Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Ico*
Platform: PlayStation 2
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: March 22, 2002 (PAL)
Developer: Team Ico
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Fumito Ueda

NOTE: This narrative review explores the PAL version of Ico, not the 2001 American NTSC release. Deadlines demanded that several features needed to be cut from the American release; the PAL version represents the complete/intended product.

Overview

      With no shortage of time, money, and hands, a good product is an inevitability. To be great, however, is to successfully create a worthwhile product in the face of these limitations. In the late 90s, Fumito Ueda saw nothing but restrictions in the industry; the tools and technology of the time imposed hard limits on what Team Ico could make. In wrestling with these restrictions, Ueda was able to boil down what it meant to tell a story in an interactive medium, and it's these restrictions that gave birth to his now-iconic Design by Subtraction. Guided by that design philosophy, *Ico* and its world were cleansed of impertinences, leaving only that which carried significant narrative weight and contributed to the intended experience. The telling of the game's story would be inextricably tied to the life of the game's mechanics, subsequently reducing the game's reliance on other mediums' methods. Simple, concise, and adamant in its interactivity-first approach, *Ico* left the deepest of footprints with the softest of steps, silently influencing all narrative-driven games that would come after it.

      Ico is a narrative-driven, 3-D adventure, and as barebones of an adventure as one can imagine. What's equally surprising to hear about one of gaming's most influential narratives is that the tale being spun is anything but groundbreaking; *Ico* tells its variation of the era's defining "save the princess" story. At a glance, the game appears to play into this trope quite heavy-handedly by having the player hand-hold Princess Yorda in the most literal sense. However, *Ico* is so much more. The player's path towards mechanical mastery colors their perception of the pair and strengthens Ico's narrative beats. While the world within the castle walls is almost plain and barren, *Ico*'s emotional world is enriched by the player-game

interactions that take place within it. Audiences are looking for an emotional stake in this world — they're looking to see themselves in the narrative they're consuming, and Ico provides this through interactivity.

Characters

The works of Team Ico feature sparsely populated worlds — *Ico* is no exception. Fumito Ueda's infamous Design by Subtraction extends to characters, limiting the cast to three: the protagonist, Ico; the deuteragonist, Yorda; and the primary antagonist, the Queen.

ICO: A horned boy hailing from a fear-stricken village under the oppressive rule of the Queen. To his village, his horns are emblematic of the deep-rooted darkness lying dormant inside his body. To quell their fears and please the Queen, the villagers deliver Ico to the Queen's castle — a necessary sacrifice for the sake of their safety. However, the dilapidated fortress fails to contain the energetic Ico and he quickly finds himself free from his restraints. His high energy is matched by his resourcefulness, which he frequently displays traversing the unwelcoming castle. But no trait shines brighter than his strong sense of justice; his freedom and safety mean little if fellow escapee Yorda can't be afforded the same.

YORDA: She is the ethereal daughter and eternal prisoner of the Queen. Blessed with Light Magic, she possesses the power to manipulate the castle's many magical contraptions. But, as Ico discovers upon freeing her, Yorda's body is far too frail to survive the castle's grueling trials. It's her kindness and determination that ultimately earn Ico's admiration, but her cruel mother could care less. The Queen is concerned only for her body — a vessel carefully constructed for her own nefarious purposes.

THE QUEEN: A battered corpse kept alive by the barely beating black heart it houses. Sensing that her life was nearing its end, the selfish Queen turned to Dark Magic to preserve her failing body. By sacrificing the horned children, she was able to extend her life well beyond its natural limits. But she too is a prisoner in her own castle. Her pursuit of freedom leads her to creating Yorda, whom she aims to possess once she has collected enough sacrifices for the ritual. Her looming presence strikes great fear into the hearts of Ico and Yorda during their escape, but it's her panicked, old bones which rattle the loudest.

Breakdown

Establishing the Theme

A gargantuan fortress of lead and stone sits prominently atop tall rocky islands, awaiting the arrival of a timid little boat carrying its latest sacrifice. For eons, its wind-scarred walls have acted as ardent shields against invaders, and stone-cold wardens to its prisoners. Its interiors are unwelcoming, unnatural, and littered with unnecessary dangers and inconveniences; it's as though it was never meant to be lived in.

To understand the castle, one must first travel back to 1910, the year metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico put to canvas the first of his "Metaphysical Town Square" series. [1] Chirico is widely credited

as the father of the metaphysical art movement, the precursor to what would become surrealist art. The two defining traits of Chirico's work are an unnaturally empty scene and an unnerving combination of objects — both meant to convey the opposing feelings of forlornness and freedom. Fumito Ueda took great inspiration from Chirico, even mirroring his style for the game's cover art. This "less is more" style translates over to Ueda's own Design by Subtraction brilliantly, but arguably more significant is how *Ico* repurposes the thematic elements of Chirico's work.

As Ico, players brave the treacherous castle alongside Yorda. At first, ineffective communication and initial reservations kept the two wary of each other. As the bond between them grows, they learn to value their connection and leverage it to bend the castle to their will. In other words: forlornness turns to freedom. *Ico* posits that humans find strength in the relationships they build and use that power to face down their hostile world side by side. And, to serve this theme, the game employs its mechanics, level design, and more to give players a window into the inner world of the unlikely duo.

Narrative Structure & Techniques

Ico is a 5-hour, hyper-linear experience that largely follows the hero's journey, but makes an effort to toy with expectations associated with a traditional hero story. Playing *Ico*, players will find themselves in perpetual discomfort. There is no ordinary world and no benchmark for what is safe or normal — Ico and Yorda have no first act, no teachers, no allies, and certainly no place to call home. Players, as Ico, need not worry about anything but the safety of Yorda; the bond between the two is the only thing in *Ico* that is certain.

Beyond the first act, *Ico* walks the path set by the hero's journey step by step. On occasion, *Ico* will play into narrative tropes quite heavy-handedly; towards the end of the game, Ico runs into a literal Queen-slaying sword almost accidentally and with no fanfare or obvious build-up. The event is jarring, almost comical, but exists to accentuate the game's ambiguous third act. *Ico* defeats the Queen with the sword, having sacrificed his chance at freedom for Yorda, but is incapacitated. The final leg of the hero's journey is completed by none other than Yorda, who is subsequently cleansed from the darkness that corrupted her. They wake up on a nondescript shore unsure of where they are, but nothing matters so long as they're reunited. Together and finally free from harm, Ico and Yorda are closer now to what would be the ordinary world than they've ever been. As a team, they've faced down an inhospitable world, tamed it, and carved out a space for themselves in it.

Despite differences in presentation, the one commonality of all storytelling mediums is that they are at the mercy of their audience; the experience the audience will have is up to the audience themselves. In traditional literature, the "show" in "show, don't tell" refers to describing action as opposed to writing exposition. Audiences engage in cognitive evaluation — interpreting and comparing the narrative to one's own experiences — to decide what the underlying emotions being implicitly stated by the action are. In film, "showing" takes on a new life with the addition of visual elements, providing even easier access to the subtext. *Ico* understands that the evolution of showing, is doing. The game prefers its cadence of puzzles, fights, and rests to highlight Ico and Yorda's mechanics. In controlling Ico and engaging in emotion-tinged interactions with Yorda and the castle, players are given the opportunity to explore similar feelings and

develop them through their actions and decisions in-game. Direct communication through mechanics redefines what it means to understand a character and follow their character arc — it's just as much the player's story as it is Ico and Yorda's.

Ico contains little dialogue and even less intelligible dialogue — Yorda speaks a language neither Ico nor the player can understand. What's actually said is never as important as went into saying it. Expository cutscenes are an even greater rarity. If a lengthy cutscene does happen to disrupt the game flow, then that loss of control is conducive to the narrative in that moment. *Ico* is groundbreaking not because it blindly followed "do, don't show," but because it also knew when showing would prove more valuable. An example would be the ending cutscene in which Yorda carries Ico out to the boat — a reversal of roles. It is now Ico who is powerless following the final battle, communicated to the player by robbing them of control. This particular sequence can be strengthened in this way because of all the work players put into mastering the game's mechanics beforehand.

The Castle as a Storyteller

The tiny Ico is dwarfed by the Casket Chamber; its inordinate proportions remind him that he is well outside his territory. There, he reaffirms his abilities before preparing for his impossible escape. He realizes that his stature puts many contraptions and ledges just out of his reach. He proceeds anyway, pulling the only lever in the room. It opens a door, but not the one he was hoping for. Instead, a pitifully small doorway beneath the chamber's long staircases responds to the lever. As he continues exploring, he notices this becomes an annoying trend. Every standard entry point is denied to him, forcing him to take odd, nonsensical routes. The abnormal size and layout of the castle are made to inconvenience and highlight the shortcomings of the characters.

Ueda believes that the flaws of the characters must manifest in the gameplay itself for it to become relatable to the player. The level design does exactly this by instilling in players this feeling of despondency by proposing tasking workarounds to solve the simplest of problems. Displaced, alone, and ill-equipped, the game's opening environmental obstacles create a channel for players to share in Ico's forlornness.

His isolation seemingly ends when he stumbles into Yorda, trapped high up in a cage. To reach the lever that lowers her cage, he ascends the spiraling staircase for what feels like an eternity, but for the first time, this feels like progress. His reward: an equally hellish trip back down to unlock the dropped cage. Yorda, it seems, leaves an even worse first impression than Ico. Even before she joins him, Yorda is already inconveniencing the player as communicated by the level design. Chief among the operators of this emotional rollercoaster is the simple, consistent level design language used throughout the game. Ascending the castle is a signal of progress; descending is the opposite, often inviting more negative emotions. Coupling changes in elevation with positive or negative events is a case of classical conditioning in which players develop strong reactions for otherwise normal events.

The first act and beyond are littered with ledges that are just out of the characters' reach, ladders which stretch a tad too long, and gaps that are just a little too wide to jump across. The ones that are accessible by Ico are not accessible by Yorda, further establishing her as a burden to the team. The level

design paints Ico and Yorda as two weak and inept children, but as players continue clearing areas, the characters' strengths are highlighted. Ico is shown to be a proactive risk-taker with a penchant for helping others, while Yorda's later interactions with the castle outline her magical proficiency and determination. More significantly, their triumphs over the castle's challenges showcase their budding friendship and tight teamwork.

The cadence of *Ico*'s levels sees an alternation between environmental puzzles and combat encounters, punctuated by occasional moments of reprieve. But prior to the two's arrival at the gate, breaks are rarer while puzzles and combat are more frequent. The challenges presented in earlier levels are not particularly tasking, but the players' unfamiliarity with the game's mechanics raise the difficulty. To capture the development of Ico and Yorda as characters and as a team, *Ico* pays close attention to its game flow. Puzzles and enemy encounters become more taxing, and challenge overtakes the players' skills to create anxiety. Towards the middle of the game, players' knowledge of the castle and how Ico and Yorda interact with it put them into a flow state where challenges match perfectly with their skills. Regardless of whether Ico and Yorda feel calm or anxious, players will feel similarly when faced with the castle's challenges.

The story of Ico and Yorda's progress can also be seen in the evolving visual themes. Players are first introduced to mundane, enclosed environments where they spend the majority of their time. As the hours go by, sections of the castle abandon stone for wood and metal. New mechanisms and contraptions replace the primitive technologies previously seen, as if implying that Ico and Yorda deserve a more complex playground to showcase their teamwork. The camera is positioned so that, from above, players can view old areas previously traversed. And, like with changes in elevation, the occasional presence of open, grassy spaces bring about feelings of calm and safety — necessary pauses to help pace the narrative. But when Ico and Yorda are separated, the game shines a different light on the castle. Vibrant serenity becomes dark, stormy weather — less inviting than even the castle, which now provides immediate shelter from the downpour. Rescuing Yorda has eclipsed the need to escape; the castle has become the new destination.

But while the castle's look and layout facilitate the growth of Ico and Yorda as a team, it also plays a significant role in showcasing the folly of the Queen who rules over it. The castle's proportions and distaste for utilitarian design speak volumes about its creator. The Queen shows no concern for others, seeing as the castle was built to accommodate her giant stature exclusively. Ueda's Design by Subtraction ensures that rooms are barren and plain, another sign pointing towards a lonely and self-absorbed Queen with no subjects to rule over. Her castle is poorly kept and largely in ruins — a product of the Queen's diminishing power. Its sorry state is a reflection of the Queen's own mental and physical degradation. When Ico returns to kill her, the entire castle finally gives out and dies alongside its owner.

Team Building Through Problem-Solving

Ico may run at suboptimal speeds, climb at an awkwardly slow pace, and struggle to work contraptions, but Yorda reaches an even higher level of physical ineptitude. Luckily, her Light Magic is a skeleton key that allows the duo to bypass blockages and work magical mechanisms. Players can tap the R1 button to call her over to Ico. When at the edge of gaps and climb-able ledges, players can hold R1, prompting Yorda to attempt an assisted jump. The castle's penchant for endangering her also encourages

Ico to lead her by the hand, performed by holding R1 while she's in arm's reach. Yorda's lengthy animations and wayward behavior establish her as the party's weakest link — a ball and chain that introduces additional mechanics to juggle while offering little utility. The gameplay consequences that her presence brings shapes how players perceive Yorda and the potential outcome of their escape. A small and weak boy, a frail and fearful girl, no means of communication, and a castle hell-bent of keeping them there — the situation is utterly hopeless. Or so it seems.

As touched on previously, attention to game flow is crucial, and the proper alignment of mechanical growth and narrative progress is a necessity for nurturing the intended flow. Players spend time acquainting themselves to Ico and Yorda's mechanics just as the pair begins to learn how to work with one another. This proves somewhat challenging thanks to *Ico* being free of any traditional HUD and containing no non-diegetic UI elements, on top of the language barrier. This initial tutorialization continues until their arrival at the gate invites in a myriad of dangerous obstacles for players to overcome. It's in conquering these tougher puzzles and fights that players develop a mastery of the mechanics, mirroring the now-harmonious relationship between the characters. There's a sense of security not only in knowing they can face any challenge, but also in the perceived immutability of that relationship players have become a crucial part of. Additional puzzle pieces are thrown into the mix, notably pressure plates and Light Magic-sensitive contraptions that require Yorda's involvement to progress — the team dynamic is changing. Yorda even takes the initiative to climb shorter ledges and jump smaller gaps on her own. As the game explores new transformations of mechanics and presents new tests, the characters and the bond they share with each other and with the player continue to evolve in tandem.

The player's investment in the growth of this bond is what makes the sudden reversal especially potent. The Queen begins her ritual and retracts the bridge as the pair crosses. Ico attempts to reach Yorda on the bridge's other half, only to be caught by Yorda herself. The Dark Magic reaches and envelopes Yorda, causing her to drop Ico down into the watery depths below. Now separated, players struggle to break old habits as they attempt to overcome the most difficult obstacles yet, this time without Yorda. The lack of any breaks to offer players control over the pacing means anxiety continues to build ceaselessly. Both the player and Ico come to realize that their hollow goals mean nothing without Yorda by their side. By experiencing the narrative of Ico in this way, players are able to reflect on their own experiences, using the mechanics as a catalyst.

Characterization Through Combat

Armed with a wooden stick and a single melee combo, Ico's effectiveness in combat leaves a lot to be desired. Shadow creatures can take several beatings before vanishing, but Yorda, frozen in fear, is in constant danger. If a shadow creature successfully drags her down through a shadow vortex before Ico can fish her out, players move straight to the game over screen. Ico is invincible, prone to only temporary stuns, but shadow creatures have little interest in him. The constant pressure to keep Yorda safe while engaging multiple shadow creatures highlights the value of the bond players have built with Yorda.

Combat solidifies Ico as the weak but selfless hero he is, and emphasizes the struggles faced by Yorda. But in fighting shadow creatures, players can learn plenty about the harpy-esque beings themselves.

Shadow creatures are winged, horned humanoids with protrusions all over their bodies. They're truly disturbing in appearance, but their hit-and-run attacks reveal that they are, in fact, fearful. Their only goal is to secure Yorda for their slaver, the Queen, and show no interest in harming a fellow horned individual. But fear of the consequences that players have grown accustomed to prevent them from reaching this conclusion. The fear of losing Yorda is enough to raise goosebumps whenever the battle jingle plays; the stress felt when Ico is recovering from being knocked down is too intense for clear thought.

It's only on the path to the Queen's Throne where players get the opportunity to see shadow creatures as they really are. With no wings nor protrusions to distract, the shadow creatures' silhouettes bear a striking resemblance to Ico. Without Yorda to protect, players can see shadow creatures unobstructed for the first time. The final shadow creature encounter in the Casket Chamber is almost peaceful now that players are armed with the magic sword and the creatures have become uncombative. *Ico* provides an opportunity to re-examine one's interpretation of these pests, all while accentuating the detestable nature of the Queen before the final confrontation with her. After all, it was her who corrupted them. A few alterations to the combat were all that were needed to completely change the players' perspectives on both shadow creatures and the Queen.

How pathetic it must be to have your puppets defeated by a child with a wooden stick. The Queen is deteriorating, something that was obvious all along but the desire to protect Yorda blinded players. The encounter with the Queen is, surprisingly, a very traditional boss fight. The fight is also the only time in which Ico can be killed by an enemy — more alterations to raise the stakes for this climactic event in the narrative.

Strongest Element

The castle is *Ico*'s strongest element — a vital component that provides continuous narrative information and facilitates the exploration of the characters' inner worlds. The imposing size and impractical features are catalysts for Ico and Yorda's growth, providing circumstances that demand teamwork to resolve. The castle's flaws are windows into the mind of the Queen, exposing her insecurities. Ueda's Design by Subtraction ensures that the relatively simplistic architecture breathes life into every room of the castle. With no unnecessary additions to distract or give rise to unnecessary questions, the architecture provides focus, and subsequently, ensures closure at the level of questions.

Unsuccessful Element

In the game's latter half, the development of Ico and Yorda's mechanics is often at odds with the narrative surrounding the pair's relationship. As Ico and Yorda grow more comfortable with each other, Yorda begins to play a larger role in the puzzle-solving process. Therefore, it would be expected that the team dynamic would continue to shift in this direction to reflect how trusting the two have become of each other. Not only this, more environmental puzzles and combat scenarios that treat Yorda as less of a burden would have bolstered the positive attitude players' develop towards Yorda, thereby strengthening the narrative beats in the latter half of the game. However, the particular cadence of the castle's challenges

continues to be largely skewed towards Ico-exclusive puzzles, creating ludonarrative dissonance. This problem is clearly defined when clearing the two arenas that activate the castle gates. Each trial forces players to abandon Yorda for long stretches of time while they clear large portions of the trial. After each trial, long ladders may separate Ico and Yorda, wasting agonizing amounts of time. The character arcs are weakened because of the awkward placements of these mechanical challenges that do nothing to contribute to Ico and Yorda's relationship.

Highlight

The highlight of Ico is the failed escape sequence on the castle bridge. Having just completed two tasking trials, Ico and Yorda arrive back at the castle gates where Yorda musters up all her strength to activate the bridge mechanism. Players are rewarded with one of the lengthier cutscenes in the games — a rare showcase of open space and greenery as if inviting in a joyous conclusion to the adventure. As both halves of the bridge finally meet each other, a leading line forms and stretches from the castle prison to the forests beyond. The cutscene ends and players now guide a weakened, stumbling Yorda slowly across the bridge. At the halfway mark, another cutscene is triggered as the Queen violently deactivates the mechanism, sending Ico and Yorda to opposite halves of the now-retracting bridge before handing back control. Desperate to reach her, the player leaps across the widening gap and right into the final cutscene of the sequence. Yorda catches Ico, but as she struggles to pull him up, the Queen begins the ritual to possess her. As Ico falls, Yorda thanks him and resigns to her fate.

Cutscenes are often lambasted as the uninspired method of conveying story information because they rob players of control and ruin the flow of play. The genius of the sequence is that it turns that con into a situational pro. The agony of having lost control of the situation during this sudden reversal is heightened by a literal loss of player control. It's returned for a brief moment to let the player make it over to Yorda — something they've spent hours developing automaticity for — but robs them of control again to highlight the role swap. The fate of Ico lies in the hands of Yorda — a harsh juxtaposition to what players have become accustomed to thus far, but nonetheless, a powerful reminder of their fully-fledged friendship in this moment of darkness. Now masters of Ico and Yorda's mechanics, players experience a few final transformations (Yorda stumbling, Yorda grabbing your hand) before the mechanics reach the end of their life cycles, having been fully explored. With that conclusion comes the beautiful but saddening end of Ico and Yorda's time working together.

Critical Reception

GameCritics – Brad Gallaway – No Score
Brad shows great admiration for *Ico*'s ability to convey emotion and represent characters without heavy use of dialogue. He appreciates the value of the interactions between Ico and Yorda, and acknowledges that player participation adds to their emotional investment in the characters. He suggests that "the language the game conveys to the player is expressed through the journey." [2]

ZTGD – Michael Futter – No Score
Michael emphasizes the effectiveness of withholding information as a means of encouraging cognitive evaluation. He found great pleasure in unraveling the mystery of each character through their interactions. Through Yorda, he was able to see Ico as a "kind-hearted boy who risks his own survival for a stranger whom he cannot even converse with." [3]

Eurogamer – Kristan Reed – 10/10
Kristan praises the role of the animations and rumble in elevating the moment-to-moment gameplay and aiding characterization. "[The enormity of Yorda's imprisonment] articulated by little other than [the] way her feet patter on the ground as she runs and her hand flaps behind her as Ico pulls her along." [4] She highlights the simplistic hand-holding mechanic, citing it as the primary pillar contributing to the game's narrative. Even without words, Kristan gets a sense of the characters as they continue to grow as individuals and as friends.

Lessons

Withholding information can encourage cognitive evaluation.
Provided that enough information exists, omitting certain details in a narrative can encourage audiences to engage with it more deeply, thereby developing a sense of those details as though they were present. As with the Iceberg Theory, pushing players to discover and explore the subtext of the game for themselves often proves to be more potent than explicitly stating everything through dialogue.

Assign mechanics to characters and develop both in tandem.
As interactivity is its unique trait, a video game should be using its mechanics to grow the bond between player and player-character. The process of a player learning, being tested, and eventually mastering certain mechanics is not dissimilar to the character arcs of many game characters. This can be leveraged to involve players in a character's journey to a much greater degree.

Including extraneous elements can weaken the core experience.
Games should make the most out of every element present to strengthen narrative beats and craft experiences that are greater than the sum of its parts. Design by Subtraction, similar to Chekhov's Gun, suggests that, while certain additions contribute to an experience, they may not contribute to the intended experience and may distract from what is significant in the narrative. The detriment of including elements which are not obviously conducive to the core experience outweighs any benefits they may be adding to the game.

Summation

Though the game's poor sales performance meant that *Ico*'s reach was limited, those who did come across Team Ico's classic fell in love with the experience. For many a developer, *Ico* became the touchstone for design, serving as the veritable holy grail of video game storytelling. Team Ico spotlighted the power of interactivity, and it's this marriage of mechanics and narrative that made Ico and Yorda's journey so

compelling. Fumito Ueda's Design by Subtraction — stripping away any and all unnecessary elements from *Ico's* mechanics, environments, sound, and more — also encouraged players to engage emotionally with the characters and kept them focused on the journey ahead. Those touched by *Ico* still remember vividly the small, horned boy, the tall, pale girl, and the life-changing journey that they embarked on, together.

Citations

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