

AN ACADEMIC REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Introduction

Abstract

This essay provides an in-depth academic review and analysis of Shadow of the Colossus (Team Ico, 2005) using the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework. The essay assesses how the game's design and narrative elements connect to create a deeply immersive and emotionally resonant experience. The area of focus includes the minimalist game mechanics, the dynamics of combat and exploration, the philosophical themes embedded within the narrative, and the position of game within the broader context of the video game history and culture. The analysis explores how the Shadow of the Colossus redefines the traditional game design by focusing on a series of unique boss battles and a vast, sterile world that evokes a sense of both wonder and melancholy. With the help of this essay, we will be evaluating the game's design decisions and proposing areas for refinement. This essay also aims to illustrate the game's profound impact on the medium.

Historical Context and Legacy

In the action-adventure genre, Shadow of the Colossus is considered as one of the most influential and critically acclaimed video games. It was developed by Team Ico and directed by Fumito Ueda; the game was first released for the PlayStation 2 in 2005 and later remastered for the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4. The game quickly earned a dedicated fan base because of its innovative mechanics, emotional depth, and minimalist design. If we compare other games launched in a similar time, Shadow of the Colossus focuses on a series of enormous boss battles, devoid of conventional enemies or filler content. The approach used for the game was revolutionary, offering a fresh take on the notion of what constitutes a "game".

A simple and profound narrative can be observed at the heart of Shadow of the Colossus. The protagonist – Wander, embarks on a quest to resurrect a girl named Mono by defeating sixteen Colossi which are scattered throughout the barren land. The game's narrative ambiguity allows users to interpret its themes and moral undertones, which are underpinned through gameplay and visual storytelling.

Target Audience

Shadow of the Colossus attracts diverse audiences, which includes casual players, critics, and enthusiasts of artistic and narrative-driven games. The key player types include:

1. Explorers: Players fond of discovering can find immense satisfaction by navigating the vast and mysterious deserted land, uncovering ruins, and interpreting the environmental storytelling.
2. Achievers: The game caters to the players who seek accomplishment as defeating each Colossus does require strategy and precision and also proves to be a rewarding encounter.
3. Aesthetics Enthusiasts: The game's subdued color palette, mesmerizing landscapes, and emotional narrative attract individuals who value visual artistry and evocative storytelling.
4. Narrative Players: The game attracts players who enjoy interpreting and engaging with complex stories because of its themes of sacrifice, love, and hubris.

Game Overview

Analysis

Shadow of the Colossus can be termed as an unorthodox action-adventure game that redefines traditional gaming conventions through its minimalist design and expressive storytelling. The game was developed by Team Ico and directed by Fumito Ueda; the game engages players in the role of the protagonist Wander who is on a quest to revive a girl named Mono. In order to achieve this, Wander must traverse a vast and desolate landscape known as Forbidden Land and defeat sixteen towering beings known as Colossi. The game abstains from the most used gaming troops such as enemies, inventories, sprawling side quests, and instead of all these elements its gameplay is centered around introspective exploration and monumental boss battles. In each battle with the Colossus player's fighting and puzzle solving skills are put to test, requiring them to observe, strategize, and execute precise movements. The narrative of the game unfolds subtly, using environmental storytelling, visual cues, and sparse dialogue to explore themes of sacrifice, love, and moral ambiguity. With its atmospheric world, innovative mechanics, and emotional depth, Shadow of the Colossus stands as a landmark in the evolution of video games as an artistic medium.



Core Gameplay

The core gameplay revolves around two interconnected loops: exploration of the Deserted Land and the combat against the Colossi. The game's protagonist Wander has a sword, bow allotted as weapon and for traversal of the barren lands Wander is associated by his loyal horse Agro. The players must traverse the world and locate each Colossus and defeat it in the 1v1 battle by identifying and exploiting the Colossi weak points.

Finding and Detecting Colossi

One of the major parts of the gameplay experience is locating and engaging with each Colossus. The process involves of the following key mechanics:

Navigating the Forbidden Land:

1. Using the Sword's Light: The player character – Wander's sword reflects beams of light when it is held aloft, converging into a focused beam when pointed in the direction of the next Colossus. The given mechanic acts as a compass which guides the player across the landscape.



2. Landmarks and Environmental Cues: The map Forbidden Land is huge and open, but it consists of landmarks such as towering cliffs, ancient ruins, and unique biomes provide visual guidance. In order to progress the players must decode these environmental features.
3. Riding Agro: To traverse the vast Forbidden Land Wander has been provided with a trustworthy transport companion, it allows player to traverse more efficiently. The Agro's realistic movement mechanics require players to adjust their riding strategies based on terrain.

Detecting Weak Points:

In order to defeat the Colossus players must identify their unique weak points. To identify the weak points players can use following methods:

1. Sword Reflection: The mechanics used for navigating can be used to identify the weak point of the Colossus, the sword emits a glow when pointed at the Colossus's weak spots. The glow grows brighter as the sword is aimed closer to the weak point.



2. Visual Observation: The weak points are also marked by glowing sigils or soft patches on the Colossus's body. It can be identified by analyzing the Colossus's movement and behavior.
3. Environmental Manipulation: In some battles players are required to analyze and use the surrounding environment to expose the Colossus's weak points. For example, in the third battle the Colossus must strike the ground with its weapon which results in breaking its armor and revealing a climbable surface to the weak point.

Colossus Encounters:

The battles with the Colossus are structured in a particular manner which consisted of a unique puzzle, each battle requiring a combination of observations, strategy, and dexterity. Below it is explained by showcasing three examples of the battle with Colossi:

1. **Valus (First Colossus):**
 - a. **Finding:** The location of the Colossi is present in the grassland plains which are surrounded by cliffs. The players can locate the battle ground by using Wander's sword.
 - b. **Strategy:** The weak point for Valus is situated on its head, but to attack the weak point players must climb its legs using patches of fur present on the parts of its body.
 - c. **Dynamics:** As this is the first battle for the players this battle introduces to core mechanics such as stamina management and targeting the weak points.



2. Gaius (Third Colossus):

- a. Finding: The battleground for Gaius is situated on a raised platform in the middle of a lake, it requires traversal of a narrow bridge.
- b. Strategy: To reveal the climbable surface players must provoke Gaius to strike its massive weapon, as it dismantles parts of its armor.
- c. Dynamics: Players have to manipulate environmental objects and make decisions using precise timing in order to defeat the Gaius.



3. Avion (Fifth Colossus):

- a. Finding: The Avion is situated in a misty lake surrounded by ruins. To reach the battleground players must swim to the central platform.
- b. Strategy: The players are required to leap onto the wings of the Avion and maintain the grip while it soars as its guilds through the air.
- c. Dynamics: Players are introduced with aerial mechanics, creating a sense of exhilaration and danger.



Narrative Theme

The narrative of *Shadow of the Colossus* is conveyed through a minimalist storytelling approach in a profound exploration of sacrifice, love, and moral ambiguity. The journey of Wander to resurrect Mono forms the emotional core of the game, but his quest is fraught with ethical dilemmas that challenge traditional notions of heroism. A unique puzzle needs to be solved to defeat the Colossus, but each of them also represents a majestic and seemingly innocent being, raising questions about the morality of their destruction. The black tendrils corrupt Wander after each victory, it symbolizes the sacrifices he makes which does affect him physically and spiritually in the path of accomplishing his goal. The game's barren landscapes and lack of conventional dialogue amplify the themes of isolation and introspection, allowing players to project their interpretations onto Wander's motivations. Ultimately, *Shadow of the Colossus* invites players to reflect on the cost of defying natural laws and the lengths one might go for love, leaving its story open to interpretation and personal connection.



MDA Breakdown

To frame this with regards to the MDA framework:

Shadow of the Colossus is a landmark example of how the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework can be utilized to create an emotionally resonant and immersive gaming experience. The game's minimalist design ensures that every element, from its core mechanics to its visual and auditory aesthetics, contributes to a cohesive narrative and gameplay structure. Each aspect of the MDA framework is deeply intertwined, resulting in a game that not only challenges the player's skills but also evokes profound emotional responses.

Mechanics: The Building Blocks of Gameplay:

The mechanics of *Shadow of the Colossus* are deliberately simple yet deeply impactful. They revolve around three primary activities: exploration, combat, and environmental interaction. These mechanics ensure that players are consistently engaged while remaining immersed in the world and story.

Exploration mechanics form the backbone of the player's journey through the Forbidden Land. Wander's sword, a key tool in the game, emits beams of light that guide players toward the location of each Colossus. This mechanic is not only functional but also symbolic, representing the divine connection between Wander's quest and Dormin's enigmatic power. The lack of traditional HUD elements enhances immersion, requiring players to rely on the game world itself for navigation. Agro, Wander's horse, is an essential part of exploration, offering realistic movement physics that demands careful handling across different terrains. Agro's inclusion as a

companion also provides an emotional anchor, reinforcing themes of trust and partnership in an otherwise solitary experience.

Combat mechanics is where *Shadow of the Colossus* truly shines. Each Colossus is designed as a living puzzle, requiring players to analyze its movements, environment, and weak points to devise a strategy. Wander's climbing ability, governed by a stamina bar, introduces tension and urgency to battles. Players must plan their movements carefully, balancing the need to ascend the Colossus with the risk of falling or running out of stamina. The weak points on the Colossi are not always immediately accessible, often requiring players to manipulate the environment or provoke specific behaviors from the creature. For instance, the battle with Gaius, the third Colossus, involves luring it into striking a stone platform to break its armor and reveal climbable surfaces. These mechanics elevate each encounter beyond a simple boss fight, transforming it into a unique and memorable challenge.

Environmental interaction is another crucial component of the game's mechanics. The world is vast and desolate, with ruins, cliffs, and natural features that not only serve as visual landmarks but also play a role in gameplay. Traversing the Forbidden Land requires players to observe and adapt, using the environment to their advantage in both exploration and combat. This integration of mechanics into the world design reinforces the sense of immersion and highlights the themes of isolation and decay.

Dynamics: Emergent Gameplay and Emotional Engagement:

The dynamics of *Shadow of the Colossus* arise from the interplay between its mechanics and the player's actions. These dynamics create a deeply personal and emotionally charged experience that evolves as the player progresses through the game.

Exploration dynamics are shaped by the absence of traditional waypoints, NPCs, or enemies. Players must rely on their intuition and environmental cues to navigate the Forbidden Land. This design choice fosters a sense of agency, as players feel responsible for their journey and discoveries. The vast emptiness of the world evokes feelings of solitude and introspection, mirroring Wander's isolation. Each trek to a Colossus becomes an adventure in itself, as players traverse diverse terrains and uncover the remnants of a forgotten civilization.

Combat dynamics are characterized by tension, strategy, and adaptability. Each Colossus battle is a test of observation and problem-solving, requiring players to experiment with different approaches to exploit the creature's weaknesses. The stamina system adds an additional layer of complexity, forcing players to weigh the risks and rewards of their actions. For example,

during the fight with Avion, the fifth Colossus, players must leap onto its wings as it soars through the air, maintaining its grip while navigating its erratic movements. These dynamics ensure that no two battles feel the same, keeping the gameplay fresh and engaging.

Emotional dynamics play a significant role in *Shadow of the Colossus*. The game's pacing allows players to reflect on the consequences of their actions, with the mournful deaths of the Colossi eliciting feelings of guilt and sadness. The majestic and often passive nature of the Colossi challenges players to question the morality of their quest, as each victory comes at a visible cost to Wander's physical and spiritual state. This emotional depth sets the game apart from traditional action-adventure titles, leaving a lasting impression on players.

Aesthetics: The Emotional and Sensory Experience:

The aesthetics of *Shadow of the Colossus* are integral to its identity, creating a world that is both hauntingly beautiful and deeply melancholic. Every visual and auditory element is carefully crafted to enhance the player's emotional connection to the game.

Visually, the game is a masterpiece. The Forbidden Land's expansive landscapes, muted color palette, and decayed structures evoke a sense of awe and melancholy. The Colossi themselves are stunning works of art, blending organic and architectural elements to create creatures that feel ancient and otherworldly. Each Colossus has a distinct design that reflects its role and environment, further immersing players in the world.

Audio design plays an equally important role in shaping the game's atmosphere. Kow Otani's orchestral score transitions seamlessly between serene exploration themes and intense battle tracks, amplifying the emotional stakes of each encounter. The ambient sounds of the Forbidden Land, from the rustling wind to the echoing cries of distant wildlife, enhance the sense of solitude and immersion. These auditory elements complement the visuals, creating a cohesive and emotionally resonant experience.

Narrative aesthetics are deeply embedded in the game's symbolism and storytelling. The black tendrils that corrupt Wander after each victory serve as a visual representation of the cost of his actions, while the cyclical nature of the ending reinforces themes of sacrifice and renewal. The game's lack of explicit exposition allows players to construct their own interpretations, fostering a sense of personal investment in the story.

How the Game Aligns with the MDA Framework:

Shadow of the Colossus exemplifies the MDA framework by seamlessly integrating its mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics to create a unified and impactful experience. Mechanics

provide the tools for exploration, combat, and interaction, while the dynamics emerge from the player's engagement with these systems, shaping the emotional and gameplay experience. The aesthetics tie everything together, evoking feelings of awe, melancholy, and introspection that resonate with the player long after the game is over. This alignment ensures that every aspect of the game contributes to its overarching themes and narrative, making it a masterclass in game design.

Improvements:

While *Shadow of the Colossus* is a landmark title, certain refinements could enhance its alignment with the MDA framework. Improving Agro's responsiveness and refining the climbing mechanics would reduce player frustration and make the gameplay smoother. Adding optional environmental puzzles or lore fragments would deepen the exploration dynamics, providing more incentives for players to engage with the world. Introducing dynamic weather effects and lighting changes could enhance the game's aesthetics, making the world feel more alive and immersive. Finally, implementing a "remix" mode with randomized Colossus behaviors or locations could increase replayability, encouraging players to revisit the game with fresh challenges. By addressing these areas, *Shadow of the Colossus* could further strengthen its position as one of the most iconic and influential games of all time.

Summary:

Shadow of the Colossus remains a defining example of how video games can transcend traditional boundaries to deliver an emotional and artistic experience. Its innovative mechanics, minimalist narrative, and breathtaking aesthetics have earned it a place as a timeless classic. By focusing on quality over quantity, the game delivers a focused and meaningful experience that leaves players reflecting long after the credits roll.

However, no game is without its shortcomings. The challenges of imprecise controls, sparse interactivity, and limited replayability highlight areas where modern refinements could elevate the experience further. By addressing these issues through enhanced controls, dynamic gameplay features, and expanded environmental storytelling, *Shadow of the Colossus* could achieve an even greater balance between its artistic and interactive elements.

Ultimately, *Shadow of the Colossus* serves as both a work of art and a masterclass in game design, demonstrating the medium's potential to evoke powerful emotions and provoke deep

thought. It is a testament to the ability of games to explore themes of love, sacrifice, and moral ambiguity, cementing its legacy as one of the most significant titles in gaming history.

References:

- Bogost, I. (2007) *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hunnicke, R., LeBlanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004) 'MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research', in Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI. San Jose, California.
- Juul, J. (2013) *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2011) *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- McGregor, R. (2018) 'Shadow of the Colossus and the Architecture of the Sublime', *Journal of Games Criticism*, 5(1), pp. 1-12.
- Otani, K. (2005) *Shadow of the Colossus Original Soundtrack* [Album]. Tokyo: Sony Music Entertainment Japan.
- Schott, G. and Burn, A. (2007) 'Psychological and Sociological Perspectives on Video Games', in Perron, B. and Wolf, M.J.P. (eds.) *The Video Game Theory Reader* 2. New York: Routledge.
- Stang, S. (2019) 'The Ludic Sublime: The Aesthetics of Play in Shadow of the Colossus', *Game Studies*, 19(3).
- Team Ico (2005) *Shadow of the Colossus* [Video Game]. Tokyo: Sony Computer Entertainment.
- Totten, C. (2014) *An Architectural Approach to Level Design*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.