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**Edmund Burke and Shadow of the Colossus:
Manufacturing the Sublime Experience in Virtual Reality**

The sublime experience depends upon a delicate balance of components. In such moments where mankind is confronted with the absolute vastness of the natural world, we are inflicted with emotions such as terror, delight, and pain only to realize that their effects hinge upon the subjective experience of each individual. There is no general consensus to the formulaic creation of the feeling of the sublime. Edmund Burke uses his essay, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) to analyze these fluctuating ideas which creates this very complex feeling. Beginning with pain and pleasure, the two feelings that rouse humans from their typical state of indifference, Burke explains how, through a twisting and complex whirl of sensations, we can either arrive at the sublime or be deviated into less elusive states of feeling. True sublime experiences belong to the natural world, however, man has continued to use these components to create artificial, more accessible experiences of the sublime in order to keep humans continually exposed to a state of shock and awe.

Shadow of the Colossus (2005) is a minimalistic video game that helped propel the movement of video games-as-art where players are invited to experience a virtual reality based upon the sublime.

Written in 1797, Burke's essay remains accessible through its rather introductory language. Readers, who perhaps have no previous background in the subject of the sublime or philosophy, are able to enter the reading with ease. The unorthodox structure of Burke's essay moves almost sporadically between his talking points, and his writing carries the sensation of a conversation when he addresses the role of each component in his analysis of the sublime experience. While some of Burke's observations can be considered elementary, his philosophical approach to the sublime is unique for he focuses on the internal effects of the sublime rather than using nature as the model of his analysis. Later philosophers such as Immanuel Kant would go on to refine Burke's ideas to have more psychological ground. However, Burke's interests in applying external laws found in nature to the internal laws that govern the human psyche provides valuable insight despite critical skepticism.

Burke starts by addressing the passions of pain and pleasure—two fundamental feelings in the human experience for their physical, mental, and emotional influence. No two people feel pain and pleasure the same way at the same level by the same cause. They belong to individual experiences. However, we do know when we are feeling pain and we know when we feel pleasure. Burke writes that in order to reach either of these states, one must be moved past the state of indifference. However, pain and pleasure are inaccessible to each other—the removal of pleasure does not equal pain and in vice versa because they function independently of one another. For example, just because your tooth

stops hurting does not mean that you subsequently experience pleasure. Instead, when pain is removed, Burke calls this sensation delight. “I make use of the word Delight to express the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger...” (Burke. Pg. 34). After the intense experience of either feeling, we eventually return to a state of complete indifference. If the sensation of pain or pleasure is so overwhelming, “the mind naturally continues in something like the same condition, after the cause which first produced it has ceased to operate.” (Burke. Pg. 32). This explanation is relevant to post-traumatic syndrome, happy memories, anything that induces shock.

In Burke’s argument for the pleasure, he states that any level of pleasure is positive for pleasure is always willing and self-inflicted. To foster pleasure and happiness leads to the acknowledgement of eventual loss knowing that the cause of the pleasure must end leading to disappointment and grief. These emotions that stem from pleasure carry remnants of that happiness, such as through reminiscing, therefore it is not comparable to absolute pain.

On the other hand, pain and danger are essential for the reinforcement of our individual self-preservation. The threat of physical harm, short lives, disabilities, and bodily weaknesses inflict us with the idea of horror and become the strongest passions in the human psyche. Terror reminds warns us that pain will follow, to take caution, to be weary of our own limitations and powerlessness.

Reaching an explanation of the sublime, Burke states, “the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is the state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with

some degree of horror. In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.

Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.” (Pg. 53). The sublime creates the feelings of astonishment and awe, ignites horror, and summons a great stillness in which our awareness of our presence of such a power dominates our senses. “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in the any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” (pg. 36)

Burke argues that pain is far more potent in its effects than pleasure because of its association to death. Most would prefer the idea of death compared to undergoing any sort of extreme pain—pain not having any sort of relation to grief—that simply results in the terrible experience. Despite the looming sensation of horror and pain in the face of the sublime, this is a feeling that mankind continues to make more common and easily accessible.

Perhaps it is because imitation stems directly from our passions and it causes a pleasurable feeling when we are able to use imitation to sympathize with others—it is in our nature to be concerned with those around us. Burke says: “when the object represented in poetry or painting is such, as we could have no desire of seeing in the reality; then I may be sure that its power in poetry or painting is owing to the power of imitation, and to no cause operating in the thing itself.” (Pg. 45). We use manufactured experiences imitating the sublime in order to generate the same feeling without the

consequences of potentially being in harm's way or endangering ourselves. An example of this is found in today's entertainment where movies, theme parks, and immersive environments attempt to generate the intensity of the sublime for the everyday public. These are experiences that employ Burke's components of the sublime that continue to seek ways to bring us to that brink of feeling overwhelmed and powerless in an controlled and accessible environment.

The entertainment industry is tasked with keeping audiences suspended in disbelief and awe, to bring reproductions of the sublime to us in the theaters and in our own homes. *Shadow of the Colossus*, the adventure video game by Sony Entertainment and Team Ico, is such an example of imitating the natural sublime. The game was designed as a minimalist adventure through subtractive design that instead of expanding the interactive features seen today in most video games, streamlined the content and the plot to focus solely on the premise of the game. Players assume the role of the protagonist, a young man named Wander, who travels to a forbidden world to find a way to bring his lover back to life. In order to do so, he is tasked by an unseen power called Dormin with defeating sixteen Colossi hidden throughout the land. Other than the ominous garbled voice of Dormin giving riddled instructions and the sparse unintelligible conversation of a few characters towards the end, the game is spent mostly without dialogue. There are no towns, no character modifications, or side quests. The entire game is of Wander and his horse, Argo, traveling across a massive world going from boss-fight to boss-fight with nothing but a sword and bow. Seven sections of Burke's essay will be

used to analyze *Shadow of the Colossus* beginning with the passions created by the sublime, scale, privation, obscurity, sound, power, and terror.

Shadow of the Colossus uses the largest source of tension available in any video game, which is the anxiety and terror leading up to a boss battle, and making it entire game revolve around that sensation. Players realize that in order to make progress, they have no choice but to confront the massive Colossi that lie hiding in tucked away corners of an even larger world. As such with all video games, players also understand that each battle will be even more difficult and each Colossus more complex than the previous. Likewise, players feel a very measurable sense of accomplishment or even pleasure after solving the puzzle to defeat each Colossus. This way they are able to see exactly how much further until the game's completion. The victories imitate Burke's idea of passion and ignites a drive to conquer further bosses to re-experience the feelings. This leaves players in a state of suspension where they can either continue on to face the Colossi, or not and would not be able to do anything more with the game, making it unplayable.

While in the natural sublime the realization of no escape invokes the feeling of powerlessness, *Shadow of the Colossus* operates within the idea that players who are committed to finishing the game will undergo an artificial and mediated version of the sublime. The game's creators, Team Ico, then dispatch an great myriad of tools to envelop players in this experience. The most obvious component used is scale.

Burke examines the infinity in pleasing objects. He says that it has the ability to fill us with "delightful" horror that our senses are not able to encompass the entire object. "But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be

infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. We are deceived in the like manner, if the parts of some large object are so continued to any indefinite number, that the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them in pleasure.” (Burke. Pg. 67). The game creators understand this effect on the mind and use their own methods of deception to mimic those trigger objects. The fictional setting of the game operates completely on an open-world model, meaning that whatever location appears on screen, anywhere, is accessible to the player. Should a mountain sit somewhere in the distance, a player is able to travel there with time and patience with only the aid of Argo. Meanwhile, new terrains will appear along the horizon line to invoke the feeling of continually moving through a vast world. Granted there are actual boundaries, it is no easy task for the player to traverse back and forth across the map; getting from location to location becomes a major factor as game-time is split between battling the Colossi and actually finding them.

Another interesting component to Burke’s discussion of scale is how he perceives vastness. While there are no towns in *Shadow of the Colossus*, there is one temple ruin called the Shrine of Worship that serves as a sort of home base. It is here that the body of Wander’s lover lies upon the alter, and where Dormin resides to give clues to finding the next Colossus. Like anything else in the game, it is possible to climb the exterior. However, when standing at the foot of the structure, players are unable to see the top of the temple, uncertain how tall it actually is unless positioned far out into the surrounding plains. Most players are unable to accumulate the grip strength, (the one level-up component to Wander’s character) to hang on long enough to even get close to the top.

Reaching the summit of the Shrine of Worship remained a large myth within the gaming community and seems impossible without hacking the game. Internet forums spawned many conversations debating about how to reach the top, if there was extra game content hidden and waiting for one player who completed the deed, or if it would be possible to locate all the Colossi at once from such a high vantage point. The awe of the height of the temple relates to Burke's paragraph where he states that extension creates the most striking effect: "extension is either in length, height, or depth. Of these the length strikes least; an hundred yards of even ground will never work such an effect as a tower an hundred yards high, or a rock or mountain of that altitude."

Privation contributes a large role in the feeling of playing the game. "All general privations are great, because they are terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence." (Burke. Pg. 65). What invokes a feeling a terror as a player is the realization that you can only play alone to create a very individual game experience. Video games typically emphasize an illusion of social interaction, whether it be with non-playable computer characters or online with real people on the other side of the screen. *Shadow of the Colossus* takes this common feature and completely reverses the effect—it emphasizes that there is nearly no one to communicate with or to seek help. Wander is stuck in this empty world populated only by giant monsters. Many players have expressed the great attachment they feel towards Argo, for Wander's horse is the only other companion and ally to engage with. Sparse birds and lizards make an appearance at times, but serve hardly any purpose. Players realize they are completely in solitude in the world, with nothing to do except face the Colossi.

The obscurity and mystery surrounding the Colossi themselves is a huge contribution to the tension of the game to recreate a natural sublime. Each Colossus appears to have based off of some sort of mythological animal or humanoid to add to its enigmatic presence. Combined with stone or vegetation, the beasts seem to rise out of the land when players finally stumble upon them. The location of each Colossus is unknown with clues provided only by Dormin's few lines of riddle and the strength of the light reflecting off of Wander's sword. Players can hold the weapon up to the sun where the general direction of the boss is revealed by a trail of light. Otherwise players are left to search for the Colossi across the world knowing that they are only heading in the correct direction to find a massive monster at the other end. In the Shrine of Worship stands large statues depicting a stylized version of the next Colossus. It is possible to examine these statues, but since they are all the same height, the actual size and most of the true appearance of the Colossus is unknown. Between the hints and actual travel to the location, players are left to imagine what kind of boss-fight they are walking into. "When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes...who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds, which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings." (Burke. Pg. 54).

Sound does much for the atmosphere of the game. While traveling on horseback, all the audio stems from a natural perspective. Players hear the whistling of wind over the desolate landscape, the galloping and panting of Argo, and Wander's yells urging the

horse onwards. Some locations such as forests trigger minimal chiming melodies, but only the boss-fights will activate a dramatic musical score. When a Colossus finally topples to the ground in defeat, a low lamenting choir sings in the background as if to convey the sadness of its death. Other than sight, sound is the only other true sense that players have to interact with in a virtual experience. Therefore this becomes crucial when attempting to mimic the sublime. (Burke. Pg. 126).

The powerlessness and terror contribute largely to the presentation and design of the Colossi. Most are countless times larger than Wander, and completely earn their titles. They lumber across their own designated territories as gentle, yet menacing giants and as a part of the landscape themselves. They will not interact with players unless engaged by Wander's weaponry. Because there is no initial computer reaction by the Colossi, players can decide when the fight will begin. The moment leading up to a boss-battle allows players the opportunity to simply take in as much of the Colossus as possible. The camera angles can very rarely display the entirety of the beast at one time unless Wander is standing at the edge of the designated territory. Players must question how they can hope to take down such a massive creature with no special abilities and no directions. There is a moment of powerlessness where the player can only marvel at the enormity of the Colossus who won't even regard Wander with any attention until prompted, insinuating that it does not register the player's tiny character as a threat.

The most critical instance in which all tension of the game occurs is when Wander's first arrow makes contact with the Colossus. It is here when the giant beast will stop, slowing turn about, and its wide eyes normally the color of a docile blue will

shift to a glowing red as it fixates upon Wander. The player then realizes that with a flash of terror that they have incurred the wrath of a creature of immense power.

Burke states the sublime is produced when terror creates an unnatural tension and causes “certain violent emotions of the nerves.” He says that whatever causes this kind of tension must be a passion like terror and therefore an origin for a feeling of the sublime, although “it should have no idea of the danger connected to it” (Burke. Pg. 121). The very premise of the video games is to allow for an interactive and artificial experience in which we can invoke emotions within ourselves without true consequences. We can easily slip in and out of the manufactured reality with no potential to actually feel physical pain. The possibility of pain is a huge part of the natural sublime. In the face of a mountain or on the shores of the ocean, we as humans recognize our powerlessness and know that should nature chose, we will be instantly obliterated. Burke argues that the sublime is a combination of negative feelings such as pain and terror while beauty uses the positive like feelings of pleasure. (Burke. Pg. 119). Truly, video game experiences lie in the strange limbo space between the two. We play games in order to create feelings, but the falseness of the game ultimately triumphs, and renders the experience as a sad replica of the true sublime.

Despite this fact, it seems important to examine what *Shadow of the Colossus* has done for the entertainment industry. In a time where players are overwhelmed with even larger world locations, infinite custom items and character designs, unlimited access to other players around the globe, this game is still called one of the best ever. It was awarded Game of the Decade by the National Academy of Video Game Trade Reviewers

in 2011 (navgtr.org/decade). It also received awards from Imagine Games Network for Best Adventure Game and Best Artistic Game in 2005 when it was released among many others. (ign.com). In an age when we're so consumed with these virtual experiences with more and more player independence, why would such a game with an extremely direct objective and design be considered so revolutionary and highly regarded? Is it perhaps that players do find a small inkling of both delight and terror of having no escape from the game's daunting premise and yet also enjoy the experience all the same? Maybe we would like to imagine what it would be like for us to go against such awe-inspiring natural obstacles where we could be completely annihilated.

The developers at Team Ico opened up a new territory for virtual reality and the popularity of the *Shadow of the Colossus* reveals that humans still crave some sort of encounter with the sublime. While a video game cannot replicate the entirety of the sublime, the genre will undoubtedly explore new ways and to mimic its components of in order to give players their demanded and a memorable and emotional experience.

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