

2.2 “You Were There”: Losing Yorda in *Ico*

Fleeting memories rise
From the shadows of my mind
Sing nonomori – endless corridors
Say nonomori – hopeless warriors
You were there.
Yorda's song/ Ico

PROLOGUE

Ico is a Japanese action-adventure game released in 2001 for the PlayStation 2. It is currently playable on PlayStation3 and Xbox as well. In the game, a horned boy named Ico is navigated through a mysterious castle in the hopes of escaping, accompanied by non-player character Yorda, a tall, fragile woman who does not speak Ico's language.

Over the first hours, the game revolves around Ico's and Yorda's relationship. As early as in the introductory cut scene, the game world of *Ico* is established as a sublime universe. The camera follows a group of nameless riders wearing armour and horned helmets. Riding through an illuminated forest, they hold a horned boy captive, the player character to be. As we hear the soft sounds of birds chirping and winds shaking the leaves, the horses come to a sudden halt in front of a gigantic abyss. A mysterious chant sets in, accompanied by chimes, while the camera zooms out, revealing the landscape through a soft-focus lens.

The abyss is indeed a moat, separating a magnificent castle from the mainland. Panning over the complex contraption of bridges and walls, the title letters softly fade in.

Although the castle's doors are wide open, they are inaccessible for the men, who consequently seek access by water. From an intricate cave system on the bottom of the castle they work their way up inside. On the way there, a number of anthropomorphic doors open as the men touch them with a glowing sword. These are the doors Yorda will open later throughout the game.

The boy is taken to a spacious chamber reminiscent of a mortuary: Countless vessels resembling coffins are fitted into a wall. One of them throbs with energy; it is the boy's assigned tomb. The men apologise as they conceal the boy inside the vessel. As they leave, the room starts to rumble. Ico's coffin breaks loose, and Ico tumbles down, head first on the stone floor, where he faints.

In the next shot, a dream sequence, we see Ico anxiously explore one of the castle's rooms during a stormy night. The scene is dominated by lightning, sounds of thunder, and heavy rain. Ico's gaze moves up towards the ceiling where one would expect a large chandelier. Instead, there is a spiked cage hanging, from which black ooze drops to the floor. A black creature emerges from inside the cage while Ico is being pulled into a black hole. This is how the dream sequence ends and the player gains control over the character back in the mortuary.

From this first scene, it is established that space will play a central role in *Ico*. There is a notable size difference between characters and environments, evoking associations to 19th-century landscape painting conventions¹. Against the magnificent castle architecture, the characters appear minuscule and insignificant, underscoring the theme of

1 Characteristic of this convention is the painting *Mount Adams, Washington* from 1875 by the US-American painter Albert Bierstadt. The contrast between gigantic landscape formations and First Nation tribes in the foreground characterises nature as something powerful and awe-inspiring.

abandonment which players witnessed in the initial cutscene: A boy has been locked away and left to die in a wondrous space.

This is where we start navigating *Ico* around, using the left thumbstick on the PS2 controller. Since the game uses a third person view, *Ico*'s body is visible at all times, a continuous reminder of the castle's dimensions. As he runs around, we notice his boyish, tumbling movements, occasionally followed by playful exclamations. The camera is adjustable through the right thumbstick. The remaining commands are located on the right side of the controller and mapped in alignment with *Ico*'s physical abilities.

Upwards motions (jumping, pulling up from a ledge) are performed by pressing the top/triangle button; downwards motions (dropping down while hanging) are mapped on the bottom/cross button. The square and circle buttons, which are located to the left and right, stand for *Ico*'s hands. They are used to attack and interact with objects. The shoulder/R1, located on the back of the PS2 controller (fig. 8) holds a special significance in our ensuing interaction with Yorda.

Liberating Yorda from her cage comes with a bleak realisation; Yorda's freedom causes dark shadows to emerge and pull her towards a black hole similar to the one from *Ico*'s nightmare. Yorda is helplessly delivered to these assaults if the player does not realise within seconds that *Ico* must pick up the stick and fight the ghosts. At this moment, there is no way players have internalised the controls necessary to achieve this.

Unlike Cloud's heroic introduction, *Ico* makes its protagonist seem weak and clumsy, hinting at the many paranoid moments to follow (McDonald 2012). If the player fails to protect Yorda in time, the shadow creatures will pull Yorda into one of the dark holes in the ground, the game screen is engulfed by a black fog, and the game ends. This first traumatic moment introduces *Ico*'s core object: Defend Yorda from the spontaneously spawning shadows while solving a number of puzzles leading to the escape of the two characters.

ATTACHMENT

When it comes to attachment, Ico is the character through whose eyes we see the world, from whose perspective bonding happens, and whose inner life is expressed through mechanics – management of space with Yorda – and the visceral, haptic connection to her. In what follows, I discuss the wide jump, the shadow fight, and the idol door as recurring situations. Their repetition reinforces the difference between the characters, lending the attachments an aspect of co-dependency.

Dependency Rules

First, the wide jump emphasises Ico's and Yorda's physical difference, the way their bodies relate to space, and how confidently they move in it. Ico is clearly superior; his movements are faster, his jumps are longer, and his climbing skills are more advanced than Yorda's. Unlike Yorda, he possesses the skill of pulling himself up onto ledges, holding his own weight, and running faster than the shadows.

One of the more subtle effects is that Ico will pull Yorda behind him whenever they walk hand in hand. Like an impatient child pulling on the hand of his parent, Ico pulls and yanks Yorda's hand, forcing her to stumble closer towards him. When jumping is required, the effect is more dramatic. During countless situations, the characters are faced with a gaping abyss which Ico masters without hesitation. When Yorda is asked to jump by pressing the R1 button, she will first nonverbally communicate her refusal and deny the jump.

To make her jump anyway, Ico has to jump first and kneel down at the edge of the cliff. When R1 is pressed again, Ico will say a word of encouragement and gesture Yorda to jump. In an attempt to obey, she tries and fails; her hands do not even touch the platform edge, but instead she lands in Ico's stretched-out hand. Unless the player lets go of R1, Ico can now pull Yorda up to the platform. This simple interaction, which is repeated over and over in the game, uses Yorda's weakness for the purpose of a quick thrill: Each time the player spots an abyss, she

will correctly anticipate Yorda's failure, evoking a simple question: Will I be able to help her this time?

A similar dynamic is introduced during the ghost fights. As discussed in regard to *Ico*'s opening scene, Yorda's liberation from the cage is staged as the origin of the shadow attacks. Eliminating the shadows is Ico's task, while Yorda passively awaits her fate in what seems to be anxious paralysis. This is afforded by the circumstance that picking up objects and using them on other game objects is an action exclusively available to Ico. Yorda's fear does not translate into self-defence but triggers a flight response. Unfortunately, her in-built maximum pace is too slow; without Ico's intervention, the spirits at her heels will eventually catch up and take hold of her. By rendering Ico physically superior, the game introduces a sense of moral duty. As the stronger character with a greater action repertoire, Ico needs to help and protect Yorda by making her run faster or eliminating shadows.

The player can decide between an offensive and a defensive approach. The offensive approach would be to try and destroy all ghosts as they attempt to abduct Yorda. The ghosts never initiate aggression against Ico directly, but some of them will strike back if under attack. In this case, they will knock-out Ico for some moments, during which Yorda is unprotected. Another risk of the offensive approach is that Ico might be occupied with fighting one creature while Yorda is kidnapped by another.

Part of the game's increasing difficulty curve has to do with the progressively more versatile shapes and actions of shadow creatures. As the characters progress in the castle, the spiritual realm seems to undergo a kind of evolution, starting with simple spider-like forms whose smokey bodies can be dissolved simply by waving the stick. Later permutations include winged creatures and large anthropomorphic beasts growing thick, oily bodies. These advanced shadows are fast, efficient, and coordinated, endure a number of strikes, and are capable of powerful retaliatory attacks against Ico. They easily pull Yorda from Ico's grasp, shoulder her, and run or fly away quickly.

This is why playing aggressively in a later stage may feel overwhelming. One can choose, instead, an escape strategy, running towards one of the many magic idol gates, hand in hand. Aesthetically, this escape scene gains a dramatic edge through Yorda's restless turning around towards the threatening shadows. If they have navigated a level successfully, Ico and Yorda eventually reach an idol gate characterised by two anthropomorphic pillars which will forcefully break apart as soon as Yorda approaches them. As a collateral effect, an energetic flash is released, strong enough to eliminate all shadows in the room. This allows a powerful defence strategy; instead of bothering with awkward shadow fights, the player may simply run and let Yorda unleash her powerful energy flash.

In any case, it will be Yorda's ability which allows the couple to progress, which characterises the relationship as co-dependent, encouraging different interpretations. Yorda both represents a living key which enables Ico to progress, but she is also in charge of the mysterious doors, suggesting that she has her own, hidden, agenda behind following Ico. Indeed, Yorda seems to know the surroundings and solutions to the castle's many puzzles excellently. When the player gets lost, Yorda will give subtle pointers by calling Ico over or looking in the direction of progress.

Gender: Yorda, the feminine other/ed

We cannot fail to notice that Ico's and Yorda's division into aggressive and impulsive versus fragile and defenceless characters is gendered. This pushes the meaning of bonding with a less capable other towards a heteronormative narrative: Ico cares about Yorda because he has found in her an attractive counterpart confirming his identity as masculine protector. In terms of visual staging, there are parallels to Cloud and Aeris in *FFVII*: Yorda's petite feminine body contrasts Ico's stubbly appearance. Her overly white limbs glow against Ico's brown skin when their hands touch.

Fashion choices complement this difference. Yorda wears fringed, flowing garments, while Ico, as the bolder character, is allowed to wear

a bright red shirt tightened around his waist by a brown leather belt. Ico's clumsy stumbling and the echoing sound of his feet on the ground emphasise that he is grounded, while she hardly touches the floor. Binary aspects on the level of character design are rounded off by Ico's signature object, the erect wooden stick, displayed on both versions of the game's box art (fig. 6). In both illustrations, this symbol for male aggression protrudes directly from his hips, while Yorda is the mysterious background figure or the rescuee dragged along.

Figure 6: Ico's box art as used for the release in the Japanese and PAL regions (left) versus the US (right)



Source: SIE Japan Studio (2001)

There is one visual element which troubles a straight-forward reading of the Ico-Yorda connection as a romantic heteronormative narrative; the size difference between the characters, which invites the reading of an age difference. While Ico is clearly a child, Yorda's age is left ambiguous by making her significantly taller. This could mean that Yorda is an adult attachment figure, perhaps even Ico's mother (McDonald 2012). This leaves heteronormativity unchallenged – the

child can still desire their mother – but the act of aggression, the demand for attention, and the pulling of Yorda's arm gain a slightly different meaning. Instead of showing superiority, the child is demanding his mother's attention.

The overemphasised frailty of Yorda signifies an infantile fear of losing the beloved mother, and the paranoid shadow fight is an attempt of keeping the mother ideal intact. McDonald demonstrates that this reading goes far in explaining *Ico*'s Manichean universe. As the mother ideal, Yorda is inherently connected to the dark Queen who represents the 'bad' maternal aspects which need to be repressed in order to be with 'good' mother Yorda. From this perspective, the stick as male aggression is impotent to begin with: It can only achieve as much as to repress (kill) those dark aspects of their relationship which threaten the infantile mother ideal.

Fort-Da: Elastic Bonding

Spatiality in *Ico* is constructed through a spectacular setting in which the two characters appear fragile and lost. But the environmental challenges, and the fact that space is contested, renders the space between Ico's and Yorda's bodies precarious as well. The elastic bond device is used to create a suspenseful pulsation between separation and return, risk and relief, simply by defining the physical space between Ico and Yorda as contested.

Given the mysterious adversary Ico and Yorda are exposed to, the castle is an agoraphobic place; it is precisely the vastness and spaciousness that is threatening. It creates an ideal environment for the dancing, attacking shadow creatures. Under such conditions, the game teaches us early on the imperative of keeping minimal distance between Yorda and Ico, since closeness translates to safety. Not only do shadows emerge less frequently when Ico and Yorda share a personal space, but Ico is also able to protect Yorda more readily.

At the same time, progressing in the game affords Ico to leave Yorda on an exposed spot at times to pull a lever, climb a rope, or open a door. The shadow mechanic effectively characterises such situations of

separation as dangerous. The player is put into a position where they will anticipate the emergence of shadows as soon as they have left Yorda alone. It is this anticipation which causes stress. We have witnessed before what happens when we leave Yorda alone; it is likely to happen again. The only questions left to answer are how many shadows will emerge, and how long it will take them to abduct Yorda this time. A player may ask: Will I be fast enough to prevent the worst? I handled it before, but will I handle it this time?

Needless to say, there is pleasure in answering these questions affirmatively and returning to Yorda before something serious happens. This pleasure is not unlike what Freud described in his *fort-da* game in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” from 1920 (Strachey 1962). Freud observes a toddler boy repeatedly throwing a wooden reel into his cot, where it is invisible to him. He then pulls it back again with pleasure. The name *fort-da* is derived from the boy’s exclamations during each action, commenting on the object’s status; “*fort*” (German: absent) stands for the tense moment in which the reel temporarily disappears, whereas the much more joyful “*da*” (German: present) celebrates the moment when the reel returns to the boy. Freud concludes from this observation that to the toddler, this game holds significance as a symbolic negotiation of maternal absence. The reel acts as a stand-in for the mother whose temporary absence the toddler must learn to cope with. To deal with the separation, the toddler symbolically enacts the joyful return of the mother.

Ico exercises the *fort-da* game on a basic level. Throughout risky puzzle sequences, Yorda is put into a Fort position and thereby established as a vulnerable object worthy of protection. Ico’s return to her creates a pleasant Da moment, which can feel like the player’s personal victory. We do not want Ico to leave her personal space, unless for the sake of such a pleasant return. Throughout the game, Ico’s Fort moments become longer and more difficult to master, but the pleasure of reunion grows proportionally, too.

The Call-Response Controls

The call/response device is a haptic strategy which defines communication between Yorda and Ico as essential part of the gameplay. Pressing the R1 button on the PlayStation2 controller stands for Ico's desire to connect to Yorda. Yorda will do whatever she can to accommodate Ico's wish by coming closer, holding his hand, or carrying out an assisted manoeuvre like the wide jump. This is even possible in a universe where Yorda and Ico do not share a spoken language.

Yorda's belonging to the mythical castle is underscored by the fact that her speech is encrypted, and even translated into fictional subtitles (fig. 7). Though being inherently alien to both Ico and the player, Yorda still consents to communicate with them on a physical level.

Figure 7: Screenshot from Ico, Yorda's fictional language expressed through playful hieroglyphs

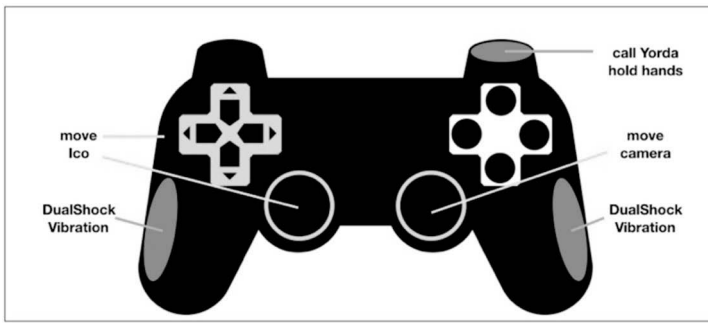


Source: SIE Japan Studio (2001)

Where spoken language fails, there is the tangible level of the hand-controller relationship, which is the only medium to bridge the gap between the characters. McDonald (2012) has shed light on an interesting parallel between the anatomical nomenclature of the R1 button (shoulder button) and its use in *Ico*: Through it, Ico literally rubs shoulders with Yorda, and, as McDonald suggests, the rounded shape evokes associations to the comforting maternal breast.

This comfort – the response Yorda gives to Ico’s calls – can be achieved in several ways, depending on the context and the space between Ico and Yorda. When far apart, R1 triggers Ico to call out for Yorda, and she will try to come closer if possible. Only if separated by an obstacle unsurmountable to her will Yorda refuse Ico’s call. In this case the onus is on Ico to find a solution.

Figure 8: Ico’s control scheme



Source: author

We have seen the case in which the R1 button can be used to make Ico stretch out a helpful arm to catch Yorda after her jump. A similar dynamic is at work when Yorda faces an inaccessible ledge. If Ico jumps up first, R1 makes him reach out and pull Yorda up by pressing the square button. As shown in fig. 8, the mapping of R1 does not interfere with any of the other commands. Actions mapped to the right side of the controller are triggered with the right thumb, while R1 is activated using the right index finger. This means that irrespective of what Ico does, contact with Yorda can be maintained at all times.

The most powerful deployment of the R1 button is certainly when Ico and Yorda are within each other’s reach. In this case they will hold hands, triggering the DualShock feature of the PS2 controller to send a soft vibration feedback to the interreactive player. As indicated in fig. 8, this vibration feedback is felt on both grips of the controller. In

conjunction with the action of holding hands, it underscores a sense of intimacy and safety, just like feeling another person's pulse during skin contact (McDonald 2012). If the player identifies as Ico, the controller may stand for Yorda's hand. Otherwise, the comfortable vibration may simply feel pleasant in its own right, contrasting the fast-paced action during combat, and the performance pressure imposed by a gaping abyss.

Altogether, these three design devices of dependency, spatial elastic bonding, and call/response mechanic anchor Yorda as a natural part of the game's objective. The first establishes responsibility of a helpless other as a core motive to care, the second presents intimacy as an advantage for survival, and the third emphasises the pleasure of reunion. Connecting with Yorda becomes as natural to the player as the action of navigating Ico around. There is one objective – escaping the castle – and this objective is based on the premise of a shared space. By repeating bonding exercises on the mechanical, spatial, and haptic levels, shared space becomes a given, taken for granted by the player. It will only be at the point of separation that the player realises how much Yorda has been sutured into Ico's universe, and what he loses when Yorda becomes unavailable to him.

THE FAREWELL TROPHY

Ico's separation from Yorda is introduced via a dramatic scene in chapter six, around two thirds of total playing time. Hand in hand, Ico and Yorda have finally reached the castle's front gate and set out to leave it via the gigantic stone bridge connecting the castle to the forest. The weather is bright and calm, although clouds start forming in the distance. Halfway over the bridge, the castle's dark Queen approaches and pulls back part of the bridge. A gap widens between the two sides, separating the couple. Inverting the established power dynamics, Yorda stretches out her hand, and Ico needs to jump. If the player times this jump correctly, Ico grasps Yorda's hand.

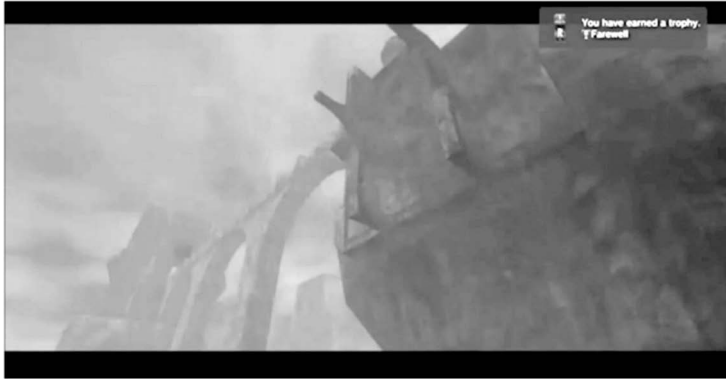
Foreshadowing the imminent change of gameplay, Ico's weapon slips and plummets into the moat. Meanwhile, the Queen's shadow has reached Yorda, and starts engulfing her. Thus paralysed, Yorda's hand lets go of Ico, and he tumbles down. Yorda whispers the word *nonomori*, which will reappear later in the lyrics of Ico's final song *You Were There*.

Following Ico's fall in the abyss, the screen fades black. The soundscape changes, indicating that the weather has changed to a thunderstorm. In the PlayStation3 version, a small message pops up on the top right corner of the screen, connecting the diegetic inner game screen with the extra-diegetic black frame (see fig. 9). It reads "You have earned a trophy². Farewell". At the same time, we see the castle from a low, tilted angle, towering over Ico's new location in the rain – a giant cave.

Although the 'farewell trophy' is visible only for seconds, it is an interesting addition to the PS3 version of *Ico*. In this version, trophies are used as extra-diegetic elements to comment on a task ('Rescue') or geographical location ('West Gate'). What the 'Farewell' trophy does is to rationalise and finalise the separation of Yorda and Ico, using the authority of the generic trophy animation. The fact that "you have earned a trophy" means that a chapter of the game is now irrevocably closed. What we have 'earned' is an official confirmation which may or may not help players find emotional closure.

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- 2 The trophy feature is an in-game reward system introduced with the PlayStationNetwork (PSN) in 2006. It allows players to compare their achievements and share secret findings via the PSN. Developers can incorporate trophies of four different levels into their games (bronze, silver, gold, platinum), suggesting a certain competitiveness. However, it has also become popular to use trophies for narrative purposes.

Figure 9: Screenshot of Ico, Farewell trophy after the fall from the bridge



Source: SIE Japan Studio (2001)

GAMEPLAY DEPRIVATION

Ico's postlapsarian life is not quite what it used to be. For the first time, he will be on his own, in an environment that has notably changed from the familiar castle setting. While a thunderstorm is raging outside, Ico finds himself inside a cave, standing on a dark, spiked, hanging cage. This exposition mirrors the game's opening scene in several ways. First, this is a place not unfamiliar to the attentive player who will recognise it from the introductory scene, as a place the three horned riders traversed before imprisoning Ico. Ico is again imprisoned, but this time from Yorda's perspective, on a hanging cage. Secondly, both of Ico's awakenings are traumatic. Initially, the game's transition from cut scene to interreactive action happens via Ico's fall from the tomb/womb. In the mirroring postlapsarian scenario, Ico is exposed on what might be the cave's most dangerous spot.

The shift of scenery from a warm and homely indoors space to a rough outdoors environment is exploited symbolically. The player has been familiarised with the castle's architecture, its solid, tiled structure,

its trimmed court gardens, and its balconies with a view. The weather had been bright and clear, allowing an unconstrained look at the promised land in the distance; a land seemingly bare of obstacles and therefore preferred to the castle's unpredictable mysteries. In other words, the spectator/player had been allowed to project hopeful future dreams on Ico and Yorda. In contrast to this, the rocky insides of the cave in the now are treched in a greyish mist, making the organically shaped level structures difficult to read.

When we first find Ico, balancing on the narrow, dangerously dangling cage contraption, we realise he is surrounded by a confusing number of cages that need to be navigated to reach a solid precipice. Like other essential puzzle pieces ahead of us, this precipice is almost invisible, hidden in the dark. This breaks with established principles of level design lighting which usually aims at providing player guidance (Jenssen 2012). Players are literally left in the dark about the path towards progression, introducing moments of guesswork and disorientation. Climbing passages start in unlikely spots, seemingly blind alleys turn out to be the way towards progress. Yorda's direction pointers certainly would have been helpful here.

Although the game contained water-based puzzles before, there is a new focus on swimming, falling into, and being washed away by water, indicating Ico's loss of stability. Through tricky rope climbing passages the player is landed in a dull cycle of climbing, falling, and climbing again. The rain outside and the waterworks inside the cave produce deep roaring noises and a thick greyish mist, two effects adding a depressive tone. Ico must follow a dark, confusing, and depressing path through organically winding tunnels, across rusty pipes, and barely intact cogwheels.

This means that Ico's life after the fall is characterised by gameplay deprivation. First there is a loss of important gameplay routines, such as the pleasurable fort-da dynamic. This introduces uncertainty: Can the game provide an adequate replacement for a previously fulfilling task? On a narrative level, Ico's identity as heroic leader is put into question.

Ico's purpose of being in the world so far has been the aggressive protection of a weaker partner, and the constant search for intimacy.

Part of his agency has been constructed around defeating Yorda's enemies, literally pulling her out of trouble. By removing this role as helper and protector, the game shifts focus on what is left of Ico: A character who is no longer needed and whose place in the world has become precarious. His first encounter with an idol door is another way the game puts the player in touch with this precariousness. We remember Yorda's ability to effortlessly open the idol door, while Ico has to take a significant detour to find an idol sword, a prosthesis substituting Yorda's natural born instincts.

Finally, there is a loss of the soothing DualShock vibrations whenever Yorda's and Ico's hands had met. Here, the game's previous investment in a single-button ritual mediating communication translates into a tragic effect: Since the player has become used to the sensation of hand-holding, the absence of the soft rumbling construct additional loss of purpose. *Ico* acknowledges that the hard-to-grasp sensual dimension plays a role during attachment. It mimics the subtle sensory complex of a partner's idiosyncratic touch, smell, and sense of presence which is hard to let go of. Through the call/response mechanic, the game has created a sensual 'Yorda complex' whose meaning changes when R1 is pressed in Ico's new situation. In this case, Ico will still call out for Yorda, but his call will die in the cave's void without response. Ico's dying voice thus confirms that pleasant bonding rituals like the wide jump, hand holding, a hand-in-hand escape from the shadow monsters, or simply a partner responding to the wish for proximity, have become a thing of the past.

Like in *FFVII*, *Ico*'s gameplay deprivation comes with a secondary loss. Yet while Aeris's removal from the battle party changes only parts of the player's strategic setup, Yorda's loss significantly changes Ico's relationship to the world and removes the game's core objective of escaping together. Ico and the player have to deal with a loss of self in the form of Ico's heroic identity: The focus shift from socially oriented towards self-oriented shakes the foundations of what it means to be Ico.

This shift is reinforced through an emotionally charged visual and auditory landscape. There is a transition from bright to dark, solid to liquid ground, from domestic to wild, from clear to clouded. Furthermore, the level design plays with the conventional metaphorical dichotomy *up is good/down is bad* (Lakoff/Johnson 1980). One starts high up on the castle platform, signifying the hope to be in charge. Hundreds of metres above the ground, Ico's elevated emotional journey takes place mainly on a horizontal plane. Although this introduces the fear of falling – culminating in *game over* situations in which Yorda's shadows push Ico off an exposed platform – there is hope, expressed through well-lit, accessible passages.

Ico literally falls deep from this plane of hope. His place after the fall is close to the sea, the lowest point of the environment. From the initial cutscene, we know that there are two ways to go from here; out (representing resignation) and up (representing yearning for Yorda). However, at this point the game forces Ico to go up. Ico cannot let go of his hopes to reconnect with Yorda.

Although these hopes turn out to be unrealistic, Ico refuses to give in. On the contrary, he forces his way into the castle once again, where instead of Yorda, he finds the Queen. His attempts to kill the Queen, using the idol sword, are successful, but this does not bring Yorda back or grant Ico control over the situation. In fact, he loses his horns and passes out while the castle starts crumbling.

This is when the game's final cutscene starts, and Yorda makes her last appearance in the shape of a shadow ghost who tucks Ico's unconscious body into a boat. She then pushes the boat off onto the open sea, while the castle dramatically collapses. Yorda's climactic appearance is all the more dramatic for its music. Since the game's soundscape has been minimalistic so far, listening to a song feels out of the ordinary.

Fleeting memories rise
From the shadows of my mind
Sing *nonomori* – endless corridors
Say *nonomori* – hopeless warriors
You were there
You were there
Am I forever dreaming
How to define the way I'm feeling
You were there
Countless visions they haunt me in my sleep
You were there
Though forgotten all promises we keep

Source: SIE Japan Studio (2001)

These lines are sung by a child's voice that may belong to Yorda, Ico, or both. As mentioned, the central word is the ominous 'nonomori', the magical formula Yorda's whispers on the bridge during the moment Ico's hand slips from her grip. Through repetition, *nonomori* becomes the joint between past ("You were there") and the present ("Fleeting memories rise"), an evocative spell inviting the player to contemplate special moments in the game before they put it aside.

Furthermore, as an encrypted phrase, *nonomori* has inspired fans to speculate about its meaning. Some believe that the phrase means "thank you" in a reversed version of Japanese romanji³. While no evidence exists that this is the case, fan Rune proposes: "Instead of saying 'Thank You', start saying 'nonomori' to people; on the internet or in real life"⁴.

3 Fan speculations about the purportive meaning of Yorda's language can be found in forums like neoseeker: <http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/543/t933514-yordas-speech-at-end-spoilers/>

4 Rune's suggestion can be found here: <http://thecolorless.net/posts/48790>

That way, Rune hopes to spread Yorda's word, and become a part in ordinary language, expressing the wish to honour her in everyday life.

TO BOND OR NOT TO BOND WITH YORDA?

While discourse around Yorda's language points towards interest in the character, players have responded to the game's construction of attachment and loss in different ways. The inequitable distribution of power among Ico and Yorda has elicited frustration as well as emotional commitment.

For some players, the imperative to protect and defend Yorda makes her appear disproportionately useless, undermining bonding. As user Jack reports: "It'd have worked a lot better if when you find a better weapon, you give her your old one, so she can at least attempt to defend herself. The game's pretty much one big escort mission, which is probably the root of me finding it to be stunningly average⁵."

When Jack refers to "escort mission" as a problem, he points to the often-deplored design trope of a weaker side character whose behaviour does not match their vulnerability. Their poorly designed AI, or "artificial stupidity" induces them to throw themselves into danger, undermining the player character's attempts at protecting them⁶. Jack implies that Yorda's "uselessness" affiliates her with this trope and compromises her role as a partner to be taken seriously. If only she

5 Online source: <http://www.rlmukforum.com/index.php?/topic/77573-ico/&page=2>

6 The TV trope wiki defines Artificial Stupidity as a recurring consequence of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) failing to choose an appropriate move for a simulated character. This failure of a computer to make a contextually appropriate decision is the most visible in role-playing games, but also prevalent in escort missions, where NPCs often demonstrate "suicidal overconfidence": <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ArtificialStupidity>.

would be allowed to participate in the action and show her commitment to the mutual cause.

For others, Yorda's passivity enhances a feeling of paranoid commitment and the fear of inadequacy. In the same forum thread, Cyhwuhx writes, "The very first time she was pulled into the shadows, I felt a shiver down my spine. Everything... black.. I felt sickeningly empty". For superstarbeejay, "[t]he panic and urgency as you hear her yelp from a different room is spine tingling". In both cases, dependency is a meaningful source for emotional projection: The sole responsibility of Ico over a weaker other adds weight on the players' shoulders, causing them to experience "panic" and "emptiness".

For these players, the game communicates paranoia of loss successfully. What characterises the relationship is a constant feeling of alertness. Yorda's dependency is not unpacked in terms of her own uselessness but the player's potential failure at providing and protecting. Emotional projection allows these players to become vulnerable, putting themselves in a role where they can use the game to confront their own insecurities concerning questions of attachment and loss.

What is notably absent from fan forum discourse is that Ico's vulnerability is channelled through a gendered binary in which the masculine is active and the feminine is passive. *Ico's* dependency rules and the call/response controls force player's attention to Ico's inner life, while we know little about Yorda's dreams and ambitions. Since all of her actions are responses to Ico's demands, we never find out whether she even has a will on her own, or truly wants to follow Ico to begin with. The game never brings up the question of consent. Yorda is hard-wired to respond to Ico's request positively, without ever challenging his way or uttering her opinion. This makes *Ico* a game in which feelings around love and loss are constructed around the total victimisation of the feminine other; a male-owned paranoia fantasy.