

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Shadow of the Colossus

Platform: PS2

Genre: 3rd Person Action/Adventure

Release Date: October 18, 2005

Developer: SCEI

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment

Game Designer: Fumito Ueda

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Overview

On Paper, *Shadow of the Colossus* is a game that consists primarily of sixteen massive boss fights. But the actual experience of playing the game far exceeds its basic description. The game's creator, Fumito Ueda, used the soundtrack and visual design of the game to blur the lines of the traditional narrative of hero and villain. Also, the story of *Shadow of the Colossus* is not laid out for the player through extensive dialogue, but must be pieced together patiently through the gradual progression of the game.

Initially, *Shadow of the Colossus* only reveals to its player that the unnamed protagonist has traveled to a temple in a distant land in hopes of restoring the life of a girl whose body he has brought with him. Upon arrival in the temple our hero is greeted by the disembodied, godlike voice of Dormin. The game's sparse dialogue is delivered in a language that Ueda and his team made up so that the player must follow the English subtitles in order to understand. Dormin explains to the main character that it is indeed possible to restore the life of the deceased girl, but first the task of destroying each of this land's sixteen colossi must be accomplished. So with his task set before him our

hero sets out to accomplish it. After this brief setup the story is only occasionally and sparingly elaborated by the game.

Characters

- **Unnamed protagonist** - The player character is charged with fulfilling heroic tasks in order to bring a girl back from the dead. The parameters of his quest were given to him by the god-like character Dormin.
- **Dormin** - An unseen character and is known to the player only through his otherworldly, spectral voice. It is he who directs the unnamed protagonist to kill the colossi and leads him on with hints along the way.
- **Agro** - The sole earthly companion of the unnamed protagonist throughout the game.
- **Dead girl** - The exact relationship of the nameless dead girl to the unnamed protagonist is not explained. But, as the protagonist pushes himself further and further along in his quest, the player realizes that whatever the relationship was, it must have been significant.

Breakdown

The story of *Shadow of the Colossus* is meant to cause the player to question the traditional roles of hero and villain, and does so through the progression of the overall narrative and through the colossi battles. At the beginning of the game the player learns that he or she, playing the role of the unnamed protagonist, must save a girl by accomplishing the herculean task of slaying sixteen colossi monsters. The player is thereby set up to believe that he or she will be filling the role of hero.

But as the player encounters each colossus, the firm delineation between hero and villain begins to deteriorate. Though the large stature and lumbering movements of the colossi make them intimidating opponents, when the player comes upon one of them, gentle orchestral music fades in; this substitution for the usual music signifying entry into a fight scene causes the player to second guess his or her assumed role. As well, the docile eyes and soft fur of the colossi further call into question their role as monsters, so though the player knows that the mission is to kill the colossus, he or she grows less sure that it is a “heroic” act. Finally, when the colossus is slain, a mournful melody rises like a lament, replacing the charged music that had been urging on the player once he or she had instigated the colossus into fighting. This transition again unmoors the player from the expected triumph that was expected as reward for victory.

Once all the colossi are defeated, the protagonist is not rewarded with the restoration of the girl, but is instead turned into a monster himself. The monster then in self-defense turns on his former people and ends up destroyed before the girl is finally restored. At this point, it is discovered that the protagonist has not really died as the monster, but was transformed into a horned infant. Even the conclusion to the story leaves the player with doubts about hero and villain; though technically the desired end was achieved, neither the journey nor its end was what was expected.

Strongest Element

Fumito Ueda along with composer Kow Otani designed the music of *Shadow of the Colossus* not as a background element but as an integral narrative component. Most of the game, the player is exploring vast, deserted terrain in search of the colossi, during

which time there is no music at all. The only sounds heard are those of the player's galloping horse or possibly a far-off bird's cry. This virtual silence helps to emphasize the isolation of the protagonist in a strangely unpopulated land. Then, when the player does come upon one of the colossi, gentle orchestral music begins to fade in. Though the player knows his or her mission is to kill all the colossi, the music seems to be indicating that this creature is in fact benign, creating an internal conflict within the player, without any dialogue being uttered.

However, the player must pursue the mission, so he or she sufficiently provokes the colossus into fighting. But again when the colossus has been defeated, the expected triumph is instead replaced with a deepening sense of uncertainty, triggered again by a change in the music. During the battle the music was the charged and confident tempo of an action sequence. Yet after the colossus falls, the music abruptly becomes mournful and heart wrenching, causing the player to question his or her role in the situation.

Similar to the important role of music as a narrative element, the art design also plays into the game's story. The vast landscape the player moves through is notable first for its breathtaking vistas, and further for its variety. The terrain shifts from verdant fields to sun-bleached deserts to dense, mossy forests, moving the player between darkness and light; just as he or she is moved between the role of hero and villain, the game having loosened these roles from their traditional moorings. Not only are the landscapes visually engaging metaphors, but the colossi themselves are visually impressive symbols. Their large statures and lumbering movements make them intimidating opponents, but at the same time their docile eyes and soft fur call into

question their role as monsters, so that the art adds another layer of ambiguity to the game's narrative.

Unsuccessful Element

While *Shadow of the Colossus* is a beautiful game with an innovative storytelling mechanic there are a couple of noteworthy shortcomings. The first one worth mentioning is the subtitled translation of the made-up game language. Though it does give the player a more immediate understanding for the foundational narrative of the game, it is a bit incongruous with the rest of the game's pattern of unraveling the narrative expectations of the player. It would have been more consistent to leave the player without a clear explanation for what they are witnessing, and where they are meant to go next.

The second weakness of the game actually comes out of its strength; the deeply layered narrative requires a patient audience, which increases the commitment required of the player and therefore limits the game's potential audience. Through its vast deserted lands and abandoned ruins, *Colossus* forces the player's imagination to invent scenarios that are more vivid and personal than that which can be conveyed through traditional narrative mechanisms. In other words, *Colossus*' sparse narrative facilitates the player superimposing him or herself onto the game's protagonist, the act of which establishes a deep bond between the narrative and the player, but only if he or she is willing to nurture this sort of an imaginative relationship. Because of this, *Colossus* can never be a crossover title.

Highlight

The most significant event in *Shadow of the Colossus* is not any single moment, but is a recurring experience. Each time the player slays one of the colossi, believing that he or she is working toward the completion of their mission, the mournful music that arises questions the assumed heroism of the slaughter. This unraveling of the expected storyline outcome is what propels *Colossus* beyond being merely a well-implemented game to also being a relevant participant in our wider, cultural narrative.

Critical Reception

Shadow of the Colossus has an average Metacritic score of 91%. James Mielke, of *1Up.com*, gave *Colossus* a rating of 95% noting that the game “breaks storytelling barriers none of us knew existed” and that it “is a game that takes you somewhere you’ve never been before.” The few negatives mentioned in the review are purely technical, while it clearly notes the game’s innovative narrative elements. IGN.com’s Chris Roper gave a 97% score to *Colossus* saying the game “forces you to essentially paint your own picture of how the world came to be as it is, why it is essentially a wasteland, or even a prison if you will, for the colossi that inhabit said land. In this, *Shadow* excels more so than possibly any title in the history of gaming.” This review also points to the inventive narrative of *Colossus* and that the sparseness of traditional elements pushes the player to bring more of his or herself to the gaming experience.

Lessons

The first lesson that can be learned from *Shadow of the Colossus* is that visual and melodic cues can be used in place of dialogue to drive the narrative of the game in a way that allows for more subtlety of meaning and interpretation. *Colossus* contains very little actual dialogue. Instead, the mood-saturated tone of the melodies heard and the visual sights seen are used to propel the player through the narrative of the game. By this, the player is pushed to discern meaning instead of simply accepting it, as is done when it is provided by customary dialogue.

The main lesson that can be learned from *Shadow of the Colossus* is that to create characters that are more post-modern and less of a meta-type character, like hero or villain, twists to the expected narrative can be used to dislodge the player from his or her usual gaming disposition. If an action like “hero slaying villain,” which has deep roots in most traditional, cultural narratives, can be presented so that neither role seems clearly associated any longer with right or wrong, the player is prompted to question not only his or her in-game actions, but also the meta-narrative of hero and villain. In other words, by defying player expectations, a video game narrative can provoke the player into not just reacting with the controller to affect the in-game outcome, but also with his or her mind; an influence that will remain with the player, exceeding the actual game experience.

Summation

Shadow of the Colossus is an undeniably unique game that implements its story, music, and art in new, innovative, and deep ways. *Colossus'* most powerful attribute is that it twists the expected narrative in order to dislodge the player from his or her usual gaming disposition, thus prompting an effect within the player that can reach beyond the game experience itself. But this very strength is what will force it to forever remain a niche game; beloved by a few, but inaccessible to the masses. This is an illustration of how challenging it is for a video game designer to make a game that will have a reasonable level of popularity, while at the same time, preserving in it some measure of singularity and integrity that can secure it a prominent spot on a player's list of favorites.