated Player" as a player-type receptive for representational art and as a form of dialectic meaning-production between an actual player of this type and the implied player (the game's design). This will be connected to Zapf's notion of literature as a cultural ecology. Addressing similarities in function and differences in the mediality of literature and videogames and considering recent studies in game-theory and ecocriticism, I will demonstrate that emancipated play of aesthetically complex videogames can be considered a condition for videogames to function as a form of cultural ecology and thus also as a regenerative force in the larger cultural context akin to literature. The exemplary analyses consider especially the use of unnatural anti-conventions as a self-reflexive technique for reflections about videogames themselves, which are connected to reflections about the empirical reality. The games offer perspectives creating blanks for the player to be filled with her imagination and consequently unfold arguments about the aesthetic condition and conventions of videogames as a mirror of a neoliberal society without regard for the environment or the non-human. It becomes clear that representation or procedural rhetoric alone cannot be sufficient to describe the aesthetic effect of the videogame as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (an all-embracing art form). They can only function as cultural ecology, if we consider them as multimedia artworks offering a degree of openness for the imaginative power of the player. To play videogames is not either to observe or to inhabit, it is the amalgamation of both which enables their creative force to influence the discourse as cultural ecology.

*Keywords:* Emancipated player, cultural ecology, videogames, *Flower*, *Shadow of the Colossus*.

### Resumen

Este artículo trata los videojuegos como una forma de ecología cultural, usando los ejemplos *Flower* (2013) y *Shadow of the Colossus* (2011). Para apoyar esta tesis, hago uso del "Emancipated Player" (jugador emancipado) de Farca, un tipo de jugador receptivo de las artes figurativas y como forma de producción dialéctica del significado entre un jugador real de este tipo y el jugador implícito (el diseño del juego). Conectaré esta teoría con el concepto de Zapf sobre la literatura como ecología cultural. Abordando las semejanzas en la función y las diferencias en la medialidad de la literatura y los videojuegos, y considerando los estudios recientes sobre teoría de juego y ecocrítica, demostraré que el juego emancipado de videojuegos estéticamente complicados puede ser considerado como condición para que los videojuegos funcionen como una forma de ecología cultural y, por lo tanto, como una fuerza regenerativa en un gran contexto cultural como la literatura. Los análisis ejemplares consideran especialmente la aplicación de anti-convenciones poco naturales como técnica auto-reflexiva para reflexionar sobre los videojuegos, que están relacionados con la realidad empírica. Los juegos ofrecen

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perspectivas creando espacios en blanco para que el jugador los llene con su propia imaginación, creando así argumento sobre la condición estética y las convenciones de los videojuegos como espejo de la sociedad neoliberal sin consideración del medio ambiente ni del no-humano. Se comprobará que la representación ni la retórica procedural pueden por sí solas ser suficiente para describir el efecto estético del videojuego como una *Gesamtkunstwerk* (una forma artística universal). Solamente funcionarán como ecología cultural si los consideramos formas de arte multimedia que ofrezcan un grado de apertura para la fuerza imaginativa del jugador. Jugar videojuegos no es ni observar ni habitar, sino una amalgama de ambos que permita que su fuerza creativa influya en el discurso como ecología cultural.

*Palabras clave:* Jugador emancipado, ecología cultural, videojuegos, *Flower*, *Shadow of the Colossus*

Videogames and ecocritical projects oftentimes face the same accusations based on the assumption that the only way to experience nature is to be in nature: “Why are you playing games in here where you could be playing outside? [...] Why write about the environment when you could just go outside?” (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 78). A common reference for this alleged deficiency of videogames compared to nature is Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods*. He describes the generations born since the 1970s and judges all kinds of electronic devices—most particularly computers and gaming consoles—as main reasons for what he calls “nature-deficit disorder” (2008). Chang argues against Louv’s thesis, as she points out similarities between the benefits he ascribes to natural experiences and videogames (“Environmental Texts” 58). Also, Parham argues for a positive impact of videogames on the “pragmatic understanding of and instruction in ecological issues [and] to constituting or shaping environmental or ecological awareness” (211).

We cannot expect this kind of positive feedback from every game and player-type, especially when it comes to such topics as ecology and the environment, but such games and receptive players for them exist; there is only a lack of theory to describe them both. Zapf’s cultural ecology here offers a valid framework for literature and a starting point for an ecocritical discussion of videogames. This concept is based upon the assumption that literature “in its aesthetic transformation, [...] acts like an ecological force within the larger system of culture and cultural discourse (Zapf, “Ecology of Literature” 140). Cultural ecology offers a theoretical framework for the deconstructive and reconstructive impact of imaginative literature that “breaks up ossified forms of language, communication, and ideology, symbolically empowers the marginalized and reconnects what is culturally separated” (Zapf, “Ecology of Literature” 147). I will connect this regenerative force of literature to videogames proposing that they function in the same way (but medially different). To establish a background for games apt to function as a form of cultural ecology, I will use Farca’s “Emancipated Player” (2016). This concept fills the void of a well-defined player-type, who reads and plays games as a form of meaningful representative art in game studies, which is a crucial step in understanding videogames as an art form with all its implications. I propose that an emancipated player is a necessity for videogames to function as cultural ecology, as there needs to be critical reflection upon the perspectives the player encounters and

creates reaching from the gamespace into the empirical reality. I will exemplify this with the remakes of thatgamecompany's *Flower* (2013) and ICO Games's *Shadow of the Colossus* (2011) as their (primarily) unnatural elements enforce reflections in the player and connect the metaludic deliberations with those on environmental issues. First, I will outline Farca's emancipated player as a player-type.

### **The Emancipated Player as Player Type for Aesthetically Complex Games**

The emancipated player generally engages in videogames as a form of meaningful art and participates using her full potential in both the ludic as well as narrative aspects of the game (Farca 2). She is inclined in the processes she sees and creates and is involved not only on the level of plot, but strives for the thrill of significance. Here, the types of involvement coined by Calleja—"kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective and ludic involvement" (37-38)—are extended with emancipated involvement as an additional possible player's pleasure. An emancipated player is receptive for games as a form of meaning production and willingly engages with the game's design on an aesthetic-interpretative level. She takes pleasure in the significance of her actions and imaginative processes (Farca 5-6). Additionally, the emancipated player obliterates limiting perceptions of videogames confining her and sees them as multifaceted artifacts (Farca 3). The emancipated player sees videogames in their entirety and combines different approaches in opposition to the focus on one particular aspect of what a game possibly offers, such as its procedural rhetoric, semiotic layer, gameplay, or story. Thus, this player-type neglects for example Bogost's (2007) structural notion about the primary importance of the procedural rhetoric of videogames. Only through viewing the different aspects of a game in combination can the act of play properly be understood (Farca 14).

Further, emancipated play highlights the intellectual part of playing videogames, as an increase in knowledge and experiences (aesthetic and worldly ones) also enhances the intellectual potential of readings and playthroughs (Farca 2). This might seem elitist at first, but emancipated play is something inherent in every player to a certain extent (Farca 8). This means, every player who is at least to some extent receptive for representational forms of art can experience this thrill of significance and make connections to the real world or other works of art (Farca 7-8). An emancipated player-type is explicitly necessary for videogames offering a certain "aesthetic complexity" (Farca 2) to account for player-involvement on a higher level. Without this complexity, the game cannot exercise its aesthetic effect in the process of play. It is inscribed into the implied player (Farca 6), which will be outlined in the following section which deals with the dialectic act of communication between the emancipated player (an actual player of this type) and the implied player (the game's design in all its facets).

## The Dialectic Between the Player and the Implied Player

The foundation of the “Emancipated Player” is the creative dialectic between the player and the implied player, a form of communication between an actual player and the game’s design on different levels; it is the analysis of the game’s implied player. Aarseth’s “[i]mplied player [...] can be seen as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to exercise its effect” (132). He focuses on the ergodic aspects, whereas Farca includes the imaginative aspect in his more extensive approach. He sees it as a semi-open framework molding the player’s imaginative experience in outlining the actual player’s interaction in the game’s world in all modes of involvement (Farca 8). By including the game’s “*affordance and appeal structure*” (Farca 8) the implied player not only becomes a set of expectations the player needs to fulfill in order to make the game functional, but it becomes the very basis of its aesthetic effect. As a “dynamic framework” it outlines the player’s interaction and offers an incomplete “game- and storyworld” that the actual player completes through her imagination and acts of play (Farca 8).

Further, the player does not only accept this role offered by the implied player, but rather reflects on it and its implications; she is not in a mode of passive reception, but thinks self-consciously about her role (Farca 14). This also holds true for the game’s persuasive effort, which the player might negate or affirm; the player creates her own opinions and thus emancipates herself from the implied player as a role and as a structured form of aesthetic effect (Farca 14).

But how does this dialectic work? An aesthetically complex game offers different perspectives. These basically describe everything a game contains. They offer meaning to the play and include processes, player actions, the gameworld (including signs), spaces, labyrinthine structures, characters (speech/actions), music, sounds, and the plot framework (Farca 10). The friction of perspectives offers the player blanks, which she can fill in by using her world knowledge and the act of play (Farca 10).

The mode of expression for the emancipated player is play on the ergodic and the imaginative level (Farca 10). The actual player engages dialectically with the implied player as a form of creative meaning-production (Farca 2). Expression happens through play and the engagement with the implied player, as the emancipated player “participates, observes, selects, interprets, and acts upon her deliberations” (Farca 10). In her dialectic engagement, she acts like a detective; deploying her knowledge about the world to make connections with her encounters and creations and also relates the experience to the empirical world. She imprints herself in the game world as the game world imprints itself back on her (Farca 8-10).

Farca introduces a new player-type necessary for the analysis of and perspective on aesthetically complex games. This player-type uses her knowledge about and experiences of the world to act as a co-creator for the perspectives through which blanks can emerge. Those can be filled using her imaginative power and the potential choices offered by the game. She shapes the game’s world (as far as the game itself allows it) through imagination and play (Farca 14). Further, she abstracts meaning from

her experience and the perspectives she encounters: meaning is created through the act of play (Farca 14).

The following part will connect this approach to videogames as a form of meaning-creation to Zapf's assumption about literature as cultural ecology. I will establish that videogames can act like an ecological force in a larger cultural system and thus can be read and played as a form of cultural ecology.

### **Emancipated Play as Condition for Cultural Ecology**

Zapf states that especially "imaginative literature" has an impact on the ecological discourse, as it "deals with the basic relation between culture and nature in particularly multifaceted, self-reflexive, and transformative ways. [...] [I]t produces an 'ecological' dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity and aesthetic complexity" ("Ecology of Literature" 139). His assumptions about this kind of literature resonate with Farca's statements about aesthetically complex videogames featuring a "degree of openness or multifacetedness that allows for a diverse richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations" (Farca 6).

This enables literature to function as a form of regenerative force, which opens an "imaginative space" for (self-)reflection and exploration and does so primarily through the "representation of the unrepresented [and] the reader's participation in the textual process" (Zapf, "Ecology of Literature" 141-142). The notion of the participative reader is especially interesting here, since it echoes the "emancipated player designat[ing] a reader and creator of perspectives" (Farca 14) filling blanks with her imagination. In comparison to literature, however, the act of emancipated play goes beyond the mere participation in the medium's processes; the player becomes a creative force as she acts within the limits the gameworld provides.

What Zapf describes as "(re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses" ("Ecology of Literature" 149) can be seen in prototypic form as Farca's emancipated involvement which "establish[es] links between virtual and empirical world, which [...] may influence or even benefit the player's life" (6). Chang also sees this evocative power in videogames as "even games that present a temporally remote scenario [...] can impress themselves forcefully on our psyche" ("Environmental Texts" 78) and she argues that game environments can function as "affective [constructs]" ("Environmental Texts" 75). Similarly, Parham claims that "computer games can contribute both to a pragmatic understanding of and instruction in ecological issues such as sustainable development or energy supply and to constituting or shaping environmental or ecological awareness" (211). This enables ecocritical play to function in the same reflective way for the player as environmental literature does for the reader and the surrounding discourse: "[T]he affective and rational understanding of readers—and even that of non-readers—can be shaped or at least influenced by environmental narrative" (Weik von Mossner 534).

Nevertheless, videogames go beyond the mere representational (though indeed highly impactful) mode of literary writing as "to play is always to inhabit" (Chang,

“Environmental Texts” 78). Videogames offer “a chance to think procedurally about consequences of actions on the environment itself as a system with its own particular inputs, triggers, instabilities, affordances, and dangers” (Chang, “Virtual Ecologies” 4); it is (at best) a dynamic environment using a “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost 1-64) in which the player can “learn ecological principles through playing a game” (Parham 214): The player gains awareness through inhabiting a virtual place. Authenticity of representation ultimately becomes accessory, since “[t]he test is not verisimilitude or allegiance but ethical engagement and critical understanding” (Ulman 349). Thus, playing videogames can be a cultural “process by which new human ecologies emerge” (Parham 215). The emancipated player recognizes the importance of the procedural rhetoric, but integrates it into the multilayered medium of the videogame; games may be built upon code and processes, but the videogame as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* includes all kinds of different perspectives. The player fills in the blanks in-between those perspectives using the choices the game offers and her imaginative power. She is situated between inhabiting (Calleja 167) and observing the gameworld “as an amalgamation of both creatures” (Farca 5).

Cultural ecology as well as the emancipated player are based upon multifaceted and aesthetically complex works of art, through which their positive influence as a regenerative force can emerge in co-operation with an active reader/player. Both see their respective genre as a potential influence in the world, which can have a positive effect on the individual’s behavior through active participation in the media’s processes and (in the case of videogames) through actively taking part in the gameworld. The acknowledgment of reflections about the empirical reality triggered by playing videogames in connection to their affective structures is at least a pre-condition of emerging ecological thoughts as a regenerative force in society rooted in playing games. This renders emancipated play a necessity for videogames to be understood as a form of cultural ecology and as a forceful rendition of representational art.

Combining this player-type with Zapf’s notion of cultural ecology, I proclaim that (aesthetically and imaginatively complex) videogames can function as a form of cultural ecology in a larger cultural context. I propose that *Flower* and *Shadow of the Colossus* are prime examples of this type of videogame that addresses environmental issues. These games in particular focus on unnatural elements as self-reflexive means, as I will discuss in the following section.

### Unnaturalness as a Form of Self-Reflexivity

Richardson defines unnaturalness in narrative terms as “defamiliarizations of the basic elements of narrative” using the “anti-mimetic” as violation of narrative and realistic conventions (34). His notions are correct, but the term “anti-mimetic” might be misleading; thus, I will call it the *anti-conventional*, since he continually refers to the violation of conventions leading to reflections about fictionality and constructedness. Ensslin considers unnaturalness as an element inherent in videogames (Ensslin 53). Nevertheless, she also acknowledges a different kind of unnaturalness as self-reflexive

anti-conventions, since “they deliberately violate the ludo-narrative conventions of their genre and the medium itself” (55). These can be connected to the reflective nature of emancipated and ecocritical play, as Ensslin ascribes them the function of “evok[ing] metaludic reflections in the player—as well as other types of philosophical and critical processes” (55). Thus, self-reflexivity in videogames through the utilization of unnatural elements seems to fit the conditions of the emancipated player. This aesthetic effect can trigger metaludic reflections which might include the potential emergence of ecocritical thought. The following analyses will show how these concepts can be applied to the implied player offered in *Flower* and *Shadow of the Colossus* and how they unfold their dialectic with the empirical player through representation and play.

### ***Flower* as Cultural Ecology: Breaking the Nature/Culture Divide**

In *Flower*, every level contains the same elements: A scene showing the urban space and then the game environment acting upon the urban premise. The player has to open flower-buds to progress and collects more and more petals. Through this structure, the game unfolds a rhetoric of oppositions concerning the nature/culture-dichotomy and seems to affirm these binaries in favor of nature at first, but in the end strives for a synthesis of the human and the non-human (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 74-75). This rhetoric unfolds in different ways all aiding this particular interpretation of the game, which does not mean that this is the only possible reading. It is but one of the potential interpretations of this multifaceted game. First, I will address the avatar the player controls as a means of immersion into the non-human. The second section will deal with the controls as a form of defamiliarization and simulation of empathy for another system of thought. The third section is dedicated to *Flower*’s unconventional gameplay and its implication of sustainability. The final section deals with the game’s visual rhetoric and how it advocates a synthesis of the human and the non-human. All these elements form an argument for sustainability through defamiliarization, though without an overtly educational impetus. It is one of the possible readings of this complex game, which can emerge through emancipated play.

#### *The Unnatural Avatar as a Form of Foregrounding the Environment*

In *Flower*, the player essentially acts as the wind (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 74). This opposes the common practice of games, which use human, humanoid or symbolic characters: *Flower* works against this convention of games as it presents a non-human and organic avatar; it neither provides an anthropomorphized nor a graspable form of corporeality (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 74). The invisible wind gathers more and more flower-petals, but essentially stays an amorphous mass for the player to navigate. Visibility is only created through the player’s effects on the environment and thus foregrounds firstly the environment itself as a protagonist and secondly the effects created through the player’s actions (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 74). In comparison to mainstream games, the drama unfolds around the usually neglected scenery

elements, as Kelley Santiago, one of the co-founders of thatgamecompany states: “What would happen if we take [bushes and grasses] that [are] normally an afterthought on the edge of the world [...] and put it right in front and make the entire game about it?” (Donovan 368). The natural environment constitutes the gameplay instead of just being a supplementary element (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 74). This design-choice shifts the focus from a human-centered approach to the surroundings as well as it highlights the impact our actions have on it and thus enforce an immersion into a “simulated natural environment” (Parham 225).

### *The Controls as a Way of Shedding the Human Scope*

*Flower* uses an almost idiosyncratic form of controls. The six-axis-controller is used through motion: the player must tilt it forward to accelerate and to the side to change directions. Chang sees these kind of controls as an encouragement to leave our experiential repertoire bound to the earth by substituting it with “birdlike swooping and skimming” (“Environmental Texts” 74). Where this adds nicely to the overall theme of the game, these motion-controls are a struggle for experienced players who are particularly familiar with the conventional controls of sticks and buttons. This struggle simulates the challenge of understanding the non-human by stripping the player from her conventionalized means of interacting with the game-world. Usually, familiarity is enforced by the controls; games of the same genre use a similar control-scheme and familiar players can easily navigate within them. However, the controls of *Flower* urge the player to understand a system to which she is not accustomed. This can be described as an unnatural use of a control-scheme, disrupting the usual conventions of flawless and repetitive game-controls. On the one hand, this reveals the player’s bias concerning controls and the invisibility of controls as a self-reflexive statement about their conventionalization. On the other hand, it mirrors the process of relating to the non-human through an anthropocentric mind. Of course, other deliberations could be triggered by this experience and observation, but in the grand scheme of the different perspectives offered by the game, this interpretation of the controls seems to be viable.

*Flower* thus works against the human hegemony and highlights the marginalized through the new form of understanding the player has to develop. Further, this is integrated into an aesthetic discourse about the condition of mainstream-gaming that is about dissolving the nature/culture dichotomy or anthropocentrism; self-reflexivity becomes a means of reflecting upon the player’s conventional perspective in gaming and in life.

### *Overcoming Obstacles in a Sustainable Way*

*Flower*’s gameplay differs vastly from mainstream games. Whereas brutality, combat and self-optimization are the focus of lots of acclaimed and successful blockbuster games, *Flower* strives for a friendly approach to overcome obstacles. Rather than exploiting the given resources to optimize her character (Stallabras 94; Baerg



“Governmentality” 119-121), the player is acting as an environmental-friendly force, enhancing the conditions she is thrown into. Instead of draining the environment of all valuable resources, the player gives something back and acts in a cooperative manner; she goes from conqueror to an ecological force with a positive effect on the environment. The mechanics of letting flowers bloom and establishing sustainability (through activating windmills and giving back energy) can be seen as “impart[ing] ecological principles in the process of navigating through that environment” (Parham 225).

The gameplay disrupts the hegemonic structure of capitalist society mirrored in the usual approach to games, that is, self-optimization, overcoming enemies and exploitation of resources. It foregrounds a culturally neglected approach of non-exploitative gameplay and thus the mindset of an ecologically sensitive humanity. Again, the aesthetic discourse about games as revenants of capitalist-thought can be integrated into the ecological message of the game.

### *Flower’s Visual Rhetoric as Argument for the Synthesis of Human and Non-human*

The first level starts with a cut-scene showing a hectic street accompanied by distorted city noise. While zooming out, we see more of the dark city and construction sites lurking above it. This is an unconventional use of cut-scenes, as usually games begin with an introduction of their characters via outstanding animation; here the environment is foregrounded instead and the usually depicted human presence is only alluded to by indirect means (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 74).

The first gameplay section shows a green and lush environment. This juxtaposition of hectic and dark city life with the soothing and colorful natural environment constructs a clear opposition between the city connoted with darkness and turmoil and the natural landscape with color and tranquility.

The following level begins with the depiction of grey spaces within the city and then blends to an also grey environment the player has to fill with color, affirming the formerly constructed dichotomy and the healing power of nature.

With the third level, *Flower* addresses environmental issues more directly. It starts with an image of the burning sun and then cuts to a heat-wave in the urban space. This juxtaposition symbolizes climate change as the highly-intensified sunlight together with the flickering air can be seen as an allusion to the receding ozone layer. The play section does not oppose this imagery, but shows a solution for the problem by offering an alternative way to reduce pollution through renewable energy, as the player activates wind-turbines. The formerly constructed binary opposition of nature and culture is challenged the first time, since human-made technology is integrated into the natural environment harmoniously. *Flower* is “[f]ar from condemning human intervention [and] attempts to bridge the pastoral and the urban through the player’s experiential journey from one environment to the other” (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 75).

The fourth level shows an energy crisis as the lamps at night suddenly turn off. The player is able to reactivate them through play and imaginative natural energy, but

inevitably fails. Using “futile interactivity”<sup>2</sup> (Fortugno 176), the game takes a sinister turn and renders the setting, polluted through fossil fuels, a dark pastoral.<sup>3</sup> In Sullivan’s words, *Flower’s* environment turns into a representation of dark ecology including “the beauty and horror of this interconnectivity [between human and non-human]” (85).

The fifth level is a dark world, where drilling rigs and oil pipelines dominate the formerly astonishing landscape. All color is gone and what is left is a dreadful space of danger and death. The dichotomy created in the first two levels seems to apply again, the stakes for the environment never higher than in this dramatic turn.

Only in the sixth level, there is hope for the cooperative work of the human and the non-human. Rather than destroying the cultural effects within the environment, they are transformed into something cooperating with nature. Eventually, the player dashes through the central construction and above it and transforms into a giant tree surrounded by the (now white and bright) human-made constructions. Humankind is no longer depicted as an alien element in the former pure nature, but strives for synthesis with the non-human. The epitome of this rhetoric can be seen in the ending-cutscene, where the urban premises are re-iterated: the traffic is shown as more tranquil, the grayish wall becomes colorful, the sun does not seem as hot anymore, and a flower is blooming through the concrete of the pavement.

The game progresses from simple oppositions of nature and culture to a nihilistic ending in the fifth level. This metaphoric death is followed by a rebirth in the sixth level that changes the rhetoric completely. Ultimately, there is hope for a better world, which offers space for the human and the non-human alike. The visual rhetoric advocates neither a stance on the radical nature side nor nihilism concerning the environment; rather, we strive for the ideal of a symbiotic life. The environment is foregrounded, as avatar, enemies, and challenges to overcome, everything unfolds around what used to be merely perceived; the marginalized environment in games (as well as in empirical reality) is at the center of attention. Thus, *Flower* and its visual rhetoric can be ascribed an unnatural quality unfolding an ecological drama on the periphery of humanity as well as in the margins of blockbuster games and creates a discourse against the boundaries of the human-centered perspective.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Shadow of the Colossus* as Cultural Ecology: Inverting Videogame Conventions**

At the beginning of *Shadow of the Colossus* the common trope of the damsel in distress is iterated and the player willingly engages in the premise to save a girl from death by acting as the hero. Nevertheless, the final plot-twist—Dormin, who acts as an

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<sup>2</sup> Fortugno describes “futile interactivity” as the player’s struggle to achieve a goal which is not intended to be reached: “[T]he scene resolves to designer’s and not the player’s objective [enabling] the designer [to use] agency in order to create dramatic necessity” (Fortugno 176).

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan describes the dark pastoral as “a rejection of the artificial delineation of local and global, of cities here and rural countrysides there, as if they were independent from each other in the anthropocene” (85).

<sup>4</sup> This mirrors Zapf’s statement about literature (applying Derrida) that it has the ability to open up the text for the other of non-human nature by essentially keeping its alterity (“Kulturökologie” 25). This is a recurring moment in *Flower* and its unnatural traits in terms of shedding the human perspective or offering an alternative (non-human) point of view.

instructive voice from above (often seen in videogames) selfishly sends him on this quest for his own gain—negates the protagonist’s heroic ambitions and renders him villain (albeit maybe a tragic one). Although this particular convention is not inverted, *Shadow of the Colossus* generally defamiliarizes conventions through inverting them. Again, this technique connects an aesthetic discourse with ecocritical deliberations. The first section deals with this narrative premise and the subsequent betrayal of conventions through the gameplay, as the player recognizes her own complicity in the destruction of the environment. The second part deals with the appearing creatures as a foregrounding of marginalized gameplay elements and non-human entities in connection to capitalism. The last section deals with the protagonist as an inversion of the neoliberal tendencies of character-development in videogames.

### *Narrative Expectations and Failing Realization through Gameplay*

The aforementioned narrative frames are not questioned within the game (be it the benevolent quest-giver or the quest-giver turned evil). It is not the betrayal of the convention that enables the player to question those structures in the empirical reality, but exactly the unquestioned authority of those frames within the game, which creates expectation in the form of gameplay. Being sent on a quest signifies in this narrative framing, that heroic deeds are to be done and the player is triumphant during gameplay (even if her attempts are ultimately rendered in vain). The friction here emerges during gameplay as the player’s triumph is taken away, rendering her complicit in the environment’s destruction (Milburn 217).

The core of the game is taking down the colossi; they are complex puzzles to be solved supposedly “lead[ing] to a sense of triumph” (Fortugno 173). This ludic goal is usually enforced through narrative desire (here saving the damsel in distress), which also becomes the player’s motivation. However, *Shadow of the Colossus* creates incongruence between these types of desire (Cole 7) as the player becomes gradually less willing to fulfill the narrative premise of saving the girl. This discrepancy is created through various perspectives during encounters with the colossi, making the player question the morality of her actions (Cole 4; Fortugno 174-175).

There is the inversion of the trope of the heroic protagonist and the enemies as aggressors; the colossi are hidden away acting harmlessly and are often ignorant to the protagonist’s appearance in their realm (Cole 4; Fortugno 173f). Their case is one of self-defense upon trespassing or attacking of the player, since they are harmless and content with their environment until the player interferes. This renders the protagonist a villain invading the colossi’s realm.

The representation of the allegedly triumphant act of defeating one of those creatures also denies the player her emotional reward. Stabbing them results in “a gory stream of black blood in an awful hiss” (Fortugno 174), their deaths are shown in slow-motion cutscenes accompanied by a “sorrowful female choral [reminiscent of] a requiem” (Cole 5) and the camera lingers over the corpse of the slain giant (Fortugno 174). Cole sees taking down these harmless creatures as “making an appeal to our sense

of morality” (Cole 4). The environmental framing of the colossi, their behavior, and the cruel display of their death creates a “conflict between the player’s desire [of mercy] and the narrative desire [of saving the girl]” (Cole 7) and causes a friction in-between those perspectives letting the player question her deeds. She realizes her own complicity in obeying the rules of narrative desire and the gamic system (Milburn 217).

This affective and self-reflexive structure of the game is enhanced through a decidedly environmental stance. As Fortugno states, the usual “world saving quest” (174) becomes something else entirely: the player does not feel heroic anymore, but like a monster herself “hunting down and killing innocent beasts in the barren wilderness” (174). However, the colossi do not only represent animals as the non-human, since 11 of the 16 colossi resemble animals, but through their bodies. The hybrid materiality of fur, stones, and ruins also renders them representatives of the environment.

The process of hunting the giants makes the player question her morality through its emotional impact and is intertwined with environmentalism through the presence of the colossi as symbols of the non-human (animals and the environment). The player becomes an invader disturbing the creature’s natural habitats and those habitat’s perfectly content inhabitants to fulfill the narrative premise (i.e. saving the girl). Through inhabiting the gameworld in this malicious way and being emotionally affected by the consequences, deliberations about the morality of conventional game-mechanics and rewards are triggered. An aesthetic discourse about games traditionally built around a neoliberal mindset and a procedural rhetoric which “functions like the neoliberal free market economy in offering choices to players who can use its resource to further their own interests within the parameters of the game’s rules” (Baerg, “Governmentality” 119) is countered with moral deliberations through the dreadful representation of the player’s deeds. A videogame usually “shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun” (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter xxix-xxx) and do so through the narrative frames of heroic quests. However, players are not usually confronted with implications for flora and fauna, especially in minor tasks like slaying a certain number of monsters in an area. Here, though, the player is confronted with the immediate response of the environment to the naturalized convention of neoliberal capitalism in games. The friction between narrative expectations and the procedural dimension questions this convention in videogames and may enable the player to make critical statements about the narrative explanation of deeds done in this mindset thus acknowledging their own in complicity—in videogames as well as in the empirical reality.

### *Marginalized Creatures and Elements of Games Made Visible*

The protagonist’s horse called Agro would usually be a tool for travelling through the gameworld, but instead becomes a personal acquaintance for the player. Of course, there are examples for animal helpers whom the player’s get attached to like Dogmeat in *Fallout 3* and *4*, but Agro is a special case, since her procedural representation differs vastly in this respect. Dogmeat’s procedural existence intends him as a tool to be used

(he can attack and guide the player to items), whereas Agro's behavior marks her as a singular being within the world of *SOTC*; the design enforces this attachment not only through a 'cute' visual representation like in the case of *Fallout*, but through its processes. She becomes an algorithm that "stand[s] for the nonhuman" (Milburn 2016). If not being ridden, she wanders around on her own, although staying close to the protagonist. Additionally, she behaves idiosyncratically as she "frequently slows for no discernible reason, randomly changes directions [...] and refuses to attempt difficult obstacles" (Cole 9). She is a character with her own will and the player needs to learn to cooperate with her rather than to use her like a tool. Further, players gets emotionally attached to her as a companion not only for her gameplay purposes, but "because [...] they have developed a relationship with her as a person" (Cole 9). Rather than being a tool, Agro becomes a personal acquaintance for the player especially by means of her procedurality.

Also, the implementation of the colossi takes a stance against the matériel battles fought in videogames. Since there is no conventional dungeon within the game, the colossi effectively replace this concept as they are "puzzle[s] that the player must solve" through experimentation and exploration (Fortugno 173). Thus, the player engages more personally with them as one would with conventional "waves of near identical (and dehumanized) [enemies]; each one is a distinct individual" (Cole 4). In the process of climbing the colossi and spotting their weaknesses, the player gets acquainted with her opponent and its personality. Through estrangement the colossi oppose the commodification of enemies (Stallabras 94) in favor of a more personalized approach. Additionally, at the end of the game, the protagonist is transformed into a colossus as Dormin takes over his body. The player is thrown into an unknown situation, with "confusing controls, limited vision, and encumbered movement" (Fortugno 183). Though this change seems to signify an increase in power, the player feels helpless and is forced to sympathize with the colossi through her own experience (Fortugno 183). The conventional anthropocentric perspective of the protagonist is disrupted and replaced with a new level of sympathy. Understanding of the non-human enemy is enforced by disrupting the whole mechanical and perceptual system of the player.

The companion Agro and the adversarial colossi function as a culture-critical discourse of the capitalist patterns of maximized exploitation and mass-produced commodification and integrate this in an aesthetic discourse about the capitalist structures in videogames. They especially focus on the exploitation of the non-human (for example the animal as a commodity in factory farming) by representing animal and environmental natural forces.

### *The Protagonist as an Inversion of the Capitalist Tendency in Videogames*

The protagonist shows "fatalism and almost apathy that is atypical in a hero" (Fortugno 173), as he does not display any regard for the impact his actions have. This can be seen already when Dormin sends him on his quest: "[T]he price you pay may be heavy indeed. [Protagonist]: It doesn't matter" (*SOTC*). Further, the arrival of Emon

reveals the true colors of the protagonist: “Not only did you steal the sword and trespass upon this cursed land, you used the forbidden spell as well” (*SOTC*). He is a “reckless and heedless character who has broken sacred law, stole from his people [...] and brought down great harm all in the name of his goal” (Fortugno 182). Additionally, he shows no remorse or guilt, or any emotion toward the atrocities he commits in slaying the colossi (Fortugno 180).

Through his lack of emotions, the protagonist offers a double perspective: it presents him as stoically focusing on his goal while also offering a blank space for the player’s emotional (Cole 3) and imaginative processes. Furthermore, the usual development patterns for a character in a videogame is inverted: instead of increasing in skills, power, and equipment (Baerg, “Risky Business” 160), the protagonist degrades gradually (Cole 9; Fortugno 181) as his clothes get dirtier and his appearance thinner with each defeated colossus acting as a metaphor for “[the player’s] questionable actions” (Cole 10).

The game incorporates a hero who essentially becomes a villain in connection to the inversion of the conventional developing structures of a character in videogames which are based on the accumulation of power and wealth. The player cannot advance through an unquestioning overcoming of obstacles anymore. The preference of self-optimization and a no remorse strategy for achieving one’s goals inherent in a neoliberal gameplay of increasing one’s own state through mastering challenges is exposed. This makes clear how the drive for perfection and the reckless strategy capitalist society uses to achieve its goals, is oftentimes at the expense of others, in this case the non-human.

## Conclusion

*Flower* simulates the struggle for empathy with non-human organisms, whereas the usual standardized controls, conventional gameplay and an anthropomorphic or merely symbolic avatar would have strengthened familiarity and thus an anthropocentric worldview. Through the anti-conventions of idiosyncratic controls, non-violent and non-competitive gameplay, and corporeality in the form of the non-human but organic and interconnected avatar, the player becomes aware of an unknown system using empathy as she is forced into a different perspective. The game disrupts anthropocentrism and the nature/culture-dichotomy through play and self-reflectivity. *Flower* undermines, therefore, the symptomatic conventions of games as the world’s mirror of habitual patterns, like greed for power, a lack of empathy for the non-human, and a tendency to stay in the comfort-zone of the human’s own experience. Those thoughts emerge through the critical stance of the emancipated player and her imaginative and actual play.

*Shadow of the Colossus* also criticizes videogame-conventions as a mirror of the current conditions of capitalism and its recklessness. It questions the obedience to narrative structures through anti-conventional gameplay. Taking away the player’s triumph, the game is not conceived as a celebration of the capitalist spirit often encountered in games, but rather forces the player to reflect upon her actions and her

complicity in the system as destructive force. Capitalism is also addressed by using a negatively connoted and anti-conventional protagonist working against capitalist videogame-conventions. The ecocritical connotation is enforced through the inclusion and revaluation of marginalized creatures as non-commodities and singular acquaintances.

Both games deploy the unnatural to form a self-reflexive discourse about conventions of videogames that intertwines them with deliberations about humanity, capitalism, and its ecological impact, though without an overt pedagogic impetus. They are semantically open and offer a multitude of interpretations through their complexity and necessitate an emancipated player to have their full effect. The various perspectives offered by them create blanks for the player to fill through imagination and play and which enable the reflections necessary for such deliberations to emerge. Through observing, inhabiting, and relating not only ecocritical ideas arise in the player, but the potential for a magnitude of different reflections and ideas is offered. Thus, these games are prime examples of imaginative and aesthetically complex videogames that fit the definition of Zapf's cultural ecology. To play videogames in an emancipated way is not either to observe or to inhabit, it is the amalgamation of both, which enables their creative force to influence the discourse as a form of cultural ecology.

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