

Fantasy and Finitude in *Shadow of the Erdtree* (2024)

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INTRODUCTION

When playing *Shadow of the Erdtree* (2024), I experience a terrible longing for something beyond what's before me in the game. This longing for the beyond is strange, as *SotE* has already established itself as a world beyond the base game, *Elden Ring* (2022). In this paper I discuss the relationship between downloadable content (DLC) and base games in producing longing and desire in texts and players. With the advent of DLC, players become aware of a 'lack' to be filled with new content, and the base game is retroactively marked as unfinished. I analyse *SotE* as a rich example of a DLC producing lack, as it establishes a threshold to a fantastical beyond *within* the original text. Having established this threshold, *SotE* then effects a sense of finitude, making players aware of the desiring mechanism that drives play, and the pursuit of expanding content.

Extant research on DLCs varies as to whether they are exploitative (Lizardi 2012; Proffitt et al. 2007) or novel expressions of transmedia storytelling (Payne 2018). Scholars, players, and developers, however, tend to agree that DLC 'extends the life' of a text through presenting itself as the key to a new textual horizon (Genovesi 2018; Tyni and Sotamaa 2011; Payne 2018). This paper examines how the DLC that exists to 'extend the life' of the original text is diegetically positioned, how this affects the meaning of the text, and how this is experienced by players. Specifically it asks how the possibility of textual life extension is presented to the player, and how player desire for it is fostered.

To better understand the diegetic positioning of *SotE*, I turn to studies on thresholds and desire in fantasy literature. The *SotE* DLC is accessible through a physical threshold in the world of *ER*, establishing what John Clute (1999) terms a 'secondary world' within the 'frame world'. Farah Mendelsohn (2008) argues texts containing secondary worlds lead to fantasies of restoration, and stoke in readers the desire for a *beyond*. This paradoxical structure alienates the reader from the 'here', which in the presence of the beyond appears diminished. I argue the introduction of a secondary fantasy world in *SotE* within *ER* draws player attention to the nature of their desire for a virtual *beyond*.

Recurring in the literature is the revelation that fantasy is predicated on its failure to arrive (Attebery 1992; Clute 1999; Gray 2008; Jackson 2005; Mendelsohn 2008). Clute (1999) writes that JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis deliberately stirred *sehnsucht* in their readers, which is the vague longing for something they cannot identify and have not experienced yet feel as though they have (849). Susan Stewart (1993) similarly

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writes that fantasies of fairyland point the subject to an impossible point of origin, beyond nostalgia, and beyond the subject (113). Julia Kristeva (2024) insists this is the imaginary wholeness that precedes subjecthood (9), a perspective Ben Nicoll (2023) shares and claims drives our desire to play videogames (107). Thus videogame play and fantasy are both predicated on the player's desire to discover a place or thing that can make them, once again, feel whole (107). *SotE* dramatises this in the geographical relationship between the DLC and base game, offering a world *beyond* the (now lacking) original text.

Through textual analysis, I find that the arrival of the beyond in *SotE* deliberately fails, as it greets players with a sense of finitude and textual depletion. In doing so it stanches the play of desire driving fantasy, DLCs, and play, by presenting itself as a textual dead end or caesura. I read *SotE* through Julia Kristeva's poetics of melancholia, to account for how lack and desire manifest in paradoxically pleasurable ways in the play experience. This suggests that videogames can draw attention to players' drive to impossible fantasy, not to 'dissolve' it, but to allow them to play with the anguish of being unable to meet the object of desire.

BIO

Max Coombes recently received his PhD at the University of Auckland, Waipapa Taumata Rau, New Zealand. His research is concerned with videogame embodiment and the unheimlich, and the uncanny textuality of videogames.

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