

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Shadow of the Colossus*

**Platform:** PlayStation 2

**Genre:** Action-adventure

**Release Date:** October 18, 2005

**Developer:** Team Ico

**Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Fumito Ueda

**Author of this review:** Charles Egenbacher

**School:** Guildhall at SMU

## Overview

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*Shadow of the Colossus* follows a nameless hero's quest to save a young girl. The hero arrives at a temple, rumored to contain a power that restores life to the dead, with his deceased female companion. A shadowy figure known as 'Dormin' tells the young hero that he will restore life to his companion if the hero destroys the sixteen colossi guardians who prevent such magic. The nameless hero sets out on his horse, Agro, to seek out and destroy the ancient guardians.

*Shadow of the Colossus* delivers narrative through visual, audio and environmental cues, while minimalistic dialog provides the player with an overall objective. This storytelling process is highly unusual for such story-centric games, which usually convey story through written or verbal communication. However, *Shadow of the Colossus* executes this non-traditional narrative in an interesting way, and successfully creates a unique game experience that stands apart from traditional interactive media.

## Characters

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Relying heavily on storytelling through the environment, *Shadow of the Colossus* contains few characters, though each character brings a crucial story element to the narrative.

- **Wanderer** – The player avatar; Wanderer is a young boy who brings the body of a young girl to a shrine of worship in a forbidden land. Though the game provides little backstory for the Wanderer, the girl, and their relationship, short dialog between Wanderer and an entity known as "Dormin" reveals that Wanderer seeks to resurrect the girl at the shrine. The Wanderer strikes a deal with Dormin – if Wanderer slays the sixteen colossi, Dormin will resurrect his companion. This desire to save the girl drives Wanderer's quest to slay colossi throughout the game. Wanderer's initial physical appearance is a slight build, dark hair to his shoulders and pale skin. However, the hero's skin gradually

turns to black as Wanderer slays more colossi. Armed with a sacred sword and a bow, Wanderer also relies on a sturdy grip to clamor up and navigate on the massive colossi that he must defeat. Wanderer traverses the forbidden land on his horse, Agro.

- **Agro** – Agro is Wanderer’s only companion in his quest to resurrect the young girl, and arguably the most significant character in the game. Though Agro transports Wanderer around the forbidden land, Agro signifies more than just a means of transportation – Agro symbolizes the relationship formed between two people who share a common goal. The developers even dedicate a button press to depict the relationship between the two characters, during which Wanderer gently pats Agro and lovingly says her name aloud. Without Agro, Wanderer would have no hope of completing his quest. Furthermore, if Agro were not created as a lovable character, Wanderer (and the player) would be completely alone in his quest.
- **Mono** – The young girl, who Wanderer desires to resurrect at the shrine, represents Wanderer’s sole motivation to seek out and destroy the colossi. Mono, later revealed as having been sacrificed because of a, ‘cursed fate,’ initiates the entire plotline for *Shadow of the Colossus*. The young girl’s body rests within the temple (primary player hub) throughout the game’s entirety, until Wanderer slays the final colossus and transforms into a large, powerful shadow creature. After this sequence, Mono rises from the tablet completely resurrected.
- **Colossi** – The colossi are the primary targets for Wanderer, which he must destroy in order to resurrect Mono. Sixteen colossi exist in the forbidden land, all resembling various animals. Large and generally covered with fur and stone, one colossi represents a horse, while another represents a bird. Furthermore, some colossi are very passive while others are extremely aggressive. However, killing a colossus is bittersweet. The challenge of discovering a colossus’ weak points and then defeating the creature is very satisfying, but the death sequence (along with the music) invokes a strong feeling of sadness and foreboding within the game’s narrative.

## Breakdown

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*Shadow of the Colossus* does not force-feed the player a plot, rather relinquishing much story to the interpretation of the player. Who is this girl the player is trying to save? What is the player character’s relationship to her? The land is beautiful, though completely unpopulated – what is this place and what happened here?

Presenting these questions to the player, rather than dictating a plot through heavy dialog or walls of text, allows *Shadow of the Colossus* to focus on environmental storytelling. The player must explore the vast open world with their only companion, Agro. Lacking reference to anything else in the game, the player clings more closely to her reliable equine companion, Agro. Additionally, without guidance in the form of oral or written

dialog, the player relies on the light of their sword to make their way to colossi, whose locations are otherwise unknown. Another example of this environmental guidance is the case in which a hawk appears overhead when the player travels in the correct direction.

In presenting the story this way, the game obliges an environmental awareness within the player, and facilitates the bonding between player and NPC. Over the course of the game, Agro becomes the player's anchor in a sea of uncertainty. Establishing such a relationship without spoken or written dialog between the characters is both unique and impressive.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest element of the game's narrative is its ability to maintain player interest with minimal dialog and backstory. Alternatively, *Shadow of the Colossus* utilizes visuals, music, and the player companion Agro to introduce a broad narrative to the player. The player then builds their own, unique narrative based on their personal interpretation of the game elements. The impressive visuals immerse the player in the environment, which Wanderer must make use of in encounters with certain colossi. In addition, the eloquent subtleties between Wanderer and Agro create a deeper element to the beautiful game narrative. The success with which *Shadow of the Colossus* establishes such deep narrative elements without heavy dialog is incredible and inspiring.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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One of the game's strongest narrative elements is also its weakest – presenting an objective with a vague purpose is hit-or-miss. Many players expect a game to explain why their character exists in a world, their character's purpose in that world, and provide clear, measurable feedback of their character's interactions within that world. Though *Shadow of the Colossus* presents the player with an objective, the context in which the character's actions have significance is completely unknown to the player. Simply put, the player has little reference as to why they should care about this unknown dead girl. The player will choose to either explore the unknown, or be bored with the proposition.

## **Highlight**

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The best moment in the game's narrative takes place on Wanderer's approach to the final colossus. As Wanderer and Agro make their way across a rickety bridge, the bridge begins to break. In a desperate effort to save her companion, Agro pitches Wanderer to safety, and plummets to the river below. Wanderer, calling his horse's name down the chasm, is enough to move the player to tears at having lost her only companion throughout a long and arduous journey.

The intense emotion felt during this scene is a vivid illustration of *Shadow of the Colossus*' narrative style, and how that style allows the player to develop a strong bond with an NPC.

## Critical Reception

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*Shadow of the Colossus* received highly positive critical media attention, averaging at a 91.58% approval rating on Game Rankings. IGN regarded the game as an, “amazing experience,” and “an absolute must-have title,” giving the game a 9.7 rating overall. In addition, *Shadow of the Colossus* received numerous awards at the 2006 GDC Awards, which include, "Best Character Design", "Best Game Design", "Best Visual Arts" and "Game of the Year."

Negative reviews were few, mainly regarding minor frame rate and AI issues with Agro.

## Lessons

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- Many games attempt to establish a less empty world by adding numerous NPC characters to a game’s environment. Conversely, *Shadow of the Colossus* establishes companionship with a single NPC, Agro, in an otherwise empty world.
- A game’s narrative does not need to rely entirely upon written or spoken dialog to tell an interesting story. Vague stories, left open for player interpretation, can lead to personal interpretation of the plot, and foster a deeper appreciation for a game’s narrative.
- A game with few active characters causes players to examine these characters more closely. Accordingly, each character will need to have a significant impact on narrative and characterization.

## Summation

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Overall, the *Shadow of the Colossus* experience is slightly different for each player. The vague story leaves the broader storyline open to player interpretation. *Shadow of the Colossus* allows players to fill in the plotline themselves, resulting in a gameplay experience that is unique to the backstory that they construct. In so doing, the player becomes even more enthralled and engrossed in the story. *Shadow of the Colossus* is unique in that it facilitates enjoyment through player-established narrative, rather than force-feeding players a pre-established reason to enjoy the game.