

A Russian Formalist Reading of Shadow of the Colossus

BY JONATHAN HOLMBERG
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Shadow of the Colossus is a game for the Playstation 2 that follows a boy's quest to resurrect a girl sacrificed because of a curse. The boy trespasses in a forbidden land and speaks to the spirit residing in an ancient temple. The spirit, named Dormin, offers to revive the girl, so long as the boy destroys the sixteen colossi wandering about the land.

Dormin, though, is evil, and the colossi were created as seals to keep Dormin from manifesting in the real world. So, by the end of the story, the player has spent all of the game working for the evil being, and the girl ends up trapped in the forbidden land with what's left of the boy. While the story clearly wants to challenge our notion of what it means to be a hero, the style of the game does something much more subtle, and much more interesting. Through the use of passive opponents, dramatic irony, and the withholding of information, *Shadow of the Colossus* defamiliarizes our automatic perceptions about audience participation and culpability.

When talking about *Shadow of the Colossus*, it's almost easier to talk about what the player doesn't know, rather than what they do. Unlike most other games, where we're given a clear background of the characters and the world and the situation we're playing through, *Shadow of the Colossus* gives us next to nothing. The game opens on the boy making his way to the temple; we have no idea where he came from. Who sealed Dormin away is never discussed, and neither is the curse which doomed the girl, Mono, to be sacrificed. We, as the audience,

never even know what kind of relationship the boy has with Mono. As such, as we play through the game, we hardly have any story-based motivation for our actions—especially as those actions begin to take on a sinister edge. This ties the character's in-game actions directly to our own personal motivations, be they to see the story through to the end, to best the next monster, to explore more of the world, or whatever else.

We're also never given the boy's name, which ties us even more closely to what happens onscreen. Players love to claim personal credit for the great, heroic deeds their characters perform, but in games where a character may do something despicable, players can distance themselves from the action by saying, "Did you just see Rourke detonate that nuke in New York City?" That's not an option here. Every bit of praise, every command, every accusation, every invective is directed at "you." "Your next target is—" "You stole the ancient sword." "You freed the demon." "You" are the constant target of what little dialogue there is in the game, and it is very difficult to avoid shifting that to "I." "I stole the sword." "I killed the colossus." "I freed the demon." If "you" are responsible for all this, how responsible are you?

Player responsibility for what happens might be avoided if the player is as clueless about the ramifications of his actions as the character is. However the game's use of dramatic irony makes it clear that the path you've chosen is a negative one. When fighting a colossus, the fight typical consists of two phases, and

the music during the second phase ramps up and becomes much more urgent than during the first. This is fairly common across most video games, and in other video games, when the battle has been won, the music turns celebratory. When the colossus has been defeated, though, the music takes an extreme shift, with a somber and quiet tone. It's almost mournful.

And the music isn't the only thing that clues the player into the wrongness of their behavior. From the corpse of each colossus, black tendrils of... something stream into the air and then seek out and impale the character's body. You can try to run from them, but no matter how far you get, they always catch you. The character grunts in pain, falls to the ground, and reappears in the temple a bit later surrounded by an ever-growing crowd of shadowy, black figures. These are the same figures that, at the beginning of the game, threatened the main character and were destroyed simply by the unsheathing of the ancient sword he carries with him. These creatures were also the main enemies in *Ico*, *Shadow of the Colossus*'s sister game. Their peaceful presence is not a positive thing. Even if it's not abundantly clear that you're participating in a Bad Thing, suspicions ought to at least be running rampant through your mind.

Perhaps most damning of all, though, are the battles with the colossi. In most games, the levels are full of minor enemies to fight, and the Big Bad Guy attacks you on sight, and does so relentlessly until one of you is dead. In addition, the

Big Bad is typically specifically targeting your character for some reason or another. Not so here. The forbidden land is practically devoid of life. There a few lizards and birds, but the colossi are the closest thing the land has to intelligent life. In addition, all the colossi just hang out in their designated areas. They seem to feel no need to wander. As such, it is up to you, the player to seek out and destroy these essentially docile creatures, for no other reason than because a voice from the heavens told you to.

And they truly are essentially docile. While the colossi do attack you, they only do so when you have invaded their areas, and sometimes they will ignore you, even then, until you actively seek to provoke them. One colossus, shaped like a giant bird, sits on a perch and grooms itself, leaving you free to wander around its area as much as you like. It's not until you shoot it with an arrow that it takes notice of you and tries to get rid of you. Even then, if you leave the bird alone for a while, it will return to its perch and stay there until you provoke it again. This holds true for the other colossi, as well. Leave their area or ignore them for a while and they will leave you be. You are the aggressor, the invader, the destroyer. They just seek to defend themselves and their homes.

How much, then, are you, the player, to blame for the destruction that happens onscreen? If you are watching someone else play the game, can you be held accountable for not stepping up and putting a stop to the train wreck in progress? Those questions may seem too much to ask with regards to a video game, but if we ask it about the events in a video game, maybe then we can start asking those questions about other events where we serve as the audience.

Our only recourse in *Shadow of the Colossus* is to turn the game off.

The world will forever be suspended in the state in which we left it, but we can tell ourselves that the boy abandoned his dangerous course of action and went home. It's just a story, after all. In the real world, though, we have more options. How culpable are we when we watch a report about starvation in Africa or civil unrest in Iran or human rights abuse in China, but don't try to do anything to fix it?

We've become automaticized to think that we are only passive observers of what we watch. Even if we simply turn off sensationalist media, perhaps fewer people will commit heinous acts simply to get their fifteen minutes of fame. Play through *Shadow of the Colossus* a few times, and maybe you'll be defamiliarized enough to ask, "Just how responsible are we, the audience, for what we see?"