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Myth in *Shadow of the Colossus* according to the mimetic theory of René Girard

ABSTRACT

This article proposes to incorporate René Girard's mimetic theory into the study of ludomythology using the game Shadow of the Colossus *(Team ICO 2005) as a case study, comparing the existing analyses of the game with the results of this new approach. Textual analyses argue that the game portrays a tragic world and that the actions of the player character are morally negative. Our approach suggests that this perspective corresponds to the foundational myth created by the persecutors of scapegoats, an accusatory narrative that legitimizes the sacrifice of victims. Girardian hermeneutics, supported by methods of video game narratology, reveals this rhetorical mechanism while also suggesting that, within the game's world, the victims are innocent and its protagonist is a hero seeking to abolish the legitimizing foundations of violence which are inherent in the sacrificial society to which he belongs.*

KEYWORDS

ludomythologies
mimesis
narratology
sacrifice
scapegoat
textual analyses
video game
world

INTRODUCTION, HYPOTHESES AND OBJECTIVES

This research aims to demonstrate the potential of René Girard's mimetic theory as a hermeneutic framework for video games. In this, the goal is not only to analyse one of the most acclaimed titles in the industry, *Shadow of the*

Colossus (Team ICO 2005), but also to make an original contribution to the study of myth within video games. The substracting design of the game by Fumito Ueda deprives the player of a great deal of information, to the point where one may ask: what are we really playing when we play *Shadow of the Colossus*?

In addressing the interpretative challenge posed by *Shadow of the Colossus*, we will use the following road map: first, we will consider the findings of previous research on the game, in order to establish a subsequent dialogue. Second, we will show how Girard's mimetic theory could be used in dialogue with current studies of myth in video games, revealing new avenues for research. Third, we will outline our methodology, which integrates Girard's hermeneutics of myth into narratology and the design of *ludofictional* worlds. Fourth, and in line with the dialogic nature of this study, we will present our results and a discussion, clearly distinguishing our contributions from prior proposals we have engaged. Finally, we will offer our conclusions.

This research hypothesizes that *Shadow of the Colossus* can reasonably be interpreted as a video game that successfully positions the player in confrontation with an inhuman sacrificial system; one that not only dominates the game's social world but also underpins the narrative design of the entire work. The novelty of this reading is made possible by the hermeneutic insights of Girard's mimetic theory. The work of Team ICO, given its proximity both to myth and the great poetic works that reveal it, is ideally suited to demonstrate the usefulness of mimetic theory in video game analysis.

To substantiate this notion, we propose a series of milestones, presented as our research objectives. First, to determine the extent to which the game's narrative design is shaped by the perspective of the sacrificial society the hero confronts, it is necessary to identify the narrator and their motivations. With this, we can proceed to the second objective: revealing the qualities attributed to the main character in the story. This will reveal the persuasive and legitimizing strategy of the game. Once we have a clear understanding of both the narrator's identity and point of view, and their discursive position towards the events they recount, we will turn to the question of myth. This is our third objective, reconstructing the real identity of the persecutors–narrators. The fourth objective is to consider who the protagonist truly is and how their actions should be judged.

THE INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE OF *SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS*

Shadow of the Colossus is an action-adventure game whose main character is a young man – Wander, though his name is never mentioned in the game – who, riding his mare Agro, ventures into a massive temple located in a deserted, uninhabited region, carrying the corpse of a maiden, Mono, also unnamed in the game. His goal is to bring the dead girl back to life. To do so, and following the instructions of the local deity, Dormin, the protagonist travels through sixteen regions surrounding this main cult complex, where he will defeat a total of sixteen colossi.

Since its release in 2005, *Shadow of the Colossus* has become one of the flagship titles of PlayStation 2 with a design considered to be among the most influential and acclaimed in the history of digital games. It can also be considered essential in understanding what a video game can be. In addition to the gaming challenge, which can be completed in just a few hours, it also presents an interpretive challenge, to borrow the idea from the aesthetics of difficulty

(Terrasa Torres 2022) that has engaged both players and scholars for nearly two decades.

In terms of textual analysis, Team ICO's work suggests that immorality lies at the heart of the playable character's (PC's) actions and that the game 'is clearly a tragic story' (Fortugno 2009: 185). Specifically, it can be read as a reinterpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, centred on romantic suffering (Pérez Latorre 2012: 275). This explains the bleak monotony conveyed by the austerity of other layers of meaning, the repetition of the same gameplay script and the absence of secondary objectives or significant narrative events between battles (Pérez Latorre 2012: 280–85).

Gibbons (2014) notes that the diegetic silences which abruptly cut off the triumphal music after each victory reveal the falsehood of that triumph and prompt moral reflection on the part of the player. Cole (2015) adds that these silences, both during travel and after each colossus falls, serve as emotional punishments. The music that returns when the player attempts to flee the vortex that emerges from the corpse of each defeated colossus reinforces this tragic identification with them: 'a leitmotif to identify the player's fate with those of the colossi they have spent so much effort defeating' (Cole 2015: 10).

The individuality of each colossus in terms of anatomy, gesture, geography and sound, combined with their generally passive behaviour, raises ethical questions about the extermination planned by the protagonist. The physical deterioration of the character seems to reflect the corruption of their soul. These and other carefully placed elements undermine the typical expectations of the action-adventure genre, ultimately revealing that the player has been embodying the antagonist (Cole 2015). The game has been interpreted as a paradigmatic case of *essential boundaries transgression* (Cesar 2020), a 'representation of the obsessive prison generated from a selfish individualistic isolation' (Cesar 2020: 103), where the protagonist is 'the example of the moral imbecile' (Cesar 2020: 121), someone who 'disregards others for his own satisfaction' (Cesar 2020: 122). One of its central themes is fatalism: the player, though responsible, cannot avoid their own tragic actions (Terrasa Torres 2022: 177–76).

From the perspective of myth criticism (Albarrán Ligero 2021), a complementary reading can interpret the flow of *gameplay* as a dramatization of the transition between mythical poles. The structure of the Chalice, embodied by the deceased girl, introduces a tension that draws the PC's Diurnal Regime, symbolized by a Sword representing the struggle against death, towards a messianic synthesis wherein opposites collide and are integrated. There is a striking correspondence between symbols, mechanics and the Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary, as well as continuity with ancient mythology.

The conclusions drawn from the textual analysis and myth criticism are in line with the gameplay experience. However, this focus on the most salient aspects of the diegesis and Durand's frameworks may overlook certain important elements that could lead to a more complete and perhaps more accurate understanding of the game. As Ciccoricco (2007), Gibbons (2014) and Cesar (2020) have noted, the gameplay of *Shadow of the Colossus* encourages introspection and reflection on the actions of the player. Thus, we propose to revisit the game as myth, through the lens of René Girard's mimetic theory.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MIMETIC THEORY TO LUDOMYTHOLOGY

Inspired particularly by the theories of Lévi-Strauss (1984, 2001) and Durand (1981), and by proposals such as Eliade's phenomenology ([1984] 1985),

to name a few examples, ludomythology (Planells de la Maza et al. 2023; Navarro-Remesal et al. 2022; Planells de la Maza and Navarro-Remesal 2022) primarily lies within the framework of myth criticism and other theories about myth, while also incorporating elements from video-game narratology and the theory of ludofictional worlds. Just as motifs or smaller narrative units help shape the central theme of a story, the *mytheme* represents the irreducible unit of myth. When combined with other mythemes, it forms the *mythologem*, which in narratology could be identified as universal questions or themes. These categories allow for an analysis of two dimensions: transcendent or classical myth as it appears and resonates *in the present*, and immanent myth, or the myth *of the present* (see also Losada 2022: 88, 182). In video games, the mythic or narrative dimension is closely linked to the game as a textual object and to ritual, while the ritualistic or mechanical aspect also relates to the game as an activity. It is important to note, however, that a game's mythic structures 'emerge from the interplay between text and action; that is, from a ludonarrative that integrates all the expressive elements of the medium' (Planells de la Maza et al. 2023: 68, translation added).

The conceptual framework of ludomythology emphasizes the importance of moving beyond a merely schematic view of mythic structures, calling for an exploration of the deeper meanings these structures convey, meanings which are never neutral (Planells de la Maza et al. 2023: 44–48). Thus, rather than focusing solely on the surface forms or variations of universal themes, we propose to consider categories that are inherently mythic, which may be called *mythemes*, recurring consistently across different myths. Here however we will focus specifically on myth as manifested *in the present*. For this, we propose to incorporate into the mythemes of ludomythology certain motifs informed by René Girard's interpretation of these in mimetic theory.

Within mimetic theory, desire is understood as the fundamental driving force behind human actions and the dramas reflected in poetic works. Girard identifies the mimetic nature of desire through authors such as Cervantes, Dostoevsky and Shakespeare: our desires are not original but borrowed (Girard 1985). We perceive the other with an aura of prestige and we want to become like them. The need for a model or mediator who directs our desires towards a desired object explains many dynamics of human life, with two as particular sources of conflict: the crisis of undifferentiation and mimetic rivalries.

Undifferentiation arises when the differences between subjects and realities become blurred, causing social unrest manifested in disasters: plagues, violent disputes among relatives and other types of catastrophes and disturbances of the community. In these situations, mimetic rivalries erase distinctions, driving individuals to differentiate themselves from one another, generally through violence. 'The closer the distance between the mediator and the subject, the more the difference is reduced, knowledge becomes precise, and hatred intensifies' (Girard 1985: 71, translation added).

This process leads to a spiral of escalating violence that threatens the stability and survival of the community. Paradoxically, from these same opposing symmetries the solution to the conflict emerges: all eyes turn towards a single point. Here arises the figure of the scapegoat onto whom all collective evils are attributed. Sacrificing the scapegoat, which requires the unanimous consent of the group, channels communal violence and restores order. Myth, which presents the figure of the scapegoat before the crisis of undifferentiation arises, serves as the legitimizing narrative that masks this original homicide. The ritual is its ceremonial re-enactment.

According to Girard, this scapegoat mechanism lies at the foundation of all culture. The sacrificial victim typically embodies stereotypical victimary traits: physical disability or moral failings, being foreign, marginalized or excessively prominent socially, possessing great beauty or ugliness (Girard [1986] 2002a). Myth justifies this process, legitimizing the violence of the persecutors, while literature denounces and dismantles by revealing the victim's innocence and the unjustified nature of their persecution.

Girard emphasizes that the persecutors, those who create the myth, tend to conceal both the violence inflicted and the arbitrary nature of the choice of scapegoat. For this reason, 'when we suspect scapegoating, we cannot verify our suspicion directly, we must rely on direct clues' (Girard 2002b: 151). The mythical narrative itself often canonizes the victim after their sacrifice: 'It is the murderers themselves, in sum, who sacralise their victim' (Girard [1986] 2002a: 120, translation added). Thus, myth is a collective construction which transforms foundational violence into a sacred act. The ritual, meanwhile, repeats this violence in a controlled manner, periodically reaffirming the order arising from the original sacrifice.

Myth, therefore, is a necessary lie that transforms evil into good and elevates it. According to Girard, even in Antiquity there were texts questioning the discourse of myth, showing the victims to be innocent, or at least no more guilty than their persecutors. *The Book of Job* stands as an early testament to this epistemological revolution (Girard [1989] 2002c), culminating in the Gospels and signifying the degradation of myth (Girard [1986] 2002a: 135–49, 2021: 166–81). Cervantes, Shakespeare and other prominent observers of human behaviour perceived this mimetic pattern to be typical of human societies. Therefore, true novelists are also great philosophers of human behaviour, contributing to our understanding of the person and their world (Barahona 2014: 30–34).

In this sense, myth is singular, but not in the way proposed by Eliade ([1998] 2012: 53–85), as a primordial narrative that sacralizes time and space, but rather as a repeated story that conceals foundational acts of violence (Girard [1986] 2002a: 35–63). While Eliade (1968: 157–211) emphasizes how archaic societies seek vital meaning in myth, and how literature has taken the place of recited myths over the centuries, Girard, without denying this, hypothesizes deception in the construction of myth. In fact, this notion of a singular myth differs from cultural myth criticism in which myth, as a highly specific type of narrative, is not singular but exists in many forms (Losada 2022: 193–94).

Mimetic theory has made significant contributions to the study of myth and literature (see Girard 1985; Bandera 2013) and has been applied with particular success to film, especially in analyses of Hitchcock (Humbert 2017; see also Bubbio and Fleming 2019). In contrast, its application in video-game studies remains limited. Notable exceptions include Goren's (2018) analysis of *World of Warcraft*. Overall, Girard's perspective remains an underexplored approach within the field of Game Studies.

Mimetic theory can offer valuable tools for the study of ludomythology for three main reasons. First, through the theory of desire, which allows for the analysis of gameplay as a representation of fundamental mimetic tensions and whether a game reproduces or deconstructs mythical structures, as well as the kind of life lessons it offers to the player. Second, it raises awareness of narrative strategies that conceal violence and turn victims into perpetrators. Questioning the vision of reality presented by ludofictional worlds (Navarro-Remesal 2018)

is especially helpful in revealing the social and cultural factors at play in the game's design and in its reception (Planells de la Maza et al. 2023). Third, mimetic theory provides a robust category, the concept of the single myth as a cover for foundational violence, which is useful for detecting narrative and symbolic motifs typically associated with myth in video games.

METHODOLOGY

From a general perspective, these four objectives or stages are inspired by the thinking of René Girard ([1986] 2002a) in his study *The Scapegoat* although the progressive dismantling of the discursive strategies typical of myth can be found throughout many of Girard's works (e.g. 2002b, [1989] 2002c), offering an extensive exploration of the essential features of sacrifice and the narrative elements commonly used to justify these forms of violence (Girard 2002b, 2012): the emergence of a figure whose actions provoke a crisis of undifferentiation generating unrest in the community; the identification of that figure as guilty due to their stereotypical victimary traits that draw hostility; the entire community, acting either unanimously or through a specific individual, eliminates the scapegoat and the consummation of violence pacifies the community, which then discovers the divine origin of the propitiatory victim. Regarding the method, there is a revealing remark by Girard: 'for me, differences of genre are not very important. Literature and anthropological texts are not thus differentiated' (Golsan and Girard 2002: 132). With this, Girard does not overlook the specificity of a text and its pact with the reader, which the analyst must consider, but rather emphasizes what all of them, especially poetic works, have in common.

Although we will generally draw on a narratological perspective to examine the enunciative aspects of the game, this approach is especially important for our first objective in determining who has constructed the myth, and how we assess the truth of the narrative (Girard [1986] 2002a: 40). Thus, we will analyse the game narrator and their point of view, among other enunciative aspects, as proposed in audio-visual storytelling (Gómez Tarín 2015: 45–106) with regard to the game's cutscenes (Cuadrado Alvarado and Planells de la Maza 2013) and in its adaptation to ludonarration (Cuadrado Alvarado and Planells de la Maza 2020: 73–94). Regarding playable moments, we will apply concepts from video-game narrative design (Pérez Latorre 2012; Fernández-Vara 2015). Our second objective also draws on these methodological tools, and we will provide a general outline of the game based on its segments or ludic units, allowing a clear discussion of its various parts.

The third and fourth objectives build on the previous narratological clarifications to provide an analysis closely aligned with mimetic theory, where the aim is to gradually reveal, through deduction and the examination of evidence, both the true identity and intentions of those creating the mythical narrative, and those who occupy the roles of stereotyped victims. For this, in addition to the approaches already mentioned, we will also draw on environmental storytelling and character design (Cuadrado Alvarado and Planells de la Maza 2020: 95–164).

RESULTS

Narrator and point of view of myth

Commentators on *Shadow of the Colossus* rarely pay attention to its narrator and point of view, elements which typically reveal the game's mythic bias.

It is helpful to consider the game's overall structure, shown in Table 1, where a distinction is made between the playable moments or gameplay (G) and the cutscenes (C).

Each of these seven fragments or units can in turn be subdivided further, as with the first fragment shown in Table 2.

The narrator in 1A, like in all the game's cutscenes, appears to follow conventional audio-visual storytelling: an extradiegetic, heterodiegetic and hetero-discursive narrator; that is, a first-degree omniscient narrator. The camera positions generally present the protagonist with a fixed perspective and an external point of view. This narrating entity from 1A is repositioned in 1B: 1A, 1C and the subsequent segments form a secondary narrative told by someone from within the true primary narrative, which is only present in 1B.

1B is a single shot with a slow zoom-in. In the foreground, a masked face reminiscent of a religious figure explains cosmic aspects of the place seen at the end of 1A. In the middle ground, the smoke surrounding the figure and the sound of crackling fire evoke a night-time gathering around a campfire. The background partially displays fragments of the game's map. The character, in the foreground, dominates the narrative around the fire, the middle ground, which refers to events that took place in a forbidden land, the background. The shamanic character gives his doctrine on the nature of the forbidden land: 'That place began from the resonance of intersecting points. They are memories replaced by ens and naught and etched into stone. Blood, young sprouts, sky, and the one with the ability to control beings created from light' (Team ICO 2005). He also condemns forbidden possibilities: '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' (Team ICO 2005). The structure and audio-visual traits of 1A–C indicate that the character speaking in 1B shapes what the player sees and hears in 1A–C.

The cutscenes in the third and fifth fragments reposition the narrator for the second time, as they show Lord Emon, a masked figure as in 1B, accompanied by five warriors, also wearing masks. These same cutscenes also refine

Table 1: Fragments or ludonarrative units of Shadow of the Colossus.

1	The protagonist arrives at the temple with the maiden and accepts the mission (C)
2	Combat against twelve colossi (G/C)
3	The persecutors are on their way to the temple (C)
4	Combat against four colossi (G/C)
5	The persecutors arrive and kill the protagonist in the temple (C)
6	Protagonist-colossus fight the persecutors (G)
7	Death of the protagonist and revival of the maiden (C)

Source: Provided by the author.

Table 2: Cutscenes from the beginning of Shadow of the Colossus.

1A	The protagonist crosses vast stretches of terrain to reach the temple altar
1B	The masked figure explains what the place is
1C	Conversation between Dormin and the protagonist, and the acceptance of the challenge

Source: Provided by the author.

Table 3: Cutscenes from the end of Shadow of the Colossus.

7A	Lord Emon and the pursuers leave the temple after the colossus is defeated
7B	The maiden is brought back to life, and the injured Agro finds her
7C	Final credits: scenes with the defeated colossi
7D	Lord Emon and the pursuers flee, and he makes a final accusation
7E	The maiden and Agro retrieve the horned baby from the vortex and move to the top of the temple

Source: Provided by the author.

Lord Emon's social role, most likely a priest of some rank in a hypothetical hierarchy. If Lord Emon is the character in 1B, then he is a *homodiegetic* narrator, a witness narrator of the second narrative –everything in the game except 1B. If this is not Lord Emon, that would only reinforce our hypothesis: his lineage has passed down this myth with the same authority and effectiveness as the ancestor who originally told it.

Lord Emon appears as a character in the third, fifth, sixth and partially in the seventh fragments. Is there a second narrator at the second level? It seems not: 1B makes it clear that the narrative comes from the masked figure. So, how can Lord Emon and/or the narrator in 1B know everything that happened in the second and fourth fragments? He does not know it directly but through logical deductions based on his socio-religious knowledge – according to what the game shows: he knew of the existence of the idols and their respective colossi/containers of the sixteenth parts of Dormin's soul. It is also logical that he would know the mechanism of confinement and release for each of these partitions of Dormin, as well as many other things that are not shown. He could deduce the essentials of the player's past actions when he observes the destruction of the sixteenth idol and the appearance of its emaciated destroyer. Similarly, Lord Emon could deduce the parts of the seventh fragment in which he was not present, that is, in 7B–C and 7E (see Table 3).

The austerity of Ueda's subtracting design of the game supports our hypothesis: the sparse and schematic nature of the cutscenes and gameplay makes the myth feel true. The protagonist's motivational and intellectual opacity, or external focalization, seems to correspond to this informational gap in Lord Emon's myth. By contrast, when the narrative shifts focus to Lord Emon, the internal focalization explicitly and unambiguously reveals some aspects of his inner life.

Clearly, we are dealing with a narrative, second level, imbued with the subjectivity of the protagonist's pursuers; they are the ones who have composed it and pronounced it persuasively in a context – 1B, first level – that is particularly suited for a vital, religious reception. The question is: what does this narrative teach us? This points towards the discursive position suggested by the design of this playable myth.

When the persecutors create the myth: accusation and legitimization of violence

In 1B, the mask positioned in front of the player evokes the priests and suggests their gaze, a possible metalepsis that establishes a direct appeal to someone present, another member 'of the tribe'. The myth and its representation carry a persuasive rhetoric.

This is the question that textual analysis has answered most fully and effectively, an analysis we accept as a valid explanation of the persecutors' version. The central idea is that *Shadow of the Colossus* unfolds and ends tragically due to the protagonist's destructive and immoral actions, despite his noble intention of resurrecting the maiden. The outcome of each confrontation with the colossi suggests that by destroying the titan, the PC also 'dies'. If we consider the stages of each level's ludic script, as proposed by Pérez Latorre (2012: 280) or Gibbons (2014: 130), textual analysis shows that each stage includes design elements with accusatory aspects (Fortugno 2009), qualities of a *feel-bad game* (Fortugno 2009; Cole 2015) or other similar betrayals/transgressions (Cole 2015; Cesar 2020). Each level schematically reiterates the same reproachful ideas introduced in the cinematic narrative of 1A–C and culminates in the final section of the game.

The contributions of textual analysis should go beyond a mere explanation of the narrative art of mythical *feel-bad games*. They should show how this playful accusation holds essential meaning for understanding the game's idiosyncrasies. Turning to the explicit accusations made by Lord Emon:

> 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. […] To be reduced to such a sight. […] You were only being used.
>
> (Team ICO 2005)

The accusation haunts the protagonist even after the final death:

> Poor ungodly soul. […] Now, no man shall ever trespass upon this place again. Should you be alive. […] If it's even possible to continue to exist in these sealed lands […] one day, perhaps you will make atonement for what you've done.
>
> (Team ICO 2005)

The *unicursal* narrative design of the game revolves around a very simple idea: the PC is like a plague – a stereotypical expression commonly found in stories constructed by pursuers (Girard [1986] 2002a: 21–34). The core mechanics of 'grabbing' and 'driving the sword in' serve as an image of how a disease spreads and destroys whatever it touches. Resurrecting the maiden does not seem to justify sixteen murders, followed by the opening of the gates of hell, which appears to endanger all of society. The PC is a threat to the community, and thus, according to the myth, must die for the good of all, as Lord Emon declares with 'mercy and pity': 'Eradicate the source of the evil […]. It is better to put him out of his misery than to exist, cursed as he is' (Cesar 2020: 121). The underlying logic is the same as in the justification of the maiden's sacrifice – one of the archetypal victims par excellence: 'She was sacrificed for she has a cursed fate' (Team ICO 2005). The myth wants us to accept that both deaths are necessary.

The question is evident: who was truly affected by that 'cursed fate': the maiden herself or her community through her? Moreover, is that 'cursed fate' even believable? Commentators do not question this central issue, which directly impacts the game's true world-view, but the identification of the narrator and the point of view require it. It is important to note not only the game's emotional strategies and the evaluative position to which they lead the player but also of what they disguise or even what they conceal.

Reconstructing the sacrificers

The myth conceals what really happened, but it is unable to hide it completely, or rather the persecutors and their societies never fully manage to hide themselves within it (Bandera 2013). Mimetic theory points to the task of reconstruction and to certain traits that are common within these myths and among their makers. Three of these are: apparent passivity or reactivity in the face of transgression, unanimity and institutionalized sacrificial mechanisms (Girard [1986] 2002a: 7–63, 2021: 13–148).

The attitude of Lord Emon and his five warriors is easily plausible: it mimics a spontaneous response. Their behaviour gives them away, as does the design of the colossi and the environments, all informed by the same sacrificial programme: the world is designed so that its prohibitions will be broken. Many details in the game speak to this trap for victims, in both what is told and what is left untold. An example of what is conveniently omitted: how is it possible for a single boy to steal both the sacred sword and the lifeless body of the recently sacrificed maiden, despite all the presumed security measures? There is only one convincing explanation for this: the crime is tacitly permitted and perhaps even suggested. Even in what the myth *does* tell, the truth emerges, albeit unintentionally: consider the arrival of the persecutors, who do not enter the scene until very late, after the defeat of the twelfth colossus, and who are conveniently positioned far from the temple, far enough to reach the forbidden lands only when the scapegoat is soaked in sins that legitimize his destruction; that is, when he himself has become evil incarnate.

The actions of the PC break the unanimity exemplified by the symmetrical arrangement of the sixteen idols in the temple, set eight against eight. The design of the colossi to which the idols refer, intended to heighten the player's sense of guilt, ultimately fails to convincingly simulate the life they attempt to mimic through their fusion of architectural structures and biological tissue. Their visual and dynamic camouflage does not hide the fact that they are containers of the darkness the myth seeks to conceal, yet simultaneously allows to be seen. Their behaviour is ambiguous: they protect their weak points while also facilitating access to them. This readiness for defeat is typical of victims, who accept this role with a docility similar to that suggested by the character of the maiden. The morphology of the colossi often evokes stereotypical victims, such as the bull or the image of evil, like the sea serpent. Consistently, the habitat of each colossus – the *mediated space* – is usually a circular structure, a common expression of the *all-against-one* dynamic, of a mimetically gathered crowd encircling the victim, like the shadows that converge around the protagonist or the dark tentacles that pursue him. The colossus's environment is a sacrificial altar and operates according to the rules of sacrifice – the *rule-based space*.

The unanimity of the persecutors also reveals their sacrificial disposition. When they are seen alongside Lord Emon for the first time, they are wearing masks, devices of unanimity, just like their leader. For a rider in haste, such attire can only mean that this hunt is part of a perfectly institutionalized religious ritual. Their behaviour aligns with a well-known rite that unfolds in four movements, the same which the player repeats in each battle (each segment of the game's script): (1) the appearance of the colossus, (2) inspection of its body, use of bow and arrows and activation of the strategy to reach it, (3) traversal of its body and search for its weak points, marked by wounds or symbols, (4) stabbing those weak points with the sword, leading to death.

This same ritual, although shortened, describes – and also disguises – the lynching of the young man at the hands of the warriors, as well as their confrontation with the reincarnated Dormin: arrows wound, but the sword kills. The kinship between the ritual gestures of the one and the others leads us to consider the closeness of the PC to this religious caste, and what it means that all have so deeply internalized the method of executing sacrifice.

Reconstructing the hero

Shadow of the Colossus introduces the player to a mode of thinking that is typically mythical and mimetic: a single person – or in archaic myths, even a group – throws the social system into crisis. This surprising circumstance, more so because the implicit designer does not conceal the many weaknesses of the PC, facilitates the reconstruction of the protagonist's true identity, although it is the words spoken by Lord Emon that point us in the right direction: 'I don't believe this. […] So it was you after all'. With these words, '*it was you*', we will examine both the outer and inner design of the character.

Regarding the exterior, analyses of the game rarely take note of the striking resemblance between Lord Emon's flowing priestly robes and the more abbreviated version worn by the protagonist, like a small chasuble. Nor has it been noted that the symbol displayed on the chest and back of these garments closely resembles those found on the weak points of the colossi. It is no coincidence that, when the soldier pierces the emaciated young man with his sword, he drives it precisely through this symbol on the chasuble.

Two aspects stand out in the inner design of the character. First, his knowledge of religious matters, one of the few traits that can be confidently attributed to him. Lord Emon's accusations could only apply to an initiate who has strayed from the path. Second, despite the characteristic informational gaps of Ueda's style, the PC shows an awareness of the transformative arc he is experiencing, as if he had already envisioned it and now need only to follow it through. With this, we reach the point towards which our entire interpretation is heading.

Faced with the interpretive challenge posed by *Shadow of the Colossus*, we accept as the most convincing possibility: (1) that, based on the signs surrounding him, the protagonist is actively involved in the cultic system of his society, wither as part of a priestly lineage or as a member of the group from which scapegoats, like the maiden on the altar, are drawn; in ancient myths, the roles of sacrificer and sacrificed are often interchangeable (Girard [1986] 2002a); (2) that, due to a recent awakening of moral consciousness or a long-considered decision, the protagonist adopts a theologically dissenting stance against the sacrificial system of his community and (3) that he is willing to become utterly evil in the eyes of his people and take on the guilt of all in order to, through his voluntary sacrifice, abolish this inhumane sacrificial system that claims innocent victims. In the final minutes of gameplay, the player takes control in the worst possible way, control that becomes both a synthesis of all previous deaths and the climax of a path of love.

Contrary to what some have suggested about the functioning of the game's universe (e.g. Cesar 2020: 113), the maiden's resurrection serves as definitive proof that the 'cursed fate' does not stem from the metaphysical structures of reality but rather from the socio-cultural needs of her society. This is why access to the forbidden land collapses, and Lord Emon delivers a final accusation. The purpose of the myth is to separate the community from

the truth that resides in that place which must not be visited: 'this place at the end of the world' (Team ICO 2005). Otherwise, the fragmentation of Dormin's soul into sixteen pieces makes no sense. Why not eliminate evil at its root, as Lord Emon does when he shoots the sword into the vortex that absorbs and destroys both Dormin and the protagonist or rather the deified protagonist? To guarantee cultural order. The community needs to have 'evil' confined to a place that is inaccessible except to the priestly caste. Only in this way can social unrest be managed, and the 'sacred' manipulated at will. As Poythress rightly notes in his commentary on the *Book of Revelation* (Poythress 2000), human groups ultimately end up worshiping what they fear. Why else would all the idols be placed, symmetrically, inside a temple, and each colossus within a kind of temple-altar?

The theological dissent of the protagonist suggests a structure of reality that differs from the one upheld by the mythical sacrificers. Thus, although his feat may have as its immediate beneficiary in the deceased maiden, possibly his beloved (Pérez Latorre 2012: 248–93), it in fact has a universal reach. Both things can happen simultaneously, and it makes perfect sense that they do, since love for humanity is hardly sustainable in the abstract.

The protagonist's probable rebirth in the form of a horned newborn would confirm his heroic journey as such: his generative sacrifice bears fruit marked by the sign of love, the horns, despicable in the eyes of the myth, just like Agro's limp, is a sign of the scapegoat from even before the time of Oedipus.

Myth criticism (Albarrán Ligero 2021) also establishes a messianic identification in the case of the PC, suggesting that he serves as a mediator between God, Dormin and humanity. However, this does not spare him from the ambiguity of achieving something admirable by nefarious means. The difference from the analysis presented here is fundamental: we do not recognize that the protagonist performs morally negative actions, nor that he bridges opposites. Rather, he sacrifices himself to forge a new mode of existence, for the maiden and for all who choose to embrace it, one that stands apart from the mythical project of his origins. The eternal return typical of mythical thought (Eliade [1984] 1985) which, as has been noted (Pérez Latorre 2012: 286), is suggested by the protagonist's repeated return to the sanctuary after each colossus is defeated, is a powerful expression of precisely what he struggles against and ultimately overcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

At the outset of this research, we set as our first objective the task of identifying the narrator of the myth and the point of view of the playable narrative. The most plausible answer we have found is that Lord Emon, and those who continue in his role are the authors of the myth. The persecutors tell a story that aligns well with their intentions: to effectively accuse a scapegoat – the protagonist – and thus legitimize his sacrifice. This addresses our second objective and leads us to the third and fourth objectives which consist, respectively, in reconstructing the social world and profiling both the persecutors and the protagonist-victim.

The former are agents deeply invested in upholding the scapegoating mechanisms of their sacrificial society: victims are deemed necessary to preserve the order and balance that governs the world. The young rider of Agro, for his part, plays a highly unusual role – though one with precedents

in the stories told by victims themselves. His theological dissent denies the cosmic efficacy of his society's sacrificial system, and he is willing to assume everything his contemporaries despise, becoming himself the embodiment of 'evil' in order to be sacrificed and thereby save the innocent victims, beginning with the maiden on the altar.

We believe that our hypothesis regarding the salvific effects of the PC's actions is sufficiently justified, and by virtue of this, it is possible to affirm that *Shadow of the Colossus* does not merely imitate a specific myth or universal narrative – such as the descent into the underworld, or the myth of Sisyphus, for instance – but rather imitates myths as such, what they all share when they portray the persecution of a sacrificial victim.

To avoid drawing hasty conclusions, from the outset we have deliberately refrained from referring to two games closely connected to the one under discussion: *Ico* (Team ICO 2001) and *The Last Guardian* (SIE Japan Studio and genDESIGN 2016). This apparent limitation of the study becomes a strength, since the hermeneutic key of sacrifice in *Shadow of the Colossus* not only presents itself as a gateway to understanding these two other titles by Ueda, but may also be one of the central mythological motifs explaining both the connection between the three games and a possible unified poetic meaning towards which this ludic saga points. A proper understanding of *Shadow of the Colossus* conveys a certain pessimism that pervades this fictional world: despite the dedication of the young theological dissident, the persecutors of future centuries – and their sacrificial systems – have not disappeared, nor has their fixation on especially young victims.

The study of these three games, both individually and represents a first opportunity to apply the perspective we propose and extending this type of analysis to games showing more classical mimetic traits would also be fruitful. Consider the accusation levelled against the PC, of destabilizing the social order. Is it possible that video-game avatars who perform these 'feats' are something more, and perhaps something other, than mere representations of power fantasies? Could they also be understood as scapegoats? A third group of works that could be examined through the lens of mimetic theory includes those that depict or prevent human sacrifice, or that portray social breakdowns similar to plagues or other forms of undifferentiation, for example, *The Last of Us* series (Naughty Dog 2013–20), *A Plague Tale* series (Asobo Studio 2019–22), *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) and others.

The advantage of the methodological perspective we propose lies in its ability to integrate textual analysis and myth criticism into a more comprehensive and far-reaching explanation. Furthermore, the lens of sacrifice raises several important questions within the study of ludomythologies – among them, we highlight the question of immanent myths and whether they conceal mechanisms of injustice, perhaps because they assume a skewed structure of the world, or perhaps because they persuade us that for the greater good, some 'sacrifices' must be made. Our research, along with that of Goren (2018), is the first to explore the potential of mimetic theory in the narrative analysis of video games. This is an important step, among other reasons, because it shows that in great video games, just as in great literature or cinema, we also find keen observers of human behaviour, such as Fumito Ueda in *Shadow of the Colossus*. In this sense, this article offers arguments for considering the best ludonarratives as in the same cultural register as great novels and films, helping to reveal the role of mimesis in human life.

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This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines. No approvals or subject consent were required.

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