

The Consequences of a Beautiful World: *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018)

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Abstract

What are the consequences of designing a game's environment to be beautiful? This question is especially relevant to studies of remakes and re-masters. The choices made while remodeling, retexturing, or redesigning a game's environment may diverge from the game's original themes, narrative, and intent. For instance, critics accused Bluepoint of prioritizing graphics over intent in their 2018 remake of Team ICO's 2005 release, *Shadow of the Colossus*. Bluepoint's new level of detail, the extensive addition of fauna and flora, a warmer and livelier environment, and the reduction of fog arguably stray from Team ICO's design. This video essay revisits such claims by demonstrating instead how Bluepoint's direction adapts and reinforces Team ICO's original game, complementing its themes of player-character dissonance, environmental destruction, and player-versus-character agency. I analyze the game's environmental storytelling, paratexts, and surrounding participatory culture (Jenkins 2002). I suggest that Bluepoint's aesthetic direction is beautiful, where beauty implies feelings of fondness and intimacy towards the small and delicate—an experience prioritized by the remake's highly-detailed environments. Consequently, the beautiful world of *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018) highlights exploration and ecological immersion as digressive playstyles and emergent forms of storytelling.

Transcript

Note: this transcript was written by the author, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

Why is the world in *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018) beautiful?

The land of *Shadow of the Colossus* is meant to make you feel small. Wander is a tiny speck of dust compared with the mountains and valleys, as insignificant as you may feel powerless when you encounter your very first colossus.

And just like you learn that Wander is quick, agile, and dedicated enough to climb these mountains, so too can you persevere and find a way to climb the beasts.

The colossi are an extension of the land in many ways—beyond their physical makeup, their display of size and power evoke the same forces of desperation and impossibility onto Wander and the player.

But, the Forbidden Lands aren't *just* a really, really, *really* large expanse.

The time it takes to ride through them offers an opportunity to generate suspense, brim you with anticipation, and serve as an opportunity to reflect and ponder. But at every moment you ride on Agro's back, you have the agency to stop. To look around, and see that the Forbidden Lands are beautiful.

In this video I want to explore three main ideas: What does the beauty in world design afford the player? What are the thematic implications of a beautiful Forbidden Lands? And, how does the game incentivize you to see the world?

Shadow of the Colossus.

Shadow of the Colossus is a story about a boy and a girl—Wander, undertaking the quest to kill sixteen colossi in order to revive the fallen girl, Mono. In desperation, he travels to the Forbidden Lands to strike a deal with a higher being known as Dormin.

With every colossi slain, the more power Wander gains, the more this task corrupts his body. Dormin, this higher being of light and destruction, guides Wander through his quest and to his doom. Sixteen colossi are slain; Dormin possesses Wander's body; and the resulting dark colossal beast is sealed away.

Before that conclusion is reached, however, Wander travels across the vast Forbidden Lands with his horse Agro, to hunt the sixteen colossi. The light of the sword guides you through an immense expanse.

The beautiful Forbidden Lands.

At what moment you discover the beauty of these vast Forbidden Lands is going to vary for every player.

The direct path to the first three colossi keep your camera directed towards muted grays and browns, sharp, harsh, and unwelcoming.¹

¹ Unless you get lost, of course.

If you are as locked in as Wander on his quest and share his narrow disregard to *anything* outside of it, you might not care for the trees that fill your screen, the flowers in the vines, the birds soaring in the sun.

With Dormin's voice in your ear and the frenzy of panic and adrenaline that are your moments atop the colossi, you understandably might not be too concerned with the scenery. When you make it all the way to the top of Gaius' head,² your height is less about the spectacular view in the background, and *much* more about how much it's going to hurt if you fall.

The fourth colossus, Phaedra, is where the game really begins challenging the player to start thinking about the environment.

The path to Phaedra is cramped with narrow turns, so you might ease on the reins and slowly walk Agro through. At a slower pace, you can hear the squishy footsteps of lizards, spot the delicate flowers, or take in the glowing fireflies. From total darkness you emerge to bright sunlight pouring across the soft grass. You have to cross through the ocean of weeds and dainty white flowers to reach the most animal-looking colossus thus far. When you're watching Phaedra from afar, they are framed with the forest behind them. Sprinting through the claustrophobic underground hallway further contrasts the warmth and freedom above.

This works in tandem with the gameplay—this is the first boss where environmental observation plays into the puzzle solution. The player is required to watch Phaedra from afar, recognize their patterns of behaviour, and how they interact with both you and the land.

And now, as if something has been unlocked, the path to the fifth colossus, Avion, is even more blatant. Your path is now fully saturated with greens, the tiered cliffs in the background are bathed in contrastive light. When you walk alongside the narrow cliff, the camera practically begs you to turn to the left.

And if you give your attention to this outcrop, or if the position of the camera convinces you to pause and turn yourself away from the most direct path towards progression, you are treated with a *view*.

These moments are all suggestions; opportunities you may or may not take, emotions that may or may not be stirred. These experiences are not universal; nothing this game offers might endear to you. But this game sure as hell *tries*. The forests, the waterfalls, the butterflies, the lonely trees, the radiant beams of light, and the splashes of colour.

² Gaius, alongside all the names attributed to the colossi, are fan-made. They are so commonly used that many believe they are canonical.

With overwhelming scale, you get the **sublime**. Fear and horror alongside the catharsis and appreciation that the world around you is so beyond comprehension in its vastness.³

That this land you explore is colossal in depth, vertically, and expanse, can trigger the same astonishment as the colossi themselves.⁴ Not only are you constantly eclipsed in scale and power, but the evident scale of time, a grand society eroded, strikes a similar fear.⁵

This powerlessness in the face of scale accentuates Wander's feats of mass-destruction and emboldens the fantasy of your shared power. At the same time, this hard-to-comprehend scale of nature also serves to highlight its smallest features.

In the tiny details, with the sounds of life, colourful flowers, and the sun filtering through the trees, you get **beauty**. Beauty is relaxing, endearing; a feeling of lightness and calm.^{6,7}

This game elicits both sublime and beauty through its world design to evoke contrastive and complementary feelings of your and Wander's relationship to the landscape and its ecosystem.^{8,9}

So: we understand what scale and the sublime is doing, but what about the beauty?

We need to return to the original question: why are the Forbidden Lands beautiful? This is not a question of high-quality graphics or ultra-realism, but one of artistic intent and its consequences. In other words, what does a beautiful Forbidden Lands afford the player?

Environmental, Spatial Storytelling.

This game takes advantage of environmental storytelling. Environmental storytelling is most often brought up as the method of imparting atmosphere or knowledge about a space's history through arrangement. These are called **embedded narratives**; the unspoken story, the cues of

³ Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful (1757: Second Edition, 1759)," in *A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful: And Other Pre-Revolutionary Writing*, 2nd ed., ed. David Womersley, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books, 2004).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alenda Y. Chang, *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, Electronic Mediations 58 (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p. 74. Of interest, Chapter 2 further remarks on scale, awe, and the sublime.

⁶ Burke, "A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful (1757: Second Edition, 1759)."

⁷ Anthony Quinton, "Burke on the Sublime and Beautiful," *Philosophy* 36, no. 136 (1961): 71–73.

⁸ Artsy Theory, "Awe, Sublime and Shadow of the Colossus," YouTube, July 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxQi_GHgBb4.

⁹ GameDenker, "What Makes a Video Game Sublime? Kant's Philosophy in Video Games," YouTube, March 11, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wzj4h0R_ryQ.

diegetic history.¹⁰ Every ruin you come across in the Forbidden Lands is part of the embedded narrative; suggestions of a civilization abandoned, the erosion of time, and the absence of all that once was.

Enacted narratives are the stories you create through your movement in the world;¹¹ where do you make Wander stop, where do you make Wander explore. Wander's destination is set in stone, but you control his path, his urgency, and his level of detachment from the world. Every action you have Wander perform is part of an enacted narrative; stabbing, killing, moving forward; but there's also stopping, watching, gazing. Over half of your playthrough is spent in the in-between, the land, its expanse and its variation, provides architecture for your own decision making, authoring Wander's journey.

Your personal response to everything laid out before you is part of **emergent storytelling**.¹² **Diegetic** and **non-diegetic**. If the player begins to sympathize with the colossi, feels doubt towards Wander's motivations, gets attached to Agro or Mono, or experiences fear and apprehension towards the consequences of Wander's selfish destruction; these are the non-diegetic seeds of emergent storytelling. Player stories like quitting the game after the loss of Agro, or going on a journey to explore the world before tackling the final colossus—because of some gut feeling of wrongness and loss; these are concrete, diegetic responses that bloom from those non-diegetic seeds.

The design of the land matters to each of these narrative styles; the detail and realism of the ruins can help you believe that they were built by the efforts of hundreds of once-residents. Understand the scale of time and erosion at play.

If you are at any point convinced to get off of Agro's back, stop and gaze out onto the world, run through the dense forest, watch the leaves swing in the air, drag Wander far off the beaten-path, then beauty may be encouraging your enacted narrative.

And if you feel something for that beauty—if you choose to experience aesthetic appreciation over chasing the next colossus—then a story is emerging from your interactions with the world. Beauty becomes a motivation and reward for curiosity and player resistance; if you have an emotional or visceral response to the game's environment, you actively are invoking a counternarrative to Wander's destruction and disregard for said environment.

The Player versus Wander.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 2002, <https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

This brings us to a theme that keeps coming up in the discussion thus far: **character** versus **player agency**.

Shadow of the Colossus doesn't offer the player any control over the outcome of the story. You cannot change or prevent what's going to happen. There is no meta-narrative commentary attempting to blame you for completing the story;¹³ the game *wants* you to get to the ending and witness the tragedy and subsequent potential for life.

Dan Olson from Folding Ideas has a fantastic video on the subject of agency. As Olson says, "The player's participation is not in complicity but in reenactment, the story projected as myth, the game as retelling."¹⁴

Your agency lies instead outside of the game; you can reflect, react, or reject Wander's actions.

As anthropologist Miguel Cesar writes about the game: "Players are not given the agency to contribute with their values to the game itself but to morally reflect upon the determined ethical choices and events."¹⁵

And, if the player does so—if they notice a dissonance or tension between Wander's epic successes to his worsening physical state, or the clash between his victories and the painful cries of the colossi, then they better understand and embody the ongoing tragedy.

Your agency comes from the choice to look beyond Wander's plot and see the world outside of his narrow tunnel vision. This applies to the colossi most of all,^{16, 17, 18} but also the *life* that occupies the Forbidden Lands.

¹³ As opposed to, for example, *Undertale*'s meta-narrative commentary in one of its routes.

¹⁴ Folding Ideas, "The Morality of Shadow of the Colossus," YouTube, February 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhJ_qTU61g4.

¹⁵ Miguel Cesar, "Playing with the Player: Agency Manipulation in Shadow of the Colossus and Japanese Computer Games," *G|A|M|E* (Italy) 8, no. 2 (2019): 31–42, p. 37.

¹⁶ Tom Cole, "The Tragedy of Betrayal: How the Design of Ico and Shadow of the Colossus Elicits Emotion," paper presented at Proceedings of DiGRA 2015 Conference, January 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2015i1.726>.

¹⁷ Alexander Lehner, "Videogames as Cultural Ecology: *Flower* and *Shadow of the Colossus* // Videojuegos Como Ecología Cultural: *Flower* y *Shadow of the Colossus*," *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 8, no. 2 (2017): 56–71, <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2017.8.2.1349>.

¹⁸ Justin Simon, "Video Game Design and the Influence on Players' Empathy : An Analysis of Shadow of the Colossus and The Last of Us Part II" (Universitätsbibliothek Gießen, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.22029/JLUPUB-9868>.

Wander can't let go of Mono. He refuses to accept the unfairness of her death to the extent that he's willing to do anything despite the consequences, even losing Agro, even losing himself.¹⁹ But you, the player, are given sign after sign that there are worse things than grief, and better things than despair.

Even though the Forbidden Lands are abandoned, ruined, and forgotten—there is still **life** here.

An ecosystem survives; kites and turtles and lizards, flowers and ferns and forests. And if a player takes it upon themselves to explore; to put aside Wander's quest and drag him across the map to witness all of the sublime, all of the beauty, then the inherent tragedy to the game is only strengthened.

Player feelings.

You can form an affection towards the land that Wander cannot. Yet, no matter what you discover, the player must also always enact the choice to turn away from it all, to quite literally follow the darker path to the next colossus.

Even if the player has tension with Wander, the player must enact every step Wander takes towards his goals. The physical actions on the controller embed the player in Wander's experience, be it the complexity of trying to ride a horse and shoot a target while in motion, or how tightly gripping the R2 button mimics Wander's grip on a Colossus' fur.

These mimetic actions, alongside visual and audio feedback that cue you into Wander's states of adrenaline and danger, elicit a **shared pulse** through synchronization between you and Wander.²⁰ This shared pulse can invoke the player to embody the character's reactions, emotions, and affect. The high-fidelity graphics that feel all the more realistic and tangible further amplify that affective connection.²¹

The potential for shared pulses is clearest in moments of fear and tension; Wander's clumsy and desperate movements may invoke physical tension, stress, and adrenaline. If the player tries a desperate jump towards the colossus, Wander embodies that sense of wild abandon.

¹⁹ Nick Fortugno, "Losing Your Grip: Futility and Dramatic Necessity in *Shadow of the Colossus*," in *Well Played 1.0: Games, Value and Meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson (Lulu Press, 2009; 2nd ed., Play Story Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.17613/9jk4z-8zb98>.

²⁰ Anna Gibbs, "After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822393047-010>.

²¹ Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 44.

And when Wander is gripping on for dear life, so too can the player feel that everything is riding on their ability to *not let go*. By physically embodying stress and apprehension, the moments of victory and utter power-fantasy serve as a greater temporary reward.

Many discussions have been had about how that power-rush full of positive feedback serves to contrast the immediate after.^{22, 23, 24} Epic swelling music blinds the player from the destruction Wander reaps until it suddenly cuts away; an intense contrast of tone suddenly highlights the senseless destruction that Wander enacted.

Power fantasy preludes dissonant discomfort, nudging the player towards questioning the consequences of their actions.

But something I don't often see discussed is how power-fantasy is the game's primary motivation for *replays*.

Shadow of the Colossus was intended to be a game-y video game; that seems to be the best explanation for why a time attack mode is included and promoted within the game after you complete it. For all that the game experience invites you to disagree with Wander's quest and his killing of the colossi, Time Attack Mode and New Game Plus encourages the player not only to do it again but to do it *better*.

And there's no believable poetic spin on this—you're not honouring the memory of the colossi. *Reminiscence mode* exists for that reason. (When have you ever heard anyone mention reminiscence mode?) You have the ability to return to the slaughtered colossi to pray atop their broken corpse to relive their final moments, and I swear nobody talks about it. In contrast to that, Time Attack mode is quick, efficient, and execution of skill.

Armed with knowledge and experience, the player transforms Wander from a desperate teenager lost in grief to a confident colossi-slaying machine. The player now has total agency. Achievements and the promise of cool items encourage you to partake in all detachment from prior emotional conflict.

We *have* “morally reflect[ed upon] Wander's determined ethical choices and events,”²⁵—and we have chosen to *do them again*.

²² Fortugno, “Losing Your Grip: Futility and Dramatic Necessity in *Shadow of the Colossus*.”

²³ Cesar, “Playing with the Player: Agency Manipulation in *Shadow of the Colossus* and Japanese Computer Games.”

²⁴ Simon, “Video Game Design and the Influence on Players' Empathy.”

²⁵ Cesar, “Playing with the Player: Agency Manipulation in *Shadow of the Colossus* and Japanese Computer Games,” p. 37.

Those special Time-Attack mode item rewards are worth looking at for a second. If the player defeats each colossus quickly enough in normal and hard Time Attack mode, they unlock a variety of items that improve your ability to fight the colossi. What's especially interesting is that you cannot use any of these items on your first playthrough. You also cannot use them within the Time Attack modes—they *only* exist for the complete re-enactment of the game.

This re-enactment could be interpreted as the way Wander's story is mythologized. "I heard he defeated every colossus in a single blow!" "I heard he jumped from the ground onto the colossus' back."²⁶ Wander's deep personal feelings and his love for Mono are completely erased through this mythology, only a legacy of power and strength remains.

As we re-play more as Wander, and go down this rabbit hole of pursuing power beyond necessity, there's a kind of mutually assured destruction that takes place. The tension between the agencies of the player and Wander blurs, with the player now taking on Wander's quest in his stead. Wander, as his own character, becomes the final casualty in his never-ending war against the colossi.

Alternative re-play.

However, there are a couple items that offer another mode of interactivity with the game. The lizard and fruit maps are by far the most blatant encouragement to do more than live out and re-live Wander's quest. It's incredibly easy to complete the game without knowing that you can increase your health and stamina by collecting fruit and lizard tails—the game manual and game dialogue make no hint towards their existence. With these item maps, even the most battle-focused player might be encouraged to look away from the main path and see other options than re-enacting Wander's story. The lizards and fruit trees are scattered across every corner of the world, taking you to entire areas that serve no purpose to the plot, only existing as a part of the world. The Umbral Glade is one of those many locations: it's in the background on your way to Cenobia, but you *never* have to go here. But, there is a lizard and Save Shrine waiting for you, if you do.

Of course, exploration doesn't need blatant incentivizing for every player. Some may feel naturally compelled to chase after every Save Shrine they see, and in doing so will explore much of the map.

We've already discussed beauty, but there are other reasons a player might have to explore.

²⁶ This is mostly referring to speedrunning tricks. Especially Gaius' fight (#3, the very tall one), where speedrunners will launch themselves off of the sword, flying high into the air, landing on Gaius' head.

Curiosity, enacted resistance to the central plot, information gathering, lore hunting, aesthetic appreciation, or seeking out emotional experiences.

After all of that, there's one more incentive the game provides for players to fully witness and immerse themselves within the vastness of the Forbidden Lands.

Throughout this video, I have avoided discussing BluePoint's remake as a remake. For as much as this version exists under the shadow of the original, for many players this *is* the game they will experience.

Everything discussed thus far in the video applies to all versions of the game. The original, too, makes use of the world as a platform for reflection, for instilling affect and emotion, and creating narrative out of player movement across the land.

The original certainly is a different experience and makes use of different aesthetic and emotional approaches, and one can debate which method is more appropriate, or successful. That's not the point of this video.

Unique to the remake, however, is a new, gentle reward for players who express interest in the game world.

If you're watching this video, you likely know about the 79 Steps to Enlightenment. Bluepoint, the developers of the Playstation 4 remake, added these small collectable golden tokens around the map.

These steps are first and foremost a celebration of the game's long standing community and their boundless passion for the Team ICO's creation.²⁷ A reward for those who have scoured every inch of the map for its secrets and mysteries.

But that is not the only affordance of the 79 steps.

If, in their playthrough, the player has found themselves invested in the world beyond the anthropocentric and detached view of the protagonist, has stopped thinking about the Forbidden Lands as a backdrop and rather an interconnected environment, exploration of the world offers the unexpected opportunity to stumble across one of the game's 79 Steps To Enlightenment.

The placement of these collectables often begin with the simple question of, "can I go there?" Each of 79 celebrations of the fact that yes, you can go there. Now, where else can you go?

²⁷ Jacob Geller, "The Decade-Long Quest For Shadow of the Colossus' Last Secret," YouTube, August 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQNeYbBiCKw>.

The enlightenments are found by pushing the perceived boundaries of the diegetic world. Each one takes you somewhere new. This curious and mysterious quest invites the player to intimately learn and appreciate every nook and cranny of the Forbidden Lands.²⁸ And in witnessing the world's diversity and expanse, the affective thrill of exploration and discovery is sparked by that wonder.

Colloquially the steps to enlightenment are often called “coins”, an understandable shorthand from decades of gaming history associating shiny bright and gold with coins. Some of these coins require those exploration upgrades from Time Attack mode, and the re-battling of colossi—so the 79 steps are not an alternative pacifist playstyle. But that's where the original name—Steps to Enlightenment—is important.

Enlightenment is the realization of the interconnectedness of all things. When you run around the Forbidden Lands, you witness all of the life it has to offer. You memorize the paths, the architecture, the ducts, the birds above and the weeds below. The dozens of waterfalls, the lonely trees, how the leaves run down the river.

At the end of finding all the steps, you have witnessed the interconnectedness of the land. You have seen how Wander is just one moving piece of this ecosystem, his body and actions in relation to all around him; and you have seen you as a player react to these environments, what endears to you and what calls to you.

Even if you had help from the game's community, with an online map or a guide to every location, you are immersed in an interconnective appreciation together with the entire community towards the game.

The Forbidden Lands become intimate and heartwarming not only because of its inherent beauty, but because of the memories that you, Wander, and the greater community have created within the space.

What are the consequences of a beautiful world?

The Forbidden Lands are beautiful; but it's not just about aesthetics. The same reactions you get from seeing something delicate or endearing within the game, can also be evoked by your memories of your interactions with that space.

²⁸ Leadhead, “The Beautiful Mysteries of Shadow of the Colossus,” YouTube, July 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ4M4briDQg>.

By engaging with the diegetic world with care and wonder, you build a personalized narrative in which you embody a rejection of Wander's destruction and inability to look beyond his pain.

BluePoint's design merely nudges the player in that direction. But at the end of the day, this is your narrative that you have created with this world. If you have found any meaning in these forbidden lands, your choice to look around made it possible.

So, what's the point in making the Forbidden Lands beautiful? Well, on top of everything else we have covered, it's to encourage you to look around!

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