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Five-Color Rice

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*"A gourd with five-colored rice used by shinobi as landmarks.
Intended to be spread on the ground in recognizable patterns.
The white gourd is blessed with fertility, and resting at a Sculptor's Idol will replenish it.
This rice is not edible, however."*

At one point in *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, an old lady asks for rice, in the cryptic way that characterizes dialogue in *Souls* games. A nearby merchant offers Five-Color Rice for 1600 sen, a very high price by the standards of game items of this type. Players are tempted to buy it, thinking it will be a key item they can give to the lady to progress her quest. But, it turns out, the Five-Color Rice is useless in the old lady's quest. It seems like the merchant is deceiving players, but it is in fact the game's designers that are teasing players, because the deception here revolves around game dynamics. That is, FromSoftware cleverly leverage players' expectations of the conventions of quest progression, the use of key items and the investment of currency that was earned through thorough exploration and overcoming difficult enemies. Five-Color Rice makes a mockery of all of these.

The first impressions that come to mind when one thinks of *Souls* games are the epic battles, the ruinous environments, and the fragmentary nature of the narrative. But one of the most effective tools of *Souls* games is a rhetorical device that is often overlooked and that I will call the *irony of mechanics*. This device is a kind of irony that is based on the interactive specificity of the videogame medium. Irony can be seen as a device that works by saying the opposite of what is intended, based on a contrast between two spheres: the expectations generated by the literal meaning of an utterance and the reality of the intentions underlying this utterance, which causes the literal to take on a metaphorical meaning when the intentions are somehow discovered. Similarly, the irony of mechanics plays on the contrast between the expectations created by a game's design and the actual dynamics of the gameplay, such as the expected relevance of certain items and their actual use (or, in this case, their actual *uselessness*) in the game.

Five-Color Rice is not the only case of irony in *Souls*. This is, for example, the description of Rubbish (see Andrea Andiloro's entry, [XX](#)) in *Dark Souls III*: "Rubbish of no value. Who in their right mind would bother carrying this around? Maybe you need help." In *Souls* games, items are often a reward for winning battles or successfully traversing areas that are riddled with obstacles. They reveal important details of the game's lore or provide essential power-ups to help players

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progress. When one of these items, so heavily emphasized in the game's design, turns out to be useless, players are likely to be momentarily disengaged from the game, instead reflecting on its rules from an outside perspective. For example, Rubbish can be a possible reward from the Forest Hunter Covenant after winning a battle in an invasion, suggesting it has a certain importance that it does not actually have.

As the cases of Five-Color Rice and Rubbish show, *Souls'* form of irony is often a way of challenging the basic and earnest mechanics of the game. In this way, *Souls* games break away from the purely verbal use of irony and transplant it into the specificity of the medium, which is characterized by interactivity and the expectations it generates. In both cases I analyzed, irony relies on the contrast between certain practices encouraged by design and the reality of their uselessness. They both involve seemingly self-evident game mechanics that function as ironic leverage to make players reflect on how they tend to uncritically follow game conventions.

Videogames can be seen as powerful "learning tools", as researcher Raph Koster states in his book *Theory of Fun for Game Design*: players receive positive feedback as they learn to do what they need to do to succeed by following the rules of the game.¹ Koster states that since games highlight the patterns of their own fulfilment, what counts as success is easy to understand in good videogames. Thus, the cases in which designers play with this communicative property of design mechanics are particularly interesting because they question the very foundation of the interactive pact between player and designed game. Good game design involves presenting players with clear goals and reinforcing 'correct' player behavior with rewards and fulfillment. The irony of mechanics makes players question this conventional relation, thus offering an opportunity for reflection both on game design and the way in which players tend to interpret it. In this sense, the use of irony in the *Souls* games can be seen as a specific case of "deceptive game design", as described by philosophers and games scholars Stefano Gualeni and Nele Van de Mosselaer, i.e. as an example of design that "transgresses the tacit agreement between players and designers that the game discloses an interactive game-world that the players can trust and buy into".²

According to philosopher and game studies scholar C. Thi Nguyen, the medium specificity of games can be found in the fact that they propose agency models to the players.³ Games structure certain patterns of behavior by designing specific possibilities for interaction, and making other actions impossible. The rules of a videogame direct the player's actions. In this way, Nguyen claims that games create aesthetic meaning *through* agency. The expressive value of games lies in the fact that they require the player's interaction, so that aesthetic effects can be nested within their in-game practices. Thus, a library of games could be seen as a library of agency models.

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We have already seen how *Souls* games use irony to make us question relevant mechanics through the forms of agency they suggest. To explore this further, we need to identify what the main form of agency is that the *Souls* games provide to players.

The agency model that *Sekiro* offers, for example, is to behave like a *shinobi* during the Sengoku period (15th and 16th centuries), and try to become stronger by defeating bosses, exploring areas to find useful items, and improving your dodging and parrying reflexes as well as your ability to make use of available windows to attack enemies. Not only in *Sekiro* but also in other *Souls* games, the aim of the gameplay is to improve your skills as a player and become stronger in combat. All *Souls* games are designed to clearly nudge the player into certain patterns of behavior. The presence of enemies that are too difficult to beat, for example, is often a strong hint that players should go somewhere else first, and only come back when they have upgraded their skillset, found new items, or leveled up.

Aside from the two cases analyzed that mock the mechanics of item collection and quest progression through key items, another mechanic where irony can be seen at work is in this very implied objective in the games to get stronger. But one of the fundamental points of the *Souls* games' narratives is to depict ambitions for power in a pessimistic, self-destructive way. Miyazaki plays with the sense of hubris in his characters, often emphasizing their most pathetic traits as they try to achieve greater power than would naturally be possible. Gwyn in *Dark Souls*, Laurence in *Bloodborne*, Marika in *Elden Ring* and Genichiro in *Sekiro* are the most emblematic examples of characters who destroy themselves by trying to violate the order of nature.

At the same time, how these characters are presented is never merely mocking or accusatory, but also elegiac – think of the contrapuntal effect produced by the famous soundtrack during Gwyn's boss fight in *Dark Souls*. In this instance, combat against an entity that was once divine in power becomes, in fact, combat against a hollow being that can also be easily defeated through repeated parries and reposts. The final combat against Gwyn does not exhibit the characteristics of a triumphant or epic battle. Instead, it could be described as elegiac. The decadence of this fight against a hollow version of Gwyn, maybe once the most powerful being in the game world, is counterbalanced by an elegiac and melancholic soundtrack, which functions as a device that abstracts the audience from the immediate context, prompting them to reflect on the value of expectations of victory and about the concept of power and ambition through one of the most important character of the game. The irony here comes from the perceived incongruity between expectations created by the gameplay and the tone of the music.

Another example of the ironic dissonance used in *Souls* games is the main antagonist in *Sekiro*, Genichiro, who wants to use the blood of the immortal heir, Kuro, whom we, as the *shinobi* Sekiro,

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protect. From the perspective of Sekiro and Kuro, Genichiro is the antagonist, but through the descriptions we read and the dialogues we have with Isshin Ashina, we discover his troubled history, which is very similar to that of the protagonist we control. In the end, Genichiro's explicit motive is to defend his land and his people, and to do so he is willing to resort to any means, even heresy. The backstory of the antagonist offers another perspective on his terrible actions so that accusation and pity coexist thanks to the ironic detachment. The result is a bitter awareness of the vanity of trying to be immortal, an ambition that symbolizes all human ambitions.

Here, irony lies in the fact that while the *Souls* games narratively portray characters as ambitious to no avail, and constantly but fruitlessly striving for more power, these games also include an array of design mechanics which motivate players to do the same. Through mechanics and the design of specific forms of agency, the *Souls* games make players believe that they are important and becoming ever more powerful. But through the tragic backstories of their gameworlds and characters, they reveal the vanity of the player's endeavors.

The anticlimactic endings of these games point to this vanity of the strength that players achieve during their playthrough. Even in the 'best' cases, such as the beginning of a new course for humanity, or when being transported to a new stage of existence (such as in the Usurpation of Fire ending in *Dark Souls III*, the Childhood's Beginning ending in *Bloodborne*, the Dark Ending in *Dark Souls*, or the Shura Ending in *Sekiro*), the games' endings cast ambiguity regarding the implications of the adventure and are pathetic in tone rather than triumphant and epic. Other times they imply starting over, but with the knowledge that one day everything will return to the way it was in an endless cycle of pain and rebirth (such as when linking the First Flame in *Dark Souls*, taking Gherman's place in *Bloodborne*, or achieving the Immortal Severance ending in *Sekiro*). Other times, they imply the end of everything forever (like in the End of Fire ending in *Dark Souls III*) or suggest the extreme vanity of the seemingly noble act of sacrifice (when linking the flame in *Dark Souls III* or giving your life to Gherman in *Bloodborne*).

In this way, the gameplay's implied objective to become ever stronger collides with the bitter awareness of vanity on the narrative level, resulting in a powerful ironic effect of disappointment. The disappointment and ambiguity felt towards a *Souls* game's ending can be compared to the disappointment we feel after buying Five-Color Rice. What Miyazaki's games ultimately seem to suggest is that the laughter we laugh from a distance, as we watch the plot unfold until its often absurd, vain, or anticlimactic outcome, will be a bitter laughter, because bitter is the fate of the broken worlds we traverse as players. It is like the laughter of Patches, who, in his final appearance at the end of time and space in *Dark Souls III*, wishes us a "fine dark soul" and, for the first time in his many ironic appearances, sets us on the right path.

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Patches' laughter is similar to the ironic way in which Souls' games tend to mock their own game mechanics and the implied quest for ever greater strength. The meta-textual irony of *Souls*, and the way it mocks certain basic game mechanics, warns players not to take this quest, and ultimately the *Souls games* themselves, too seriously, but to instead realize that this bitter, metareflective laughter also holds meaning in these worlds.

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