

The Mass Attraction of

CULT OF THE LAMB



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This report focuses on the elements that attract players to the game, *Cult of the Lamb* (COTL), which includes the art style, mechanics, and narrative while comparing it to other games in the roguelike genre.

Introduction

COTL is an action-adventure game developed by Massive Monster and published by Devolver Digital in 2022. The game centres on The Lamb, who repays *'The One Who Waits'* by creating a loyal following in his name after saving The Lamb, a cult strong enough to challenge the bishops of *'The Old Faith'*. As The Lamb, players take on rival cultists and non-believers while managing their cult and its followers to make it the most powerful of the land. Since its release, COTL has grown a large following, becoming very popular in the indie game community and the Australian games industry, becoming hugely successful.¹ To emphasise this, COTL has sold over 1.5 million units through Steam as of June 2023, with 60,000 pre-orders before its release and an all-time peak of over 56,000 concurrent players. In addition, the game's social media has gained over 500,000 followers, keeping active thanks to community fanart and internet memes. Additionally, according to review aggregator Metacritic, COTL received generally favourable reviews at launch, with GameSpot's Jessica Howard calling it "fast-paced, fluid and fun" (2022), while Kotaku's Ruby Innes stated, "[i]t contains multitudes of things I enjoy on their own and sews them into an experience that works [harmoniously]" (2022). Furthermore, user reviews on the game's Steam page show that 94% of its 46,000 reviews were very positive.

COTL has also earned various accolades from prestigious game ceremonies, receiving nominations and awards from The Game Awards, The British Academy Game Awards, and The Joystick Awards. The game even won multiple awards at the Australian Game Developer Awards, where it won Excellence in Art, Game Design, and Game of the Year. COTL has also been able to branch out in a more physical presence since its digital release on Steam, with a physical retail release on the PlayStation 5 and Nintendo Switch. Massive Monster also sells merchandise like t-shirts, vinyl records and more through Devolver Digital's online store. In addition, COTL has partnered with other companies to release exclusive products through their stores. Notably, Massive Monster collaborated with Youtooz, a collectable figure brand, to produce exclusive figures, plushies and pins based on the game (Figure 1), as well as a partnership with Level Up Dice to recreate the game's Knucklebones minigame as a tabletop experience (Figure 2).



Figure 1: The Cult of the Lamb x Youtooz collaboration



Figure 2: The Level Up Dice Collaboration

Connection to the Roguelike Genre

It's crucial to point out that COTL is considered a roguelike game, where players progress through randomly generated rooms to fight enemies and gain upgrades to get stronger. If players die, they die permanently and must start from the beginning with their skills reset (unless upgraded at certain vendors/places). Many games already exist in this genre, with over 2500 roguelike games on Steam.²

¹ Check Appendix 1 for all sources used to research the success and positive reception of COTL.

² Valve 2023, 'Roguelike', Steam, Valve, <<https://store.steampowered.com/tags/en/Roguelike/?flavor=contenthub>>. (Every game that features the roguelike tag on Steam).

Popular games in this genre include Hades (2020) and The Binding of Isaac (2011), which both have been very successful.³

Despite the features it borrows from such games in the genre, *COTL* stands out from the competition thanks to its unique art style, distinctive approach to mechanics, and unorthodox narrative. Consequently, these elements attract players with support from theories like colour theory, semiosis, screen violence and memory, helping with its immense success.

Attraction to the Artstyle

The game's use of colour theory is masterfully crafted, despite the various colours *COTL* uses. While one's response to colour is subjective, Wright and Murphy argue that combining colour harmony with the science of psychology can trigger emotional responses from players, where "reactions can be predicted with startling accuracy" (2014, pg. 1). In *COTL*, this can be seen in the different areas The Lamb progresses through and how it combines various colours. For instance, *Anura* emphasises tones of orange and brown, representing physical comfort and earthiness, whereas *Anchordeep* focuses on shades of blue and green, symbolising intelligence and balance (ibid, pg. 4). While each area uses significantly different colours (Figure 3), each can express emotions to the player while staying consistently vibrant throughout *COTL* thanks to its cartoon aesthetic.



Figure 3: The various areas in *COTL* (Left to Right: Darkwood, Anura, Anchordeep, Silk Cradle).

Because of such emotions, *COTL* provides "a life-like virtual environment, allowing us to become immersed within it... [where] we cognitively evaluate and emotionally attach ourselves to it that the gameplay experience will then become meaningful and valuable" (Cheng et al., 2015, pg. 246). Because of the emotional responses that colour psychology provides, players can immerse themselves towards *COTL* in contrast to similar games like *Don't Starve* (2013), with more consistent colour tones, helping to explain the immense attraction to *COTL* and its standout success.

More importantly, the art style of *COTL* attracts players through its implementation of semiosis, a theory in which symbols and signs are crafted to be reinterpreted as something else for immersing players (Neiva & Romano, 2007 pg. 46). Semiosis is crucial for *COTL* because it connects to mythology and represents ancient narratives of satanic cults throughout history (Toporov, 1987). It also helps to juxtapose the darker themes posed by *COTL* through the cute and cuddly design, therefore grounding the woodland animals into the harsh, natural environments. Notable examples of semiosis include the use of the pentagram, the various symbols and crosses, the presence of a lamb as the main character (connecting to sacrificial lambs) (Figure 4), and even the game's name.

³ Roguelike games won't be explained in such detail for the remainder of the report unless discussing certain mechanics or comparing games in the genre to *COTL* and its attraction for players.

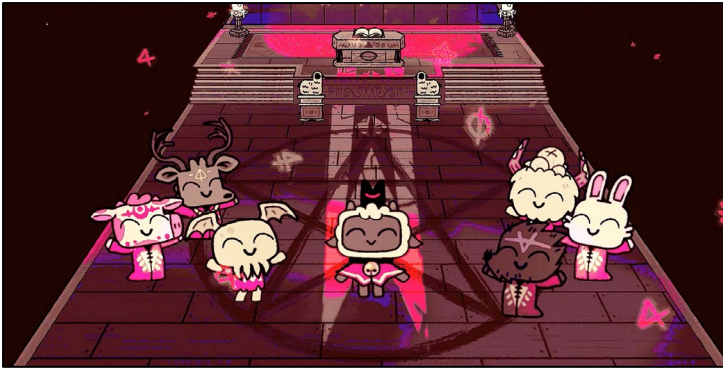


Figure 4: The pentagram and demonic symbols tie COTL's world with satanic cults.

Thanks to these historical ties to satanic cults, players can instantly recognise the semiotics in-game and immerse them further into COTL because such symbols *"live on beyond their historical period as recognized semiotic resources which can continue to be used and combined... to realize distinctly different ideological positions"* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Thus, satanic cults can be expressed visually through these symbols and signs without any textual narrative to tell the history of such mythology and those involved in such cults (Jonna & Kasra, 2013, pg. 11). Consequently, semiosis is a powerful aspect of interactions in the virtual world of COTL (MacDonald, 1999), helping to explain its importance to the game's overall experience while attracting players further towards it.

Attraction to the Narrative

Before analysing the narrative using screen violence, it is critical to mention that various discussions have been made regarding how audiences are attracted to violence through video games and how that impacts everyday society (Anderson & Bushman 2001; Anderson and Dill 2000; Igarzábal et al., 2019). Additionally, it's worth mentioning how nearly 30% of papers written on violent video games reference tragic incidents such as the Sandy Hook or Columbine Shootings (Markey et al., 2015). However, it's also essential to consider the other side of the argument, where the use of violence in video games *"may be helpful to understand the interactions between games and players, their motivations for playing action-oriented games, and how such game play can be understood in the context of a greater milieu of a given individual's life"* (Igarzábal et al., 2019, pg. 25)

With that said, violent acts drive the narrative forward in COTL. According to Brooks, *"[n]arrative... [and] plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality"* (1984, pg. 22), meaning there can't be any narrative without a drive towards an end, and there can't be an end without the human consciousness of death. Given the nature of COTL, the story is embedded with violence and death throughout, whether it be the countless sacrifices made to strengthen The Lamb or the bishops, the various rituals, or having to kill each bishop to help free 'The One Who Waits'. Alongside this, Benjamin states that death is the sanction for everything that the writer wants to say with their story, that it's the *"authority [that] lies at the very origin of the story"* (1999, pg. 151). The Lamb's death at the beginning would be considered the originating event in COTL (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Opening Sequence: The Lamb meets its inevitable death.

Without it, the narrative cannot progress further, allowing The Lamb to meet 'The One Who Waits' to be resurrected and receive his powers. The Lamb's death spurs players to enact a sequence of events that, like the activity of death, are marked by repetition, i.e., the vanishing of the four bishops and each chain holding 'The One Who Waits' unshackling (Brown 2022, pg. 75). Unlike the narrative of roguelike games like Risk of Rain 2 (2020), violence is more justified in *COTL* as it acts as a heavy element of the story without feeling excessive. As a result, screen violence is crucial to the game's plot, where the violent acts on screen signify the player's progression through the story, helping to attract players as the violence embodies this paradox of progress toward status (ibid., pg. 77).

Alongside this, *COTL*'s approach to branching narratives is another example of emphasising violence to progress the story. While this is more focused on mechanics, it still allows the narrative to seep out through the player's choice, allowing for "learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart, global algorithm... [where] [t]o win means to know the system" (Galloway 2006, pg. 90). This can be seen in the dungeons, where each run consists of the various pathways for players to choose after progressing through each phase, which range from fighting more enemies to collecting more resources/followers (Figure 6). Players must defeat the enemies within it to advance, with each stage marking The Lamb's progress towards cleansing 'The Old Faith' and constitutes a "metonymic chain of action with effects on the world and character, in the style of a narrative" (Brown, 2022, pg. 82).



Figure 6: A crusade run showing multiple ways to alter the player's story.

Players must understand how to progress through each dungeon for the narrative to reach its end while allowing for more player immersion by enabling them to choose their preferred playstyle. Furthermore, it attracts players by fuelling their desires, so they feel satisfied by completing the story and displaying their progress within *COTL*'s design (Matthews, 2011, pg. 2). As a result, using screen violence as a core aspect of the storyline allows the acts of violence to be "a predominant theme in the game... with the game's complex possibility of action and meaning... going beyond merely... killing" (DeVane & Squire, 2008, pg. 266). *COTL* attracts players by allowing for a branching narrative that enables the story to be expressed through its mechanics.

Attraction to the Mechanics

The emphasis on memory in *COTL*'s mechanics is vital for attracting players. While working memory maintains the information that games provide, procedural memory focuses on acquiring, consolidating, and automating cognitive, perceptual, and motor skills (West et al., 2017). *COTL* does this exceptionally well by introducing mechanics through Ratau, a character who teaches The Lamb the fundamentals of running a cult (Figure 7a). For instance, Ratau enables you to manage your follower's hunger and faith, then later teaches how to perform sermons, rituals, and doctrines, and around a few hours in, teaches players how to prevent followers from dissenting. Additionally, this is reinforced in the user interface to show Ratau's presence if his avatar isn't present (Figure 7b) through the yellow text from Ratau's name and the quests, showing more subtle uses of colour theory (Wright and Murphy, 2014). Having Ratau's presence acts as a walking tutorial, introducing players to various mechanics without overloading them with too many, thus detracting them from *COTL* (Sweller et al., 1998, pg. 289).



Figure 7a: Ratau teaching the player new mechanics for managing followers.

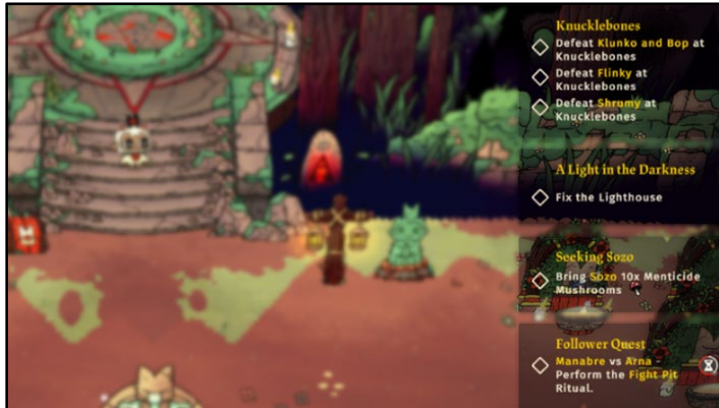


Figure 7b: The quests keep Ratau's presence alive throughout COTL with yellow emphasized text.

Roguelike games like *Darkest Dungeon* (2016) and *Into the Breach* (2018) explain too many mechanics at a time, detracting players very quickly. However, after several dungeon runs, *COTL* cleverly uses Ratau to explain newer mechanics. This allows procedural memory to help players carry those mechanics automatically in their minds (Lum et al., 2013). As Lum and Bleses (2012) highlight, procedural memory helps "support long-term knowledge and store information for years" (pg. 1139). Because of this, the player feels more attracted to the game, as they start to remember mechanics after practising them multiple times, transferring them from their working memory to their short-term memory and eventually long-term memory. By having Ratau within the game, *COTL* embraces procedural memory to introduce mechanics, thus attracting players further to focus on other aspects of the game.

Topographic memory is also blended into the mechanics, particularly the level/environmental design. Much like maps, topographic memory helps players orient themselves within cognitive representations of space within video games (Waller D, Nadel L, 2013). In *COTL*, this can be seen in how the levels are built, appearing topographic because of its top-down perspective, despite using 2D art throughout. This gives players the impression of a topographic map, feeling like a fresh take on the level design of *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1987). Many roguelike games have taken cues from *The Legend of Zelda* before in their level design and sense of progression, particularly *Crawl* (2014) and *Enter the Gungeon* (2011). However, *COTL's* approach to topographic memory stands out because of its art style, helping to attract them towards the game. Still, it feels more natural and alive through the game's environmental design and cartoonish art style, helping to let players know their virtual spaces intimately, thus attracting them more into *COTL's* world (Small, 2011). It's about making players feel physically present because digital bodies, like The Lamb, can be used to navigate through *COTL* (Figure 8).

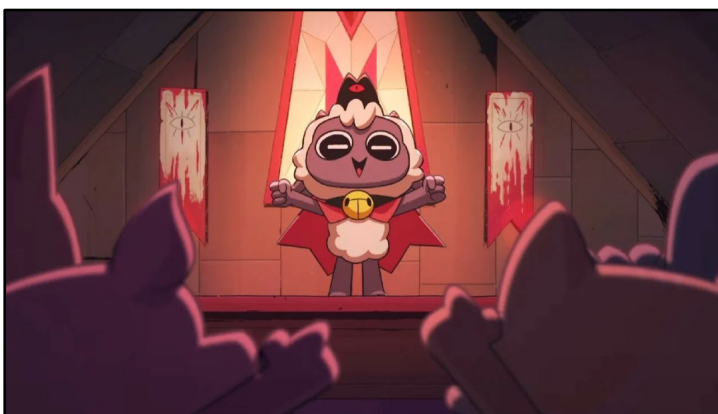


Figure 8: It feels like looking at a cartoon map that's come to life.

This use of topographic memory also displays the idea of embodiment, where The Lamb acts as a 'transparent means' that players perceive their environment through, thus feeling a personal immersion in the game. (Ihde cited by Brey 2000, p. 3). The game's level design helps build a cognitive map for players with access to all the information they need simultaneously, giving them the "ability to encode and later on to recall sufficient spatial information from the cognitive map is the fundamental basis for spatial orientation and navigation" (Lammert-Siepmann et al., 2017). As a result of COTL's level design, the game reinforces players' immersion by providing a map that offers cognitive representations they can associate through topographic memory, attracting them even more into it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, COTL is effective at attracting players thanks to its distinctive art style, quirky yet drawing narrative, and distinguishable mechanics, which help to explain its incredible success since its original release. COTL takes full advantage of colour theory to evoke emotional value within each area, triggering players' emotional responses. It also emphasises semiotic symbols like pentagrams and the lamb's presence to connect players to the history of satanic cults instantly. Additionally, COTL's unorthodox yet intriguing narrative uses screen violence to drive the storyline while allowing players to navigate the story at their own pace, thanks to the progression of dungeons. Lastly, Rataou's presence strips the typical tutorial to accelerate mechanics from the players working memory to short-term and long-term memory. In addition, the game's ability to target topographic memory helps players learn about the virtual spaces intimately. Combining all these elements in COTL makes the game stand out in the roguelike genre while capturing the player's attention with an experience like no other.



The Lamb performing a joyous sermon to its followers (Cult of the Lamb | ReAnimated).

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Image Sources

Certain in-game images have been screenshotted from my own copy of Cult of the Lamb unless stated below:

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Appendices

Appendix I (Sources Used for Providing Evidence of Cult of the Lamb's Success)

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Appendix 2 - Bonus (Official Screenshots / Cover Art)

