

# Playing Attention: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Game Mechanics in *Ico*

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## Abstract

This article argues that paying attention to the specifics of a videogame involves a difficult problem of interpreting the meaning of repeated acts. A hermeneutic framework is developed by examining the *PlayStation 2* game *Ico* through Melanie Klein's object-relations psychoanalysis. The author argues that the controller functions as a semi-autonomous unconscious space that mediates unconscious phantasy and emotions, and therefore represents a privileged space for analysis. The article adds to the repertoire of tools for a ludic close-reading and demonstrates them in a reading of *Ico* that shows how the game develops from a paranoid to a depressive style of play.

## Author Keywords

Controller; object-relations; depressive position; criticism; *Ico*

## Introduction

One of the biggest advances in recent game studies has been the focus on game-play mechanisms and their meaning. Ian Bogost (2007), for instance, has influentially argued that video games can uniquely use processes of play to comment on other processes in what he calls their "procedural rhetoric." In his dissertation "Games Without Frontiers," Aki Jarvinen (2007, p. 253-8) gives a useful summary and critique of the various uses of the term game mechanic and settles on the following definition: "the means that the game system affords its players to pursue the goals it states in the rule set" (p. 39). Jarvinen further argues that mechanics can be defined as verbs such as collecting, throwing, etc. and presents a typology which includes forty of these actions (p. 137). The aim of this paper is to expand on such an approach by recognizing an interpretive leap between the player's moment to moment activity and the verb used to describe it, and a second leap from individual moments of collecting to a general account of collecting. These leaps require a theory of interpretation specific to play. And while this hermeneutics should not stand in the way of inductive research such as Jarvinen's, it does offer two advantages. First, it can help pinpoint where the differences between categories arise. Second, and more importantly, it shows what the *meaning* of each mechanic might be for a player.

To pursue this hermeneutics I will draw on the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein, and specifically her interpretations of children's play. Klein (1988b) treated children's play as a means of accessing the unconscious in a manner parallel to dreams or free association

(Likierman, 2001, p. 129, 137-8). Klein's method is essentially akin to an analysis of game mechanics in that she breaks down all symbolic activity including play into basic psychic and bodily mechanisms that originate in infancy. I argue that every play-act is constantly interpreted by the player through these unconscious phantasies.

However I am not only interested in the theoretical consequences of this approach, which I discuss in the second section of this paper, but also aim to show the practical consequences for game interpretation. I take the position that a Kleinian approach enriches the kind of close reading that can be done on game mechanics by themselves. To this end I will explore the video game *Ico* (Sony, 2001), not least because it seems to share many of Klein's themes. In the first section of this paper I resist discussing the player's actions and present a reading of the narrative and visual elements of the game. I hope that this clarifies the nature of the close reading of game mechanics that I present in the third section. Klein ultimately offers a compelling way to understand the pathos of the game as a development from a kind of paranoid relationship with the world to one of love and tragedy.

I see the interpretation of game mechanics as one means of close reading games in the manner advocated by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011). Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum embrace the history of literary readings while recognizing the unique traits and interpretive difficulties of reading games “due to their indeterminate and shifting natures, their size, and the inherent difficulties of engaging with the medium” (p. 299). Focusing on mechanics can bring together and expand on a number of existing video game reading practices. It requires the kind of abstract concepts that Bogost's procedural rhetoric provides as a framework in which to situate individual mechanics. It also calls for the kind of close analysis found in many thematic, and especially sociological readings of individual games (the collection of essays *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity* (2008) is an excellent example of this kind of work on the massive multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*). Finally, an understanding of game mechanics is also a comparative domain that benefits from the kind of expert description that Drew Davidson (2009) describes as a combination of wide playing experience and facility with a game's practical challenges. I believe that Klein can add to the repertoire of close reading tools for games outlined by Carr (2009) and Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum.

Melanie Klein has had her widest effect on game studies through Donald Winnicott and Sherry Turkle, two students of her work. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971) translates Klein's clinical practice into a theory of why children play, and these theories have been one of the many sources of traditional play theory that video game studies has drawn from. More directly, Turkle theorizes new media in terms of object-relations, and integrated video games into her general framework of identity formation (1984). Turkle's concept of a second self mediated by the machine comes close to the ludic unconscious I propose below. Turkle, however, leaves out the details of many Kleinian mechanisms that I am interested in here in favor of a more versatile model of the mind. To my knowledge the only direct application of Kleinian thought to games is the early article “Hellivision” by Gillian Skirrow (1986), which identifies the unconscious fantasy that underpins many common game elements. These avenues point to the potential utility of a Kleinian methodology might hold.

### "Kids with horns are brought here"

*Ico* was released for the *PlayStation 2* in 2001 to critical acclaim for its uniquely emotional play and visually stark world. The player controls a young boy named Ico who rescues the glowing princess Yorda and must lead her to safety through an evil queen's castle. *Ico* is similar to other games of the exploration genre in which the player runs, jumps, fights, and solves basic puzzles, yet with the key difference that the princess Yorda follows Ico through the game, and the player must help her through various challenges. A columnist for the *Telegraph* gives a sense of the emotional relationship that the player develops with Yorda:

"Fumita Ueda's two masterpieces - *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus* - are strikingly beautiful. Their haunting, bleak landscapes instill a desperate sense of solitude... There's a section in the game when Yorda is torn from your grasp and you are sent tumbling out of her reach. For the first time in a few hours of playing, Yorda isn't there. Little Ico is standing on a long water pipe, rain hammering down on the rusted metal, dark sea thrashing below him as far as the eye can see. Never, in any form of entertainment or art, have I felt so alone."

(Hoggins, 2008, para. 2)

The emotions that develop between the player, Ico, and Yorda are as mysterious as they are powerful. To make sense of many of the subtler motifs we must have recourse to Klein's theory of infant-mother relations.

Klein began developing ideas about the period of early childhood that had been left obscure in Freud's concept of narcissism. Klein theorized that the infant related to an object in the first days after its birth, and initially to the mother's breast (Likierman, 2001). At this stage the infant cannot grasp that the breast is always the same object, nor that it is part of the mother's body (Hinshelwood, 1989). Instead the infant tries to make sense of the world by separating the good feeding breast from the bad breast that frustrates the child's desires by its absence. On the basis of this split the infant feels love for the good breast and persecuted by the bad breast. Klein called this stage of splitting and persecution the paranoid-schizoid position.

In order to fend off the frustration and anxiety caused by the bad breast the infant develops a series of basic psychic defenses. These mechanisms separate good from bad (splitting), bring the good closer (introjection), expel the bad (projection), and aim to destroy the bad (introjection/projection) (Hinshelwood, 1989). As the infant uses these defense mechanisms they are slowly building up a meaningful world inside and outside their body. For instance: the infant might feel hate for the withholding breast and in order to destroy it projects negative feelings out onto it. The breast now contains this hate, and in a further twist this leads the infant to phantasize that the breast is actively seeking to harm it. The continued use of all these mechanisms gives phantasy content to an ever widening set of objects in the infant's world, develops a stable structure of defenses and desires, and organizes the ego (Klein, 1975b). Through this process the images of the good and bad breast are expanded to include the ideas of a good mother and a bad mother (Isaacs, 1992b).

The final major stage in the Kleinian developmental picture is the crisis when, at about six months, the infant can no longer keep the good and bad mothers separate in its mind (Klein, 1975a). The infant comes to realize that its hostile attacks may have damaged not only the bad-object but also the good object. A new form of depressive anxiety develops, where the infant is anxious for the good-object rather than itself. This is what Klein calls the depressive position.

The correspondences between Klein's theories and *Ico* begin at a very general level. Klein, for instance, believes in a fundamental duality of love and hate in the child that derives from Freud's theory of the death drive (Hinshelwood, 1989). *Ico's* lead designer holds a similar view on emotional life:

"[Ico] is not about antithesis... I think that the desire for destruction is also a human instinct. At the same time, it is in our instinct to protect something or someone, as *Ico* does in the game. I don't think one instinct is good and the other is bad, and I did not regard the element of cooperation so highly."

(Barder, 2005, para. 6-7)

Further both *Ico* and Klein see the world as split in a Manichean fashion between good and evil, and one that is distinctly feminine. In the game Yorda represents the glowing personification of good feminine, and the dark Queen that of the bad attacking one. Both figures must be understood not just as feminine but as maternal. This is obvious in the case of the dark Queen who claims to be Yorda's mother, but subtler with Yorda. The player can, for example, make Ico cry out to which Yorda comes running. The cry, which is nonsense even in the original Japanese, sounds like "Maaa" or "mama".

The maternal relationship to Yorda is developed over the course of the game through the necessity of touch. Touching for the early infant is a reassuring sign that its mother is near. Similarly Ico brings Yorda around by the hand, and if the game's monsters are able to pull Yorda away then darkness engulfs Ico's world. The distance that can separate Ico and Yorda only grows slowly over the course of the game. As Donald Winnicott (1971) argues, the infant is at first very sensitive to even minor absences of its mother, and the darkness represents the limit of its capacity to live without the good object. Even more striking is the fact that the monster attacks occur at times when Ico must leave his mother behind for a moment, which allows us to read the monsters as projections of Ico's own anxieties that the good internal object will be lost.

Not only is this a feminine, maternal, and Manichean world, but the two maternal figures are in reality a single person. This is slowly revealed over the course of the game, and mirrors the infant's realization during the depressive position. From the outset this connection is made clear through a dream that takes place at the cage where Ico will find Yorda. In the dream a pool of dark ooze drips to the floor and a black female figure emerges in the shape and location of the real Yorda. It is further clarified when the Queen calls Yorda her "one and only beloved daughter" and asserts that "[Yorda] cannot survive in the outside world" (Sony, 2001, Level 2). She identifies Ico as the "one aimlessly leading my Yorda around" and that "she lives in a different world than some boy with horns!" (Sony, 2001, Level 2). Yorda's otherworldly tie to the castle becomes clear here, and ultimately the Queen in fact merges with Yorda.

There are also many smaller moments that are well explained by Kleinian theory. The stone pillars that block the various gateways throughout the game have human heads with large eyes, and in their hollowed out stomachs they carry horned children curled in a fetal position. Each one represents a mother. The horns sprouting from Ico's head are a symbol of infantile oral aggression and function as the character's earliest weapon. The moment Ico finds the stick can thus be read as a developmental move to the phallic stage. In case this seems too crassly Freudian we need only look at the secret and highly incongruous light-saber weapon, which extends in length when Ico holds Yorda's hand.

These psychoanalytic symbols also appear at the level of plot. The first level of the game, "The Tomb", provides a sustained narrative that corresponds to Ico's birth. Three horned men lead him away from a village that is never seen, through underground passages, and into a castle where they imprison him in a spherical tomb. They place his hands in stocks and leave him facing away from the small eye slit. When the men leave, the castle rumbles and the tomb falls, breaks open and tosses Ico unconscious upon the ground. Ico then dreams of a shadowy and liquid feminine figure before he is pulled forcibly through a black hole that appears in the wall behind him. Each of these moments repeats a trauma of passage with elements of lost origins, confinement, and fear. When Ico goes on to free the glowing white young girl named Yorda her words appear as incomprehensible symbols, like a newborn trying to comprehend speech. Ico responds to this first communication: "They...They tried to sacrifice me because I have horns. Kids with horns brought me here. Were they trying to sacrifice you too?" (Sony, 2001, Level 1). This question represents Ico's anxiety over his oral aggression and a tentative identification with the mother. If Ico is cast as the infant in a dyadic relation to the mother, it is hard not to see this opening as a kind of birth trauma from which a developmental story will unfold. "The Tomb" is also a womb.

A final element that Klein can illuminate is the meaning of the castle and space more generally in *Ico*. Of the defense mechanisms that Klein discusses, projection and introjection are central to the development of the structure of the mind. Introjection and projection help develop the idea of internal and external space, and the idea that other people have an inside. Through introjection the child feels the presence of objects inside itself and inside others which can interact. Klein describes numerous phantasies of children placing destructive or good faeces inside their parents, imagining one parent inside another, or imagining numerous rivals inside the mother (Hinshelwood, 1989).

Phantasies about exploring the mother's body are already present on Ico's cover. While the North American cover is a literal depiction of Ico, the original cover, painted by the game's designer Fumito Ueda, is evocative and inspired by Giorgio de Chirico's "The Nostalgia of the Infinite". De Chirico's painting explicitly functions in the surrealist and psychoanalytic tradition where buildings represent bodies and features a large tower with two tiny lovers embracing and silhouetted in a desert landscape. The piece implies both a phallic and a maternal space, particularly its desire to return to an infinite state before birth. Ueda's reinterpretation further heightens the maternal aspect by emphasizing and repeating arching doorways, which recur in the game. Reading the space of *Ico*'s castle as an exploration of his mother's body explains the desire to progress beyond the underdeveloped plot. Indeed Skirrow (1986) has argued that one of

the pleasures of games generally derives from this exploration. Each new area satisfies the desire to see and know the inside of the mother's body because the child needs to make sure that it does not harbour secret dangers and to discover the sources of pleasure she is hiding. The beautiful vistas and vast heights here become parts of the same processes of idealization and anxiety that create Yorda.

Reading the game's themes, symbols, plot and landscape in terms of psychoanalysis brings out a hidden dimension of *Ico*, but not in a way that requires it to be a game. Indeed a film of *Ico* could be read in a very similar manner. We have begun to see that *Ico* responds to a Kleinian reading, and may be broken down into elements of projection, introjection, and splitting. To begin talking about the game as game however requires a more precise understanding of what it means to act within a video game context.

### Hermeneutics of Gaming

To approach the game as game we must begin by analyzing the various structures such as rules and game mechanics. Game mechanics especially have a priority because they are the means by which a player discovers how a game works, what its rules are, and what is possible. Taking the act as a tool for analysis in games is in fact quite orthodox in ludology. Diverse critics have implicitly and explicitly focused on the repeated act as the central moment of video games. Aarseth's (1997) focus on the work of traversing a text is one key example. Other ludologists focus on specific acts. McKenzie Wark (2007) picks out targeting as the paradigmatic game act: "[w]hat kind of being is a gamer? One who comes into existence through the act of targeting" (p. 149). Similarly Steve Jones (2008) suggests that an equally fundamental act is that of collecting (p. 53-64).

If, following these theorists, we begin immediately to consider the mechanics in *Ico* we end up with a list of activities such as: running, jumping, pulling Yorda, pushing blocks, solving puzzles, hitting monsters, climbing, etc. However, in this move we have already overlooked the way that a situation of rapidly pressing a button creates a response on the screen and is recognized as 'hitting' by the player. To make this leap we cannot rely on a stable button-action link. For example, two buttons could both make the character swing, or different buttons in different contexts. Nor is the visual matter always unambiguous or similar each time. These context based difficulties make it a matter of interpretation when we move from the individual instances of an action to a general name such as hitting. For example, certain hitting mechanics might be object sensitive, and differentiate between monsters and Yorda. Should we recognize this difference in our description of the mechanics? There is no single correct answer, but rather a process of interpretation.

If we return to the list of actions such as running, jumping, pulling etc. we can also see that there is another problem. Without context, these abstract verbs tell us very little about the meaning of the game mechanics, and their meaning differs significantly from a platform game such as Mario 64 (Nintendo, 1996). We need to follow the player as they make sense of these mechanics. The interpretation takes place each time the player presses a button and recognizes their agency not as that button push, but as the action of a character, camera, or cursor on the screen. This act of

recognition is fundamentally an act of mis-recognition because it sees the self in the screen, but it also makes the game situation possible. To interpret the meaning of this mis-recognition we need to understand the conditions under which it takes place.

This encroaches on the terrain of the Lacanian approach to identification developed in film studies that has recently been applied to first and third person shooters by Bob Rehak (2003). What Lacan's mirror stage allows one to think in film is the role of identification not only with the actors and content, but also with the apparatus of the camera as a "transcendental self":

"[j]ust as the mirror assembles the fragmented body in a sort of imaginary integration of the self, the transcendental self [viewpoint of the camera] unites the discontinuous fragments of phenomena, of lived experience, into unifying meaning."

(Baudry, 1986, p. 295)

However, "for this imaginary constitution of the self to be possible there must be—Lacan strongly emphasizes this point—two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization" (p.294). These basic conditions are simply not met in games, particularly the required immobilization. One should not mistake the minute motions upon the controller as immobilization—rather they are the result of a very difficult mastery of the motor system. We can see the conceptual antagonisms that occur when Lacan is brought to games in Bob Rehak's (2003) thoughtful and rigorous consideration of the game avatar. For example, it is unclear how Lacan helps when the identification is "not of appearance but of control", particularly when the video game avatar, in all its myriad and often disorganized forms is anything but a natural extension of human action (p. 107). While visual identification certainly takes place in particular cases, especially in first and third person shooters, it cannot account for the general economy of game identification. Rather, as Freud understood the literary signifier, and Lacan the cinematic signifier, Melanie Klein is the first to thematize that of the game.

To understand this Kleinian ludic signifier we have to look at the nature phantasy. From the very beginning, in Klein's view, the infant relates to the objects in the world around it. All these relations are first experienced through phantasy, a central concept in object-relations theory. Phantasy names the psychic component of the most basic physiological mechanisms of the infant. Some of the most important phantasies are sucking, biting, vomiting, urinating, defecating, crying, kicking, being held or swaddled, and blinking (Hinshelwood, 1989; Klein, 1975b; 1975c). Susan Isaacs (1992c) describes the borderline nature of phantasy as both experiential and an objective operation:

"A phantasy is both a 'figment' and a function. The mechanism of introjection operates through phantasy.... It is not an actual bodily eating up and swallowing, but it does lead to actual, 'real' alterations in the ego. These come about as a result of such a phantasy as, e.g.: 'I have got a good breast inside me'.... These beliefs, which are figments, yet lead to real effects to profound emotions, actual

behaviour towards external people, profound changes in the ego, character and personality, symptoms, inhibitions and capacities."

(Issacs, 1992c, p. 555)

Each of these acts does something to the object towards which it is directed. Swallowing for example (and later blinking and biting) forms the prototype of a splitting action; sucking (and later hearing/sight) that of introjecting; vomiting, urinating and defecating that of projection (Hinshelwood, 1989). As the infant develops, these basic actions are symbolically elaborated into more complex operations: urine may come to be associated with burning, faeces with poison and bombs (Isaacs, 1992a).

For Klein, every aspect of mental life occurs in and through unconscious phantasy as the most basic interpretation of bodily processes. In the course of the child's development these basic theories become repressed and overlaid by more complex thinking. These actions represent then something like a vocabulary which can be used to decompose the game mechanics into component parts. At the same time the idea of phantasy points to the possible development of new psychic functions based on more complex bodily relationships. Thus the interpretation of play can take two directions. On the one hand Klein's play technique provides multiple tools to pick out the meaning of specific phantasies that game situations activate. On the other hand we can consider some of the ways games, and video games in particular organize phantasies generally.

If we focus on how the apparatus of video games organizes the player's acts then we can see that it is the controller which performs the important mediating function of connecting the player's bodily movement to that of the avatar. Equally striking is that this connection comes about through a split between the player's attention to the screen, and the space where the player is acting. To be able to play a game is to internalize the controls so that they become the object of unconscious attention (Calleja, 2011). The structured separation of attention and act means that the player's action upon the controller can provide a continual and relatively uninterrupted location for unconscious phantasy to function, which we can call the ludic unconscious. Within the larger space of this ludic unconscious, which includes for example the body on the couch, the hand-controller site is the natural location for phantasy to occur because it is also the place of action. In this way the controller becomes the privileged site at which to interpret game phantasy. At the same time it shows that the stability of the controller form is no mere accident of design or technological limitation.

The fact that attention and action are split creates a secondary problem: in order to coordinate the two successfully a mental connection between the act and the object of attention must be created. This connection must be thought in Klein as an unconscious phantasy of identification. The two key phantasies of projective identification and introjective identification cover this domain. These two phantasies differ from traditional Freudian identification in that they specify concrete pieces of the self or the other that are felt to be either expelled or taken in; through vomiting or eating for example (Hinshelwood, 1989). The abstract and logical character of identification is laid in primitive mechanisms by phantasied exchanges of body parts. So, either an element of the acting-self must be found in the object of attention, or an element of the object found in the acting-self. Further, each phantasy can be of a primarily positive or negative cast. One can give



oneself as gift or poison, and ingest from love or in an attempt to destroy (Klein, 1988a). The four functions of positive introjection, negative introjection, positive projection and negative projection define the ways one must think about the ludic unconscious. For example, when the player feels in control of their avatar there is a positive projection; but when the player is forced to follow a tutorial there is a negative introjection.

Nor are these identifications fleeting. The stability of the ludic unconscious over the course of a game gives these phantasies a lasting basis and one on which they can develop over time. Identification at this level is the necessary foundation for more fleeting visual identifications with particular characters or game situations. A prerequisite for projective identification and a consequence of introjective identification is the presence of either a good or bad object in the unconscious. The controller is both the most stable object in the ludic unconscious and the object that is acted upon. It therefore represents the good or bad internal object, whose primary significance for Klein is always the good or bad breast. The stability of the button and directional pad, as well as the move toward curved and graspable controllers can be seen in this light as a way of emphasizing its function as breast and a return to infantile nipple play. The observation fits anatomically with the common designation of the L1 and R1 buttons as 'shoulder' buttons. The *Playstation 2*'s introduction of dual analogue sticks may even come to separately represent the good and bad breast.

The consequences of the introjection of a good object into the ludic unconscious are far reaching. The controller conditions the whole of the video game experience. Not only does it allow for identification, but all other phantasies are mediated through it because they derive from the good breast. Emotions of love, hate, fear, joy, and the whole range of bodily activity can be read in the game act. Further, it allows us treat the player-game nexus as a semi-autonomous ego, with its own anxieties, defenses and affects. Further the emotions that the player experiences are mediated through this internal object, and may even be read directly off the controller. The most visible sign of this is the anger at the controller that players exhibit when they fail, as if the good breast has suddenly become a persecutory bad breast.

### **"So you're the one aimlessly leading my Yorda around"**

At this point the considerations about a ludic unconscious, an autonomous ego, and the mediating role of the controller seem quite abstract. However they will help illuminate the meaning of the game acts as I explore them not as abstract mechanics but as situated in the developing context of the game. Using these tools I will look at two key sets of acts in *Ico*: Ico's growing autonomy from Yorda, and the expansion of his aggression. Because *Ico* develops these in distinct ways I will analyze them separately; but they are linked in the logic of object-relations where the mother's absence provokes aggression. My treatment of the game's mechanics and the player's emotional response draws from my own play experience, my observations of other players, and the descriptions of other critics (Gregersen and Grodal 2009; Herold 2009, Davidson 2011). I will examine how these phantasies transform over time, what configuration they occur in, and what they are directed towards.

The interactions in *Ico* begin in a large open room where the avatar has just woken up and been set free from a cage. The freedom of this moment is palpable as the player is not pressed for any immediate action: one is able to play in and with the environment by running, jumping and climbing. The player wheels *Ico* in circles and begins to develop a relationship to the environment. For the moment the affects generated by this freedom are largely positive and self-gratifying, the mere response of the avatar satisfies a phantasy of omnipotent control. After *Ico*'s confinement the environment becomes something to explore. Finally, the player can make *Ico* yell by pressing R1. The infantile cry characterizes the space of exploration as a space of searching for an object.

The camera controls of *Ico* emphasize the pleasures and limits of seeing. During gameplay the camera keeps its distance, relegates the character to a tiny piece of the screen, and follows or precedes the character in a rather cinematic way. Yet the player has control of the camera's direction and is able to swing it away from *Ico* in order to look forward and backward. One analogue stick is used for controlling the character and the other for the camera. The structure of action here creates a double focus between the character controlled and the seeing camera, and significantly complicates the relation between projective and introjective identification. The internal game-object is undergoing visual introjection because the player feels impelled to look around the environment for exits and puzzles, and motor projection through the avatar's movement.

The set of possible actions in *Ico* quickly becomes much more complex after a few minutes of exploring when *Ico* stumbles upon the cage containing Yorda. The glowing white Yorda is immediately threatened and must be kept safe. After watching a cutscene of the characters meeting the player takes control with a dramatically expanded set of actions towards Yorda and the monsters. As the player regains control a monster hoists Yorda upon its shoulder and jumps into a dark pit into which Yorda slowly slips.

The situation is calculated to create a feeling of panic in the player who must act without knowing the new controls, when they regain control. During this flailing the player must discover how to attack. Most actions in *Ico* require controlled button pushing to maneuver the treacherous environment. Attacking is an exception and if the player feels unable to wait for the game, too anxious to pause, she may press the button repeatedly. The player, concerned for Yorda's safety, must also discover a way to retrieve her from a dark pit. Pressing the button that first functioned to call "maa" now makes *Ico* lift her, unhurt and just as white as before her capture. Similarly, *Ico* cannot be hurt by the monsters, but only knocked away. Both of these traits show *Ico*'s phantasied ability to keep the good object pure.

*Ico* and Yorda now have a continual play of separation and joining between them. *Ico* can join hands with Yorda or leave her by herself. He can call her and she will come running. Finally they can run together, which changes the feeling of movement dramatically. *Ico* is much faster than Yorda and drags her behind him, and this causes *Ico* to pull Yorda forward with a jolt every few steps. It is hard to ignore the violence in this image of child dragging mother. There is, however, also an unexpected new pleasure to running, spinning, and breaking the linked hands. The player's ability to intermittently control Yorda activates phantasies of both projective and introjective identification within the ludic unconscious. The feeling of connection is emphasized

by the vibratory function of the *Playstation 2's Dual-Shock* controller, which slowly pulsates while the pair runs together. The vibration emphasizes steps, but also heightens the feeling of the controller as a breast with a heartbeat under the surface. When the player is with Yorda the phantasy having introjected the good breast is heightened, as is the pleasure of playing. The introjection makes a parallel development between the game's content and the player's phantasy possible.

The control and power that the player has over the mother figure is emphasized early on. To continue deeper into the castle the pair must pass through a door blocked by dull green statues, but which come to life when Yorda approaches and electrifies them. These statues are anthropomorphic mothers and essentially, Yorda brings the dead internal mother back to life. In this way Yorda becomes associated with utility; she is objectified as necessary to open doors and progress. From this moment on the slow distancing of Yorda from Ico becomes a major strand of development in the relation to the good-object.

The trend grows when, in the next area, the player is forced to leave Yorda behind for a moment to open a door. They part again while Ico climbs a chain and leaves Yorda below, but this time monsters appear when Ico reaches the top. In this way the distance from Yorda is gradually increased while the danger of that distance is maintained. The parting is also more than spatial separation but also aggression. Ico must at one moment position Yorda on a crane, swing her across a gulf, and knock her down in the process. Perhaps the most frightening of these moments are the spacious gaps over which Ico can easily jump, but must leave Yorda behind. Once across the gulf Ico can call to Yorda to make her jump, but her jump is always too short and Ico must catch her. Here Ico plays with his destructive impulses.

Another dimension of separation is the objectification of Yorda. There are a variety of puzzles that must be solved to advance through the castle rooms, and these often employ simple square blocks that can be pushed and pulled over switches to hold doors open. At one point, however, Ico does not have enough blocks for this and must use Yorda to weigh down a switch. The objectification emphasizes not just her utility (as when passing the doors) but also her physical otherness. The game emphasizes the point by making Ico leave Yorda in a separate area for the first time immediately afterward. There is a tense interaction between this kind of manipulation and the identification that is made possible by the player's direct control of Yorda.

The trend of separation continues in an elaborate puzzle that involves three different levels of terrain – a yellowish brick room, a higher lush green field, and a sewer. Ico must bring Yorda from the brick room into the sewer and leave her there, circle around, and lift her onto the green field. Yorda is no longer left in a neutral environment but one that signifies death; particularly when one recognizes the green field for what it is: a graveyard. At the end of the second level the feeling of separation has been accomplished and the player has been effectively weaned from anxiety over the mother's death.

The culmination and test of the weaning comes at the end of the fourth level when Ico and Yorda have managed to open the castle's gates. Ico races across the bridge to the outside and pulls Yorda behind him, but she continually falls because she cannot keep up. Ico's treatment of Yorda as an object is more apparent here than anywhere else. At the middle of the bridge

lightning shoots from the castle, knocks Yorda to the ground, and the bridge begins to pull apart. Trapped on the other side, Ico tries to jump back, and the power structure is reversed as Yorda catches his hand. Here Ico recognizes his dependence on the mother figure as a separate person; a recognition dependent on relinquishing his hostility and dropping his sword. The realization manifests as the shadow that falls over Yorda, engulfing her body, and corrupting everything but her face. As a mirror of the queen, who appears over her shoulder, Yorda gives Ico the first glance of a mother figure who is neither purely positive or negative. However Yorda can no longer hold his hand and Ico drops an enormous distance towards the ocean. He awakes in the rain, weaponless and without Yorda for the first time since the game began. The absence of a weapon and the inability to attack (something that the player has had throughout the game) is felt as a loss even though there is nothing to fight.

Because the progressive separation of Ico from Yorda has taken place through the structured actions that the game makes possible, it applies both to the narrative level and to the player's experience. The phantasies that these actions activate cause the player to gain an ever-increasing comfort at separation from their good object. Ultimately the transition from paranoid anxiety to depressive anxiety and the fear for the whole-person is enacted within the player. The player who suddenly loses not only Yorda, but the enjoyable object-relations of control and aggression, is confronted by the fact that their own hostility and neglect towards the object are the cause of the loss. All the preceding action is re-evaluated in the new light. The player feels like they must make amends and return to save Yorda. Restorative phantasies take over as the player wants to return to the lost pleasures of the good-object. Here the player achieves a depressive kind of play that is rare in games. The binary structure of good and evil, clear objectives, and fear of death that organizes games from Pac-Man (Namco, 1980) to Halo 3 (Microsoft, 2007) is shattered and rendered ambiguous. This must be seen as a profound developmental achievement for the player and what gives *Ico* its emotional power.

### **"Now put down your sword and leave"**

The achievement of the depressive position is always a dangerous accomplishment, and the infant may readily fall back into the paranoid-schizoid phase if their depressive anxiety is too intense (Klein, 1988a). The slow distancing that makes depressive anxiety possible does not occur without resistance, and the second developmental strand in *Ico* is the reciprocal development of aggression. We have already seen Ico's initial transition in weaponry from horns to a stick with the corresponding movement from oral to phallic aggression. There are a number of further weapons that Ico can find and must use to solve puzzles throughout the game. At the same time the enemies develop into more powerful and more alien creatures. After the stick, the next development is not a weapon that injures enemies but one that attacks the castle (ie the mother's body). Spherical bombs are deposited around the castle which Ico can pick up, and waddle them over to something that has to be destroyed to advance. Ico must then find a fire with which to light the tip of his stick on fire and ignite the bomb. Klein (1975d) has shown that fire is typically associated with urine and explosives with faeces, and that these are typical means of attacking the bad-object. Further the bombs are always used to knock over tall phallic pillars.

Aggression towards the monsters develops through new weapons. The player may discover yet another use for Yorda as a tool: if she revives the statues, the lightning will also destroy the monsters in the room. There is a profound consistency here, in that the revived internal mother figures destroy the source of anxiety over her absence. The most important aggressive development is the sword. The sword destroys the shadows with much more ease, in fact reducing the amount of aggression. At the same time the phallic weapon is now associated with penetration and a sexualized function symbolically represented by the vertical fissure in which the sword is suspended. By finding the sword the player enters into the beginnings of an Oedipal relationship. While its function for fighting is important, the sword's character is brought out in the kind of puzzles that it can be used to solve. Throughout the castle strings suspend bridges, hold doors in place, and support cages; the player must pass through these by cutting the string. Highlighting the unconscious significance of string in a number of children, Donald Winnicott shows that it is "a symbol of separateness and union through communication" (1971, p. 58). Cutting the string is therefore both an assertion of distance, and an expression of castration anxiety. Sometimes however the player must revert to the stick with its fire in order to move through the castle. The return represents a regression to an earlier urinal libidinal stage.

The development of aggressive phantasy keeps pace with the relation to the good object until the crisis on the bridge. The depressive anxiety and the consequent loss of Yorda create an entirely new situation of aggression. Ico is left weaponless to climb the castle's exterior in the rain, inundated with water. Here the player finds the game's final weapon: the lightning sword. With this weapon Ico appropriates the life giving function of the mother, is able to activate the dead statues, and progress by himself.

But Ico's appropriation of the good object is only made possible as a profound aggression. One of the most pathos-filled moments occurs when the player arrives in the chamber where he was originally brought to be sacrificed in one of the many tombs. We have seen that this area represents the womb. Several shadow monsters stand around a stone statue of Yorda, but they now look more human and have horns on their head like Ico. The player's attacks kill these shadows in one swing, but the shadows no longer even attempt to attack and approach with something like curiosity. As the player slays an ever increasing number of shadows the futility of the battle becomes evident. Ico is truly fighting only with shadows of himself, fears that have no more reality than he gives to them. As each one is killed, a tomb lights up until Ico has murdered all of his phantom rivals.

The player now arrives at the game's finale. Ico and the player have gone through the crisis of losing their good object, and are at a developmental crossroads between aggression and accepting the damaged mother figure. Having seen the effects of aggression, the player approaches the Queen. Ico searches her chamber in vain, and it is only when he is about to leave that the queen appears in her throne and calls for him to wait:

My body has become too old and won't last much longer. / But Yorda's going to grant me the power to be resurrected. / To be my spiritual vessel is the fulfillment of her destiny. / When next her body wakes, Yorda will be no more. / Now put down your sword and leave. / That is what she would want you to do.

(Sony, 2001, Level 6)

The statement describes exactly the child's depressive anxiety that its hostile attacks have permanently damaged the good object. The object, while appearing good, harbours the resentment and hatred of the attacks perpetrated on the bad object. In response Ico chooses aggression and attacks the Queen. In retaliation he is thrown against the wall, one of his horns breaks off, and his sword is sent flying. Here Ico does not only fear castration but has it played out on his body and his lost weapon. The queen attacks Ico by sending wave after wave of darkness, like that which covered his world when Yorda was drowned in a pit. Only while holding a sword or hiding behind statues of maternal figures is Ico safe. After every attack his sword is thrown from his hand and he must re-affirm the choice of aggression. Finally the player kills the queen by plunging the sword into her chest in a culmination of the sexed nature of his weapon. The Queen declares that "Yorda will never be able to escape this castle", and breaks his other horn in a dying act (Team Ico, 2001, Level 6).

Thus castrated, Ico lies unconscious on the floor as the castle begins to crumble. Yorda's statue is suddenly struck by lightning from all the lighted tombs, and she returns as a shadow. Yorda lifts up Ico, carries him to the boat waiting underground and pushes the boat out to sea. She remains behind as the castle sinks into the ocean. Later, after the credits, the player regains control of Ico on a dazzling white beach, and finds Yorda far away and nearly drowned. On a narrative level we might interpret this in any number of ways, but it is in terms of phantasy and the ultimate reaction to the crisis of the depressive position that the true meaning of the game must be decided. On the one hand the glowing beach suggests that the aggressive destruction of the Queen has resulted in the omnipotent denial of everything negative. The player's appropriation of the good object as aggression leaves them in a paranoid position. Undoubtedly this is the end for Ico, as he eats watermelon with Yorda in his phantasized paradise. On the other hand, the possibility remains open that the player recognizes with regret the destruction caused by their own aggression, both upon the shadowy siblings and the combined mother. Awakening on the beach may in this case represent the achievement of the depressive position and an escape from the phantasy relation to the mother's interior. Both in their own way are tragedies, either as the loss of childhood innocence or as an entrapment in a solipsistic world.

The result cannot be known precisely because the effect is not for Ico, but for the player whose trajectory at this point relies on many outside factors. The sequence of phantasies activated at the end may work in either way depending upon the strength of the object relations founded earlier in the game. However this crisis is the meaning of *Ico*. The game presents not just a developmental allegory that allows the player to undergo a developmental situation through the game-object introjected into the ludic unconscious of the controller. By a means unavailable in other media, *Ico* is able to show the pathos, pain and even dignity of the infant's experience. Finally it is this drama that makes *Ico* an important and meaningful work.

The two readings of *Ico* I have presented here are complementary, and show that the game draws on themes of the mother-infant relationship not only in the narrative and visual content but also in its mechanics. The change that these mechanics undergo over the course of the game is only visible if we treat each of the player's acts as a meaningful in itself and through its context. When faced with the sheer monotony of repetitive button pushing this can be a difficult task. In

response I have tried to show that Klein's treatment of unconscious phantasies, especially projective and introjective identification, can go a long way to differentiating and making sense of a player's acts. The other concepts I have put forward here, the ludic unconscious and the internal game object, are ways of focusing attention on aspects of play that are otherwise difficult to recognize. The close reading of game mechanics is, I believe, uniquely situated to recognize the specific nature of games generally while also doing justice to the player's experience within a single game. Ultimately I hope this paper has presented a few more tools to explore the complex phenomenology of video game play.

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