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LOSING YOUR GRIP: FUTILITY AND DRAMATIC NECESSITY IN SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

In Shakespeare's masterpiece Hamlet, Ophelia must die. There is no possibility that Hamlet's unfortunate lover can give up on Hamlet and walk away, nor can Hamlet realize the harm he's committing on her. A core part of the arc of the play is her degeneration and her death. Of course, the play spends a good deal of time getting us to care about Ophelia, and to feel bad for her doomed relationship with Hamlet. This naturally leads us to *not* want her to kill herself. But because the play's plot is that Ophelia kills herself, all of our desire that Ophelia endure is hopeless. It is this tension that creates the tragedy – the audience develops expectations and hopes that the story's plot will necessarily dash, and the futility of that hope is what gives the story an emotional power. We call this tension *dramatic necessity*, the power that stories of artistic media create by constructing desires and expectations in the audience that the narrative will then inevitably subvert and betray.

When it comes to the medium of games, however, the possibility of dramatic necessity has been repeatedly challenged. Theorists and critics as varied as Umberto Eco¹ and Roger Ebert² have denounced the possibility of interactive media such as games ever reaching the emotional power of plays or film. They argue that the very idea of agency undermines dramatic necessity, and without a sense of dramatic necessity, a game can never reach the emotional impact of other, more fixed kinds of narrative art. Let's take our Hamlet example again. If the play was instead a game, the argument goes, then you would imagine you would have some kind of gameplay control over the important parts of the story. So, to continue our example above, a user could have the choice of whether to have Ophelia kill herself or get over Hamlet. Of course, if one really did sympathize with Ophelia, one would probably choose to have her not kill herself. This fulfills the audience's hopes, but it eliminates the tragedy by not having that hope dashed. On the other hand, a user

could also choose to have Ophelia kill herself, but simply knowing that one *could* have chosen have her survive undermines the power of the decision to have her commit the act. The problem is that as soon as you add agency to the story, the story is not determined, and without that tension between the audience's desire and an *inevitable* outcome, the story loses its emotional power.

But is it true that agency invalidates the possibility of dramatic necessity? Isn't it possible that agency in an interactive narrative can be *used* to create the tension between expectation and inevitable outcome? I argue that several games have attempted, and a few have succeeded, in using control by the user to construct this tension between desire and outcome. To accomplish this, games use an interactive trope that I call *futile interactivity*. To demonstrate this trope, I offer [Shadow of the Colossus](#), a game that is a triumphant example of how agency can be harnessed to a necessary end, and how a game interface, system, and interactivity can be used in concert to create a genuine tragedy. Warning: The following essay contains many spoilers about theme and plot of [Shadow of the Colossus](#). If you have not played the game, and have no information about the game's story, I highly recommend that you postpone reading this article until you have finished the game first. Reading this article before playing will deeply compromise the power of the game. For those interested but concerned about [Shadow's](#) difficulty and time commitment, there are several good walk-throughs available on the internet that can accelerate your completion of the game.

Hunting the Colossi

[Shadow of the Colossus](#), developed by Team Ico under the vision of Fumito Ueda, begins with a warrior (Wander³) riding to a distant temple carrying a dead woman (Mono), presumably a lover from the dedication the warrior shows her. After destroying a set of shadowy enemies, the warrior is contacted by a distant voice that identifies itself as Dormin. Wander indicates that he wants Dormin to bring back the woman's soul, which Dormin explains may be possible, but only at a great price: the destruction of the 16 colossi that are the incarnations of the idols in the temple, using the special sword the warrior carries. The warrior is undeterred by this challenge:

DORMIN: *In this land there exist colossi that are the incarnations of those idols. If thou defeat those colossi — the idols shall fall.*

WANDER: *I understand.*

DORMIN: *But heed this, the price you pay may be heavy indeed.*

WANDER: *It doesn't matter.⁴*

Even in these early moments, Wander displays a kind of fatalism and almost apathy that is atypical in a hero. But, as we will see, there are many ways in which the warrior that the player controls is not typically heroic.

From here, the game proper begins. Each colossus that the player is tasked with killing is, in traditional game terms, a boss. Eschewing standard level design, Wander faces no preliminary opponents in his quest. Instead, the player begins by searching the largely empty environment for the next colossus. Once the colossus is found, the player must figure out how to find and attack the weak spots on the monster's body. In this sense, each colossus is a puzzle that the player must solve. The puzzles take a number of different forms: simple, instructional puzzles, such as the first colossus "The Minotaur"⁵, where the player learns the basics of climbing and finding the weak points of the colossi; strategic puzzles, such as the fourth colossus "Equus Prime", where the player must figure out how to access the climbable parts of the colossus that are here too high for Wander to reach; timing puzzles, such as the fourteenth colossus "Destruction Luster", where the player must time a number of jumps and climbs of different ruins to get to a safe area in which to kill the lion; and combinations of the above. But despite these differences in the types of puzzles, the core emotion of the play is similar throughout the game, in that the player must experiment and explore each colossus in a difficult and at times frustrating process, and that the reward of play is the sense of triumph that comes from having struggled against the complexities of the problem and figured out a solution.

This presentation of a challenging puzzle which leads to a sense of triumph upon completion is a standard mechanic in digital games, one that extends back to the early text adventure games such as Zork and Planetfall. However, Shadow is not content simply to allow the player this feeling of success. The troubling of this mechanic begins with the ride to find the first colossus. The player is not tracking down a monster terrorizing a village or threatening the world. The colossi are hidden away in caves and grottos, deep canyons and forgotten cities, and as the environment is almost devoid of life (living things beyond Wander, Agro (the hero's horse), and the colossi consist of a handful of lizards, birds, and turtles), it's hard to see what harm the colossus could be doing. In fact, the more colossi Wander finds, the clearer it is that they are all sequestered away from anything they could harm, so that Wander's mission feels a great deal more like a whale hunt or a safari than a world saving quest.

Beyond their isolation, many of the colossi themselves seem to be relatively harmless. While some of the colossi attack Wander as soon as the warrior arrives, many entirely ignore Wander until he engages with them. The most striking example of this is the thirteenth colossus, "Trail Drifter". When the player arrives in the desert realm, the colossus is flying in lazy circles, with no awareness of Wander at all. To engage Trail Drifter, the player needs to shoot it down from the sky by puncturing

its air sacs, and then ride up to its wing to jump on to its body. After Wander stabs at its weak spots a number of times, Trail Drifter dives into the sand, knocking Wander loose. But when Trail Drifter resurfaces, it returns to its lazy circles in the sky, *completely ignoring the warrior once again*. Trail Drifter never, ever attacks the player, and so the player must repeatedly assault and eventually destroy a creature that means Wander no harm. Trail Drifter is the most extreme example of this in the narrative, but several of the colossi follow a similar pattern, simply ignoring the player until forced to defend themselves when the player invades their space or makes the first strike. This creates a troubling feeling that if the player had just left the colossi alone, nothing bad would have happened. Despite the size and destructive power of the colossi, it's hard to shake the feeling that Wander is the aggressor, and that the player is the monster, ruthlessly hunting down and killing innocent beasts in the barren wilderness.

This troubling sense is then reinforced by the visual decisions made about how the death of a colossus was depicted. All of the treatments of the end of a colossus are aimed at denying the player any sense of heroism. Each stab that the player makes on a weak spot of a colossus lets loose a gory stream of black blood in an awful hiss. The colossi howl and writhe in pain as they are attacked. When they are seriously wounded, they stop and respond to the wound. For example, when the fifteenth colossus ("The Sentinel") is stabbed enough times in the arm to advance the fight, the "reward" cutscene shows the colossus dropping its club and sharply clutching its shoulder, hunching over in pain. And when a colossus is finally killed, its death is shown in a sad, slow cutscene finale. A melancholy score begins to play as the creature crashes to the ground in slow motion. A long shot taking in the full magnitude of the beast follows its limp and lifeless collapse. The game then lingers on the body of each colossus, reminding the player that a unique being has been finally extinguished. Overall, the rewards the player gets for the hard-fought battle certainly do not strike a purely heroic tone.

This tragic death sequence, when combined with the isolated context of colossi and their inherent harmlessness, is carefully designed to make the player feel bad for killing the colossi. The further one goes into the quest, the more seemingly pointless death the player inflicts. Of course, both the plot of the game and puzzle mechanic each level employs push the player to be clever, to struggle, and to feel a sense of accomplishment about the destruction of the colossi. Ultimately, the player is continually left in a conflicted position, triumphant about the completion of the puzzles but regretful that this puzzle-solving lead to the painful death of a largely innocent creature. In this way, the game's core challenge pushes the player to struggle, but then betrays him by poisoning the rewards of the struggle. All by itself, this ambivalent approach to the game's core objectives creates a new kind of gaming experience.

Futile Interactivity in Play

However, Shadow goes a step further with a very short denouement that occurs after the death of each colossus, and it is in this moment we begin to see the depth of sophistication the game takes towards creating a tragic experience. When the cutscene of the death is over, the player regains control of Wander, now alongside the corpse of the dead giant. Right away, a cluster of black tentacles grow out of the body and move towards the character. But depending on where Wander is in relation to the colossus's wounds, the tentacles may or may not be immediately visible to the player. Regardless, they approach. The tentacles travel at a speed faster than Wander, so they will inevitably reach Wander, and when they do, they violently pierce Wander's chest, apparently killing him. The camera zooms out and Wander himself collapses lifelessly, and the screen transitions to a dark tunnel with a light at the end, where the player hears a woman's (perhaps Mono's?) distorted voice and cries. A fade transitions the player back to Dormin's temple where he sees the idol of the newly-defeated colossus crumble just before Wander re-awakens and stands. This scene serves a very specific gameplay purpose; it is used to return the player back to the temple immediately when the level is finished, without the player needing to repeat the long and potentially tedious process of riding back to the temple after every battle.

But the very purpose of the scene raises an interesting question about its construction: why is the player given control of Wander again if the point of the tentacle death is simply to reset the player to pursue the next colossus? After all, since the outcome of the scene is always the same, why is it necessary to make the player suffer through controlling the death of Wander each time a colossus is killed? Wouldn't it be easier just to remove the player's agency, and make this scene another part of the previous cutscene, such that Wander is automatically killed and returned to the temple as soon as the colossus falls? The answer lies in how the player experiences this moment as the player moves from colossus to colossus.

The first time the player kills a colossus, the player has no idea that the tentacles are coming, and thus is likely killed entirely by surprise. The player looks around after their successful battle, trying to figure what to do next, and is then suddenly and unexpectedly struck and killed. (Remember that since the players have never killed a colossus before, they don't know they are returning to the temple, so the death scene could be a genuine character death.) Soon enough, though, the player realizes that the tentacles will arrive after every level, and can attempt to avoid them. The third colossus "Gaius" provide an interesting case study of this. The battle with Gaius takes place in a striking location; in the center of a large lake, there is a spiral ramp that leads to platform high off the ground. Wander must spend a relatively long time simply running up the circle to reach the arena. There is no particular gameplay function to this location; it is striking to fight the colossus from

such a scenic position, but the core puzzle to defeating the colossus could just as easily occur on the ground. However, when the colossus is killed, the location takes on a new significance. Descending from the platform is very easy, and if the player simply jumps off the edge, the player gets down to the lake very quickly. This means that if the player is fast, they can get a huge lead on the tentacles in their escape. But despite the fact that the player can run for a long time (in this case, over half-a-minute) without being caught, the tentacles eventually reach Wander with the same fatal results. The setting here seems designed to allow the player to escape the inevitable death sequence, but the player is betrayed by the setting and led into the same trap.

The final scene with Gaius points to the purpose of all of these level-ending moments. The key here is that the player is given no indication of the purpose of the scene. The first time, the player has simply has control, and is confronted with a sudden, but apparently avoidable, failure. The player then encounters the scene again and again, in different circumstances and with different apparent means of escape. Because the player has control of Wander, the player can try to run, but the player learns over time that no matter what he does, Wander must die at the end of every fight with a colossus. Ultimately, the control the player has over Wander after killing a colossus rings false, because no matter what action the player takes, the tentacles win. Inevitably, after enough attempts, the player becomes resigned to the fact that Wander is going to die, that the agency he is given is a lie, and that the struggle for survival in this moment is pointless.

This small scene is an example of a trope that is reused over and over in Shadow of the Colossus. I call this trope *futile interactivity*. In a scene of futile interactivity, the player is given agency, apparently as normal. The player can control the character and is set to an implied or stated objective that appears accomplishable. It is essential that the goal seems normal for the game in which it occurs, and the player have a natural-seeming control of the character. However, the scene is designed so that the goal is impossible to achieve. The outcome of the scene has been set by the designers, and nothing the player does can avoid it. When the trope is well-constructed, the player attempts to pursue the apparent goal with the belief they can succeed. Thus, the players can struggle in a typically gamer fashion to make the goal, and feel the same ambition and emotion they do when they attempt to win in regular play. But the futility of struggle, the fact the scene will end in a pre-designed way regardless of the player's choices, means that through the use of agency, the designers can set up the player to feel a certain way as they control the character, but can then betray those feelings when the scene resolves to designer's and not the player's objective. In this way, futile interactivity gives the designer a way of *using agency* in order to create dramatic necessity.

Shadow is certainly not the only game that uses futile interactivity to achieve its goals. A simple example of this trope can be seen in Call of Duty 4. There is a scene in this FPS modern war situation where the player is given control, in the game's typical first-person perspective, of a random bystander to a nuclear explosion. At first, there is no clear sense of what to do; the player just looks around for the goal of the scenario. However, when the explosion goes off, the goal is clear – escape. However, as the radiation poisons the character, the player's ability to run is diminished, until the character collapses on the ground and dies. The mechanic of this scene is clear: the player is given control of a character in a seemingly normal way and then given a clear goal (escape from the nuclear explosion). But the scene is constructed so that the goal is impossible (the radiation makes it impossible for the character to escape) and the character fails. If the scene works, players are driven to want the character to survive, but then betrayed with the character fails despite their best efforts, and that tension is the core of a tragic experience.

Shadow of the Colossus is doing something similar to Call of Duty 4 in the ambivalence it injects into the defeat of the colossi and the death transition scene at the end of each battle, but there is an important distinction between the use of futile interactivity in the two games that points to the greater theme of Shadow. One important component of futile interactivity is the ignorance of the player to the predetermined outcome of the scene. The key formula to creating dramatic tension using futile interactivity is that the agency gives players the sense that they have control over the scene, and thus they care. If the players know that they don't really have control over the character, or the outcome is pre-ordained, they don't play in the scene the same way. They know they are simply going through the motions, and as a result, they can't feel that surprise or betrayal when their actions lead to undesirable or unexpected ends. For this reason, the trope of futile interactivity functions in a similar way to a mystery plot. You can enjoy rereading a mystery story, but knowing the solution, you can never experience the same surprise and thrill from it that you did the first time. In the same way, once you know the explosion witness in Call of Duty 4 cannot escape the fallout, it's impossible to feel the same struggle. It's still a striking scene on a second play, but it no longer carries the same emotional power.

With this in mind, what makes Shadow of the Colossus unique is that it repeats these scenes of futile interactivity over and over again. You do not experience the death-and-return scene only one surprising time, nor do you experience it a handful of times as you try different means of escaping the tentacles. Instead, players experience the same futile interactivity every time a colossus is killed. Over the sixteen core battles the player is forced to fight, it is impossible for the player to fail to see that the death scene is futile, and that Wander is simply destined to die at the end of every level. Part of the arc of play from colossus to colossus is the discovery of the tentacles, the struggle to attempt to escape them, and then the resignation

that death is inevitable. The battles with the colossi and the tragic air with which their death are handled are a much more complex collection of tropes and emotions, but there is a similar sense of resignation – the realization that Wander is not saving the world, and the player is facilitating the full, and at least morally ambiguous if not downright evil, extinction of a group of awesome beasts by pursuing the goals the game puts forth. In both of these scenes, futile interactivity is employed to create a movement from hopeful struggle to resignation.

Wander's Struggle

Realizing this, we have a key into the deeper themes and emotional aspirations of Shadow of the Colossus. The concepts of struggle, futility, and resignation are woven through the entire game. Every aspect of the experience, from the control scheme to the interface to the characters and narrative to the level design, all work together in the construction of a single emotional message. By analyzing each of these elements, we can see how Shadow of the Colossus moves beyond its success as an action puzzle game into a genuine experience of tragedy.

Returning to the opening scene of the game, we can already see the seeds of the theme being planted. Wander's response to the suggestion that a price would need to be paid for Mono's soul – "I don't care" – speaks less to a gallant hero than to a hardened and focused warrior. The warrior doesn't speak much; in fact, he never again utters more than the name of his horse after the introductory scene. And while the silent hero is hardly foreign to video games, Wander's difference from other digital protagonists becomes clear in the signals he does send. The most common sounds that Wander makes are grunts, groans, and cries. His running animations are accompanied by heavy panting, and when he climbs a writhing colossus, he grunts with the effort. Even when calling his horse, Wander yells a harsh and almost desperate shout. All of the audio feedback Wander provides points to a journey that is *hard*, and a hero that has to struggle as he completes his quest.

The cues of just how hard the journey is are further reflected in the character's animations. The warrior moves in fits and starts. When he runs, he lumbers and occasionally trips as he moves from one height to another. At times he flails as though he were propelled by sheer momentum. When he jumps, he reaches awkwardly to grab what's above him. If he has one hand on a ledge, he will swing back and forth in a feeble attempt to get the momentum to the next handhold. Swimming is a frantic and explosive full-body movement. Even on Agro, there's something inelegant about the way Wander moves. Agro behaves like a horse, so maneuverability is limited and slowing down takes time. To keep Agro in a full sprint requires the player to regularly spur the horse with hard slaps on the shanks. Combat is no different. Stabbing a weak spot takes all of Wander's energy; he rears

up with all his strength and throws his whole body into the strike. Things are perhaps most pronounced when the warrior is hit. When struck by a colossus, Wander can fly several relative meters, tumbling and spinning into a crumbled hump. If he is knocked down, he stays down, for an uncomfortably long time. The avatar can lie on the ground for up to several seconds without moving when grounded, regardless of how the player attempts to stir him with the controller. When the warrior does finally rise, it is slow and pained, and he can take a moment to regain his balance. And when the player does have Wander stop and heal, he does so by crouching to his knees, with his head hung heavily. All of these visual and audio cues point to just how difficult Wander's entire quest is.

The idea of the struggle is not only a part of the surface of the game. Wander is in fact defined by his ability to endure. Following the tradition that Team Ico established in their previous game Ico, the interface and character stat display are kept to a minimum in Shadow. The visual display in the lower right is the whole of the view of the character's mechanics, consisting of a pink circle, a bar, and a display of the currently equipped item. The bar is used to measure the character's health and amount of damage Wander can take. The pink circle is used for a few different purposes: to show how long Wander can grip a surface without falling, how long Wander can hold his breath under water, how far Wander can hold his bow taut, and how much force he can tap in his rear up for a sword strike. What's similar about all these uses is that they all say how far Wander can push himself when he endures suffering or applies force – a word for it might be stamina. But if we accept this, it means that excepting the current weapon Wander wields, he has only two attributes: stamina and health. This means that the system entirely defines Wander by his ability to endure. All of the challenges that the player is faced with and the puzzles that player must solve at that core are dependent on Wander's endurance. This is an unusual way to define a heroic character, and it provides a mechanical reinforcement of the theme depicted in the character's representation.

While a health stat is far from uncommon in action games, the stamina stat represented by the circle is part of the core system that makes up the particular gameplay of Shadow. Each battle against the colossus is a unique encounter, but there is one element that they all share. In every battle, to a lesser or greater extent depending on the particular creature, Wander must climb the colossus to its weak point and then repeatedly stab it. All the colossi act in some way to shake Wander off or knock Wander loose, especially after being wounded, and if Wander is not actively holding on the colossus (i.e. if the player is not holding down the L1 button), Wander will be thrown and injured. Of course, having grip as an attribute means that player cannot hold the colossus endlessly through its stirring and thrashing. As Wander holds on, the pink circle slowly shrinks to nothing, and when the circle eventually disappears, stamina runs out, causing Wander's grip to fail and leading to an immediate fall. As a result, part of the puzzle of every colossus is the alternation

between holding on to the colossus and letting go to rest and regain stamina. In other words, the most core mechanic of the game is the decision to *hold on* and the choice to *let go* at the right moment. Mastering how long to grip before Wander must let go is a skill that is at the heart of game's challenge.

The idea that a key skill of the game deals with knowing when to let go has particular resonance within the narrative. Returning to the beginning of the game, we recall that Wander's quest is to restore life to his dead companion, a goal which is repeatedly called into question even as it introduced. Emon, the priest who features prominently in the endgame, describes Wander's quest in a less than noble light during his introductory voice-over :

EMON: *In that world, it is said that if one should wish it, one can bring back the souls of the dead.../But to trespass upon that land is strictly forbidden...*

The feeling that Wander is doing something he shouldn't isn't even lost on Dormin, who comments to that effect before offering Wander his mission:

DORMIN: *That maiden's soul? Souls that are once lost cannot be reclaimed.../Is that not the law of mortals?*

This general sense of violation has no effect on Wander. Wander shows this initially with his indifference to the difficulty or sacrifice he will need to make in this adventure, but Wander's determination is continually reinforced throughout the game. This is shown in all of the resilience and willingness to withstand harm that Wander shows in his every action, from his panting run to his rigorous climb to his slow recovery from injury.

And just as critically, Wander shows no remorse over his actions. All of the disturbing elements of the killing of the colossi are lost on Wander. He shows no reluctance when riding through the wastes to find his next target, no hesitation when confronted with the colossus in initiating his attack, and no hint of sadness or iota of guilt about killing his prey. Given how powerful the death scenes are constructed to be, it is striking that Wander does not participate in that emotional movement at all. Wander shows no reaction when standing next to the corpse of the colossus and equally no reaction when he is returned to the temple. We almost always find Wander in the same position upon his return. He is unfazed by the violence he suffered and the tentacles pierced him, and generally his only reaction upon awakening is to look up to sky to await Dormin's next order. Wander demonstrates an incredible level of focus and apathy through these scenes, and that single-mindedness is his strongest character trait.

But the fact that Wander's return to the temple follows the same form each time does not mean that Wander is unchanging. One example of this is that Wander

himself is not completely oblivious to the potential hopelessness of his quest. At the middle point of the game, just after the defeat of the eighth colossus, the return to the temple is interrupted by a sequence in which we see Mono rising from her altar through a blurry, dream-like filter. Interestingly, this is a scene where the player *does not* have control, and so when Mono begins to slip into the distance, there is nothing the player can do to have Wander catch her. But this dream does nothing to daunt Wander's quest, and after a brief visit to his fallen love, he returns to his hunt with the same sense of cold determination he had earlier.

Leaving aside this brief moment of awareness, Wander's transformation through the story is primarily one of loss. This is manifested in two developments throughout the game. The first is Wander's bodily degradation from level to level. The struggle that Wander goes through to defeat each colossus and the death he suffers after each victory take their toll on Wander, represented by his slow loss of color and weight. The effect is subtle from level to level, but by the end of the game, the change is dramatic – Wander has gone from a healthy-looking warrior to a white, gaunt shadow of his former self. This is a purely visual change; the player suffers no gameplay effect from the transformation, but the degeneration is no less striking. And Wander suffers a similar emaciation of his social world when Agro is taken from him on the path to the final colossus. Agro is lost as the horse throws Wander across a collapsing bridge, plummeting to his seeming death in order to further Wander's quest. At this moment, Wander is allowed a moment of emotion to grieve his loss, but it is only momentary. After a few calls and a lingering look into the chasm, Wander turns back to his climb with no further reference to the loss. Between both of these developments, Wander's quest can be seen as a set of sacrifices, both of body and of companionship.

Letting Go

It goes without saying that all of these losses could have been avoided if Wander simply gave up on his quest. In fact, there is nothing in particular that makes the progression through the story necessary. Wander is not saving the world, and no further harm would befall anyone if he walked away. All of the suffering – the obvious pain and struggle attached to the hunt and assault, the destruction of relatively harmless or isolated creatures of great beauty and scale, the bodily deterioration of Wander, the loss of Agro – all of this could be avoided if the quest was given up. On top of this, Wander's quest is to do something that the game has repeatedly reminded us, through Emon, Dormin, and even Wander's own dream, is unnatural and outside of normal possibility. Wander could choose to accept Mono's loss and move on. Wander could *let go*. But he does not. Instead, he pushes himself through immense suffering and enormous destruction, all in the name of clinging to the hope of defying death, all to *hold on* to Mono. In contrast to the game's demand that the

player learn when he must let go, the avatar the player inhabits fails to learn this lesson and desperately holds on despite everything that indicates the quest should be let go.

The culmination of this theme appears in the game conclusion. The priests arrive at the temple, just as the last colossus is killed. They then reveal the depths of Wander's folly:

EMON: *So it was you after all. Have you any idea what you've done?! Not only did you steal the sword and trespass upon this cursed land, you used the forbidden spell as well...*

The shaman's observation drives home the truth of Wander's character. The player's avatar is a reckless and heedless character who has broken sacred law, stolen from his people (Emon's first sentence shows he personally knows who Wander is), and brought down great harm all in the name of his goal. The shaman wisely sees that Wander has been used by Dormin and bluntly points out the tragedy of Wander's folly:

EMON: *It is better to put him [Wander] out of his misery than to exist, cursed as he is.*

Emon orders his troops to destroy him, but even in his weakened state, Wander does not stop. Wander is pierced by an arrow and then stabbed through the chest by the priest's guard, but still manages to struggle on, painfully rising from the ground, stumbling over to Mono at the altar, and pulling the sword from his torso. Even at this late stage, faced with his raw depth of his foolishness and overwhelmed by his opponents, Wander still refuses to let go.

Through this process, Wander's body is slowly consumed by Dormin, newly-released from imprisonment as a result of the destruction of the sixteen colossi. Dormin's rise leads to the final two interactive scenes of the game, both instances of futile interactivity and both powerful indictments of the character's and, as a result, the player's choices in the game. In the first scene, the player gets a moment of interaction that reveals the final movement to betray the assumed nobility of Wander's quest. And in the final scene, Wander and the player are forced to face the game's lesson in a poignant synthesis of mechanic and meaning.

The cutscene above completes with Dormin having taken full form around Wander's body, and turning to attack the fleeing priest and warriors. At this point, the player is given control over Dormin, the final colossus. After having hunted and destroyed sixteen of these creatures, the player is put in the reverse position of being the giant under attack. It is hard not to feel empowered in this moment, given the obvious strength and destructive capacity of the monster the player now controls, and the player is directed by the scene to unleash that ability against warriors who are

clear analogs of the character the player has been controlling the entire game. But whatever destructive orgy the player expects is not in the cards. First, the player's vision is largely obscured by Dormin's smoky body, and the warriors are so small that they are hard to pinpoint in the haze. More significantly, the player's controls have been completely remapped without warning, so that trying to do basic actions such as jumping or striking cause entirely unexpected results, such as breathing fire. Dormin is extremely slow, and moving forward even a single step is an elaborate effort. And the warriors on the ground are quite fast, quickly firing off arrows and skirting away from Dormin's strikes. All of the controls and all the parameters of the scene are stacked against the player, so attempts to eliminate the priest's entire group are doomed to failure, and the potentially rewarding combat scene is instead an exercise in futile interactivity in which the player is doomed to be defeated.

However, the betraying of this expectation of wanton destruction is not simply a disappointment. Until this point, the player's perspective on the colossi has been consistent – the colossi are huge, menacing creatures that will destroy Wander after one false move. Playing the colossus, on the other hand, does not make one feel like a powerful and dangerous being. In fact, the feeling is almost entirely the opposite; Dormin is slow and awkward, and the advantage is held by the smaller, quicker assailants who seem able to inflict a constant barrage of weak attacks on him without reprisal. Being allowed to act from the perspective of the colossus ultimately reveals how vulnerable the colossi are, how much more the helpless victim they are than the aggressor. Giving the player this perspective, and enforcing the sense of helplessness with the confusing controls, limited vision, and encumbered movement, provides the final push of sympathy to the giants that the player has spent the game destroying. By playing as a colossus, the player ultimately has the opportunity not to wreak havoc, but feel the victimhood of the hunted monster, and have a final interactive experience of some of the pain and injustice he has committed.

When the priest's company escapes the room, Wander's stolen sword is thrown into the pool, and Dormin is immediately sucked into the emerging vortex. This is the beginning of the game's final interactive scene. The player again controls Wander, now back in the main hall of the temple, no longer possessed by Dormin or covered in black. At the end of the hall is Mono, lying on the altar. Behind Wander is the vortex, sucking him back into apparent oblivion. The player has complete control over Wander at this point, and the controls have returned to normal. If the player does nothing, Wander is sucked back to the vortex and the scene ends. Wander can sometimes walk against the suction; sometimes the force knocks him to the ground and pulls him, rolling, backward. However, the floor is covered with carvings and cracks, so there are many handholds on to which Wander can cling. There are no instructions and directives. The player is simply left in this scene to fend for himself.

It is possible that a player may immediately allow himself to be sucked into the vortex and out of the scene, but given that this is the very end of the game, it is unlikely that this will happen. First, the player has been conditioned to pursue Mono, as Wander's interest in clinging to Mono despite her death has been reinforced in repeated cutscenes, and in the potentially even stronger play element that the altar bearing Mono is always right in front of the player at the start of every level. So, in addition to the core desire to avoid potential death from the vortex, there is the implied goal that Wander should reach Mono. The fact that Mono is opposite the vortex makes this goal even easier for the player to adopt, even if it is not the initial intent. But even if the player never thinks about Mono, simply acting against the suction brings Wander closer to his goal, and reinforces the theme of Wander's single-minded unwillingness to let go of Mono.

The other reason why an immediate failure is unlikely is a mechanical one: over the course of the game, the player has gotten very good at holding on. As mentioned earlier, every colossus has tried to shake Wander off somehow, so any player that has gotten to the end of the game has become quite skilled at timing grip, such that the player can time a series of holds and releases in order to keep moving forward. The hall space is also designed with all of its rough and carved features to facilitate the player's ability to avoid the suction. This means that for even an averagely skilled player, it is possible to remain in hall for a long time without being sucked into the vortex, and once players get a hang of the rhythm of the suction, they can make good progress up through the hall. Assuming the player figures out the rules of the scene quickly, it is actually possible to remain in the middle of hall indefinitely, slowly creeping forward, occasionally losing ground, but never in danger of being eliminated. All of the training the player has received has prepared him for this moment, and the result is that the scene appears as a challenging environment of gripping and creeping, with the goal of finally reuniting Wander and Mono.

But it is this expectation that the futile interactivity of the scene dashes. Wander will not be reunited with Mono; the player will never be able to reach the altar. The mechanics of the suction are designed so that it is extremely difficult to get to the altar at all, but even if the player does reach the staircase to the altar, the suction will not allow the player to get to the top, and will quickly pull the player back to the middle of the room. So it is not that the player *can* remain in the room indefinitely. The player *will* stay in the hall indefinitely if he keeps pursuing Mono, too skilled to be caught in the vortex, but faced with the mechanical impossibility of reaching the altar. Nothing else ever happens in the hall. The player can take as much time as he wants, but it is inevitable that the player eventually realizes the futility of the scene. In the end, the player must accept that there are only two possibilities: continuing to hold on despite the fact that the goal of reaching Mono will never be reached, or letting go and giving up. Nothing changes until the player gives up, at which point Wander falls into the vortex and the game transitions to the final cutscene.

Embedded in this scene of futile interactivity is the core theme of the entire game. Wander is a tragic hero, motivated by single-minded dedication, recklessness, and grief to try to resurrect his dead love. Simply put, Wander's flaw is that he is unable to let go of Mono. He clings desperately to the unholy and unlikely possibility of bringing her back, which leads him through a series of destructive actions: stealing the sword, trespassing on forbidden lands, killing sixteen mostly harmless and occasionally truly innocent giants, sacrificing his truest friend and companion Agro, and allowing himself to be corrupted and sickened until death. But none of this sacrifice gets Wander closer to his wish. He holds on despite the pain, the ruination, and the growing awareness of the impossibility of his quest. And the culmination of this is the stark interactive metaphor of the final scene, Wander struggling to reach Mono at the altar, fighting the inevitable for a goal that is unachievable. And what the scene represents is the moment of transformation of the tragedy. The player realizes that Wander cannot continue to hang on. Just as they learned fighting the colossi that one's mechanical grip cannot last forever, so too do they realize that there is also a time when they must let go of the quest. When the player makes that decision, Wander does as well, finally giving up on his struggle, and allowing the healing of the game's end to occur. Fittingly, once Wander gives up, Mono is restored, Wander is reborn as an infant, Agro returns, and the group of them together find a secret garden and discover a previously-unimagined sign of life, a deer that slowly approaches Mono. It is only when Wander realizes that he can never be reunited with Mono and chooses to let go that the tragedy can end.

Shadow of the Colossus is simply one example of a game that defies the arguments of Eco and Ebert. Shadow is clearly a tragic story, and it is a story with a single outcome dictated by a sense of dramatic necessity both mechanically, in that the game was literally programmed to have its one outcome, and thematically, in that the tragedy that game represents, the unwillingness to accept death and let go of a lost loved one, can only have one outcome – the realization that one has to accept the loss. The genius of Shadow is the way the theme is continually reinforced throughout the game in variety of different tropes: the moral ambiguousness of Wander's quest to kill the colossi; the stoic and single-minded nature that Wander exhibits; the use of animation, audio and visual effects to demonstrate the depth of Wander's struggle; the choice of attributes used to define Wander and thus the player's ability to affect the system; and the construction of the colossus puzzles to feature the concept of grip and choices to hold on and let go as the game's core mechanic. But perhaps the most powerful of these techniques is the game's use of futile interactivity. By constructing interactive scenes where the player is lead to believe that he can succeed when the goal is in fact mechanically impossible, the game uses multiple moments of futile interaction to give the tragedy its emotional power. From the small scenes of Wander's death at the end of each colossus level to the grand finale of Wander's last attempt to reach his dead love, the player

is taught through play about the futility of the struggle and the necessity of letting go. In this way, Shadow of the Colossus creates a tragic play experience by harnessing the power of interaction to enforce a particular dramatic necessity and thus demonstrates one way that games can achieve the same range of aesthetic themes and emotional possibilities of other narrative media.

¹ Eco, Umberto. "From Internet to Gutenberg." Lecture. The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University, New York, New York. 12 November 1996. See specifically the final paragraph regarding War and Peace.

² Ebert, Roger. "Publicity material notes that 'Chicken Little' was a Male." *Victoria Advocate*. 26 November, 2005. 46.

³ Different sources list different translations in English of the character's name ("Wanda"). I have chosen Wander for ease of convenience. This choice has no bearing on the argument, as the character's name is never mentioned in the course of the game.

⁴ All quotes in the article are drawn from the US version of *Shadow of the Colossus*.

⁵ All colossus names are drawn from the Collector's Dengeki PlayStation Magazine released the week of August 18th, 2005.