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Shadow of a Doubt

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I have often used this column as a place to lament the status of video games in society. Specifically, I have pontificated about the way that game developers and film makers are attempting to cut cost by reducing the artistic scope of their products, and I have decried the games industry for continuing to court only a fraction of potential gamers. The fundamental issue that such columns have touched upon but so far failed to address is the question of games as art.

Are games art? Can a video game have artistic merit? If games are a form of art, does that imply some elevated cultural status above simple entertainment? When this question was posted on an Internet message board frequented exclusively by game developers, an extremely lengthy debate ensued. One group of developers argued that games are clearly art because they require creative thinking to produce, and that an exceptionally specific definition of art is required to single games out among similar media such as film. Detractors countered with the argument that artistic works require meaning, and that most games have no meaningful value above and beyond their function as entertainment. In the end, the debate was squelched by a third group who presented the eye-of-the-beholder argument, and concluded that even the definition of art is subjective. The discussion serves as a clear reminder that there is still much debate about this issue within the game industry itself, but one point that most developers agree on is that games would be a more respected medium if they were more artistic (that is, more clearly a form of art) than they are today.
Though consensus about whether or not games constitute art may be a ways off, occasionally a game will stand out from the crowd as being particularly artistic. This year, that game is Sony’s Shadow of the Colossus[1]. Released in October 2005, Shadow of the Colossus is the second game from Fumito Ueda, the director of the extremely highly praised 2001 game Ico. Like Ico, Colossus is a minimalist experience; no effort is wasted on common game mechanics like accruing score points, managing statistics, or searching for items that will make the player stronger. Instead, the game asks the player to perform a single task over and over again: hunt down a giant, towering creature, climb the monster’s body up to its head, and kill it by stabbing a special weak point.

Shadow of the Colossus works like this: the player, a young man who is hoping to bring a dead girl back to life, treks to a distant castle looking for someone with magical powers. What he finds is an ominous disembodied voice that tells him that his friend (or lover, perhaps? The only thing that is clear is that this woman means a lot to the protagonist) may be brought back to life if he successfully destroys 16 colossi that roam the surrounding lands. To kill each colossus, the player must follow the reflection of the sun’s light off his sword to the location of the beast. Each colossus presents a different challenge: some wield weapons, some can fly, some swim under water. Each of the colossi has weak points on its body, and it is up to the player to ascend the beast and destroy it by repeatedly stabbing each special point. The monsters move and grab at the player as he climbs, and each blow to a weak point sends the monster into spasms of pain. When the colossus is eventually felled, the player returns to the castle to receive instructions on the next target.
Despite this rather repetitive premise, *Shadow of the Colossus* has received almost universal praise as an original, breath-taking, and emotionally challenging experience. Jerry “Tycho” Holkins of the consistently hilarious web comic Penny Arcade eloquently summed up the key to the game’s achievement:

So while you go through the ordinary motions that we associate with videogames – discern objective, eradicate opposition, return for reward – you’re engaged in a series of acts whose moral virtue is by no means assured. The supposed hero is assaulting majestic, sometimes docile, sometimes curious, sometimes sleeping creatures. They’re almost all portrayed in a sympathetic light at some point, and it’s hard not to feel disgusted at times for iterating Hollow Game Mechanic X by rote without any sense of the moral spectrum the acts inhabit. [2]

Holkins concludes that Colossus is an “indictment of gaming as usual,” a reversal of roles that puts the player in the uncomfortable situation of doubting their own righteousness. This lack of easy answers is rare in video games, and Holkins and many others have praised the game for providing an interesting, unique, and thought-provoking experience. In fact, the most common criticism of Colossus is that the technology it employes does not do its vision justice.

Though *Shadow of the Colossus* pushes the technological envelope perhaps a little too far with the current generation of video game hardware, it is still one of the most visually appealing games ever made. The game presents the player with a vast and incredibly well-realized environment: to reach each colossus, the player must cross deep valleys, high mountains, and rolling planes. The colossi themselves are varied an intricate, and it is clear that the game’s designers spent a lot of
time developing the unique details of each creature. The game’s mechanical challenges are not entirely unique, but their application in the context of the environment (such as trying to maintain balance while climbing up the back of a giant, moving creature) makes the experience somehow far more epic than usual. In short, the execution of Colossus is excellent, and it complements the authority with which the game assaults the player’s assumptions about what video games mean.

In sum, Shadow of the Colossus is a masterpiece. It provides unique and challenging game mechanics while simultaneously forcing the player to reevaluate their role as the hero and consider the weight of their actions. Its visual style glows with depth and beauty, and it manages to deliver a wholly immersive experience despite a few technical difficulties. At its core, Colossus has that something that all art strives for: emotional value.

I have written a lot about the difficulty and importance of building games that are emotionally relevant to their participants. As the debate about games as art continues, the power for games to manipulate the player’s emotional state (and thereby become a meaningful experience to the player) will ultimately sway the balance. Shadow of the Colossus, like Ico before it, is an excellent example of how games can be created that force the player to accept responsibility for the actions of their avatar, and consequently give their behavior within the game world meaning.


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