

Shadow of the Colossus

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Game Title: Shadow of the Colossus
Platform: Playstation 2
Genre: Action Adventure / Fantasy
Release Date: October 18, 2005
Developer: Team Ico
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Fumito Ueda
By: Adam Middleton

Overview

The main character, who is officially named Wander although his name is never mentioned in game, comes to a place called the Forbidden Land to revive a girl named Mono. Mono has been sacrificed because she was believed to have a cursed destiny. In order to revive her, Wander makes a deal with sixteen beings collectively referred to as "Dormin". These beings have been sealed away in the Forbidden Land for "an eternity", so they agree to revive the girl in exchange for their freedom. Wander must destroy the sixteen idols that contain Dormin to free them, but the idols cannot be destroyed by mortals. Wander must defeat sixteen Colossi that are the incarnations of the idols to destroy them. He does so with the help of his horse Agro and a special sword that shows him the location of the Colossi and their weak points.

Characters

- Wander, whom the player controls, is the main character in the story. He has come to the Forbidden Land to revive the girl Mono. His relationship with her is never explicitly stated, but it is reasonable to assume, based on what he is willing to do for her, that he loved her. It becomes clear that what he has done is considered a serious crime, so he is obviously willing to do whatever it takes to revive her. Many things about Wander are ambiguous, such as how he knows of the Forbidden Land and Dormin's ability to revive the souls of the dead, but we do know that he knows Lord Emon and that he stole the sword he uses. He has some horseback archery skill, so it is safe to assume he has some training as a warrior. His appearance deteriorates throughout the game as he defeats Colossi. He becomes paler and even begins to grow horns from his head.
- Mono is the girl who Wander is trying to revive. Wander states in the opening cutscene that Mono was sacrificed because she had a cursed destiny. Obviously Wander does not believe her death was justified, but nothing else is really known about how she died. Though it is clear that Wander loved her, there is no way to know if his feelings were reciprocated, since she and Wander never interact during the game. Her appearance also changes as Wander defeats the Colossi, she improves as he deteriorates.
- Agro is Wander's enormous steed. His most striking feature is his size (he's taller than Wander at the withers) and he clearly has a very special bond with Wander. He always returns to Wander when he calls, and he seems unfazed by going into battle with the enormous Colossi. He is Wander's only companion and plays an integral role in the defeat of several of the Colossi.
- Dormin is a godly being that has been broken into sixteen parts and sealed in the sixteen idols. He seems to be a multi-faceted god, much like the God of the Bible, but his exact nature is never explained. His physical appearance, as seen at the end of the game, is terrifying, and Lord Emon's distress at his freedom clearly indicates that there is something to fear. By all appearances, Dormin seems to be sealed away for good reason, but the specific reason for his imprisonment is also unknown. It is known, however, that he has power over death.
- Lord Emon appears to be a religious leader of some sort and seems to know Wander personally. He takes some men to the Forbidden Land to find Wander and stop him from freeing Dormin. He seems to know a great deal about Dormin and the nature of his imprisonment, and has the power to seal him away again at the end of the game (or so it seems).

Breakdown

Shadow of the Colossus is essentially a love story. The player quickly discovers how much Wander has put at stake for Mono, things a person could only do for love. Certainly the love story in the traditional sense has been beaten into the ground by numerous types of media, but what sets Shadow of the Colossus apart is the way it develops characters based almost entirely on their archetypes and the way they interact in game. The game is also unique in the way it develops an implied back story in the player's mind through gameplay.

The game begins with a cutscene that shows Wander bringing Mono's body to the Forbidden Land. Before anything is said, there are some things that are obvious about this lonely hero. His loneliness is his most prominent and striking feature. He is alone with his burden, with only his horse to accompany him. The land before him appears vast but empty, a lonely place for a traveler indeed. He is not, however, an aimless wanderer. The player does not know his purpose initially, but it is clear that his journey is deliberate and that he has decided to be alone. The player can also imply many things about the hero from his horse companion, Agro. The horse's size is what stands out initially. That makes it obvious that this horse is used for battle, so Wander must have some sort of background as a warrior. The horse's color may seem strange because black is usually associated with the protagonist of a story, but the black horse tells the player much more than that about Wander. It represents Wander's feelings about the death of the girl he carries. It represents death, anger, mourning, perhaps even rebellion as the player discovers that Wander stole the sword he now uses. It creates a stark contrast with Wander's own appearance, which is very much that of a traditional hero. He wears light clothing with a sword at his side, his face wrought with determination. When Dormin tells him in the beginning that the price he pays for reviving Mono "may be heavy indeed", Wander simply responds, "It doesn't matter." His determination never falters throughout the game, but his appearance certainly does. He becomes paler, his hair becomes darker, and he even begins to grow horns. His final transformations occur at the end of the game, when Dormin possesses his body and turns him into a terrible colossus himself, then Emon seals the temple and turns Wander into an infant. His love is such that he is willing to lose everything to save Mono. Not a word or a glance is exchanged between the two of them, and yet the player can truly understand their relationship strictly based on Wander's appearance and actions.

Mono is the consummate "sacrificial lamb". She is clothed in white to represent purity and innocence and placed on an altar. The player is led to believe that her death was unjustified when Wander states, "She was sacrificed because she had a cursed fate." A cursed fate is not a commonly accepted reason for killing someone and brings to mind religious fanaticism like in the Salem witch trials. Other details about her are difficult to extrapolate, such as her place in society or what she may have done to be cursed, but she obviously had someone's attention to be sacrificed for such a reason. Her resurrection at the end of the game, as well as the garden she takes the baby Wander to, bring to mind the Biblical archetypes of the

Christ figure and the Garden of Eden. The irony is that the situations seem to be quite the opposite of the stories from the Bible. Whereas Jesus' resurrection meant salvation for his people, Mono's resurrection awoke a terrible beast and caused fear and destruction. The garden also has a different feel than the garden of the Bible. The Garden of Eden is always associated with loss of innocence, a place that no one can go back to and something that no one can get back. The garden in Shadow of the Colossus, however, is very much a return to innocence. Wander is transformed from a terrifying demon into an innocent infant and taken to the garden. It is not a complete return to innocence however, as the horns that Wander grew remain. Ultimately, Mono's character represents a new beginning.

The nature of Dormin is a much more mysterious aspect of the story. He is a divine being to be sure. He has the power to bring souls back from the dead, a power that has always been associated with gods in mythology. He is also portrayed as having multiple parts. When he speaks he speaks with multiple voices, both male and female, and his "body" has been broken into sixteen parts. The concept of one god but many parts should be familiar to most Westerners, as the Christian God is believed to be such a being. Other than those facts, the player must decide for themselves what Dormin's nature and motives are. It's clear after the final sequence that he is a fearsome being capable of destruction. It certainly makes the player question the wisdom of Wander's actions. It seems as though he was sealed away for good reason. For a moment it even appears as if Mono will not even be revived at all, that Wander was just being used to free this being from his prison. Dormin is helpful throughout the game, giving the player hints on where to find the Colossi and how to defeat them, but his helpfulness is undoubtedly driven by his desire to be free. His divinity cannot be disputed, but whether he is a god or a demon is left to interpretation.

Emon's appearance gives him away as a foil for Wander right away. While Wander rides a black horse and wears a light colored tunic, Emon rides a white horse and wears a dark cloak and a mask. He is very much the opposite of Wander, riding with a group of companions instead of alone. He displays great power in sealing Dormin away again, implying that he is some sort of religious leader, and his religion seems to be all that he wants the outside world to see. The cloak and mask he wears symbolize the persona he puts on for the world and for his companions. He follows all the rules, ordering Wander to be killed with no remorse and sealing the temple off with no questions asked. He fits the stereotype of the pious religious leader well, driven by fear and devoid of compassion.

There is a great deal of story that is not even in the game itself. All the storytelling is done in two cutscenes, one at the beginning and one at the end, and the rest is filled in by the reader's imagination throughout the game. The land itself is full of mystery, ruins of temples and fortresses, forests, altars, all without explanation. No two players will have the exact same interpretations, but the main characters and the theme of love conquering all are made consistent through the use of archetypes.

Strongest Element

The element of the game's narrative that contributes most to the mythical tone of the story is the ambiguity. The player knows almost nothing of the situation when the game begins. They know nothing of the origins of their avatar (not even his name) and they know nothing of the girl he is trying to revive. The only thing that is clear is the objective, and that allows the story to unfold gradually. Myths often skim over or completely leave out some details because they were devised to achieve a purpose, usually to explain a phenomenon or teach a moral lesson. The details would merely serve to divert a listener's attention from the story as a whole. Shadow of the Colossus has a very similar feel. The player's limited knowledge also allows for a very focused experience. The player is forced to pay attention to try to learn more about their character through the various environments they explore and the short cut scenes that occur when a Colossus is defeated.

Unsuccessful Element

If there was one thing in the game that might be considered unsuccessful, it would be the role of the Colossi in the story. They were fantastic and fearsome creatures, and their role in the gameplay was flawless, but it is difficult to see where exactly they fit into the story. No explanation is offered as to how they came to exist, what connection they have to the idols, or what the sword Wander wields has to do with them. Some closure on some of those points might make the story feel more complete, but perhaps the game's creator wanted to leave it all up to the imagination.

Highlight

The ending of the game is full of twists and uncertainty. First, Wander is killed by one of Emon's men, then he comes back as Dormin, and finally, when Emon seals the temple, he turns back into himself. The whole time Mono appears to still be dead. It seems that Dormin has not kept his promise and that, as Emon said, Wander was just being used the whole time. All hope seems lost as Wander is sucked into the pool behind him and Mono lies dead on the altar. It seems that the entire experience was all for nothing and the player's heart is brought down to the lowest depths, only to be brought back up when Mono awakes, Agro returns, and the baby Wander is found alive. It's the kind of emotional swing that is rarely felt in a game because it requires a deep emotional connection that few games can achieve.

Critical Reception

Shadow of the Colossus is generally accepted as one of the masterpieces of the Playstation 2. The aggregators Game Rankings and Metacritic give it a score of ninety-two and ninety-one percent, respectively. It won numerous awards for game design, including "Best Character Design" and "Best Game Design" at the 2006 Game Developers Choice Awards, as well as "Best Artistic Design" in IGN's best of 2005 awards. Edge magazine, in a list of the 100 best video games, describes it as "a fiction of unquestionable thematic richness, of riveting emotional power, whose fundamental artistic qualities are completely fused with its interactivity."

Lessons

- The player doesn't need to know everything. A great deal of time could have been spent explaining the backstory but instead, the creators decided to let the story unfold in the player's subconscious through the use of archetypes. Sometimes the subconscious mind can discern more than could ever be explained to the conscious mind, so too much explanation can sometimes serve to confuse the player.
- Less action can make for a more immersive experience. The player spends a great deal of time traveling across the land searching for the next Colossus. They never meet a single minor enemy on their way. The only battling that is done is with the sixteen Colossi, which of course makes for less action. It also keeps the focus on the journey and the Forbidden Land itself, instead of requiring the player to constantly be on alert for enemies. It allows the player to take in their surroundings as they are instead of constantly looking for the next skirmish.
- Character can be developed just as well in game as they can during a cutscene. In particular, Wander and Dormin are developed very much through their interaction with each other, as well as the player's

relationship with Agro. Dormin's desire to be free is obvious from his enthusiasm in helping Wander defeat the Colossi, and Wander's love for Mono is obvious in his steadfast determination to defeat the beasts. The loyalty that Agro shows to Wander can only be understood if the player experiences it themselves, and it makes the pain of Agro's apparent death much more real. A player can emotionally connect during gameplay, perhaps even better than they possibly could otherwise.

Summation

Shadow of the Colossus does an amazing job of making an emotional connection with the player with very little storytelling. The connection is made through gameplay, and the creators did a wonderful job of minimizing the story by telling the player all they needed to know through symbolism and archetypes. It shows that a player does not need to be detached from a game's story whenever a cutscene ends.