

SHAPING HYRULE: FAN AND GAME DEVELOPER CO-PRODUCTION OF NARRATIVE AND WORLD IN THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

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Abstract

This paper explores how the *The Legend of Zelda* franchise lends itself to the creation of a master timeline through the use of repeated elements in both gameplay and storyline. Using Otsuka Eiji's "World and Variation", I demonstrate how Nintendo's design philosophy of "game play before story line" creates a formula, or a *Zelda* "world" from which the game developers make the "variations" that become each unique game in the series.

I situate this process of narrative creation within the dynamic of co-production between fans and game developers. For decades, "timeline theorists" have combined and rearranged the *Zelda* games into coherent, chronological master narratives, debating on the logical and narratological strength of each with another. In 2011, Nintendo released their own version of the *Zelda* timeline, hoping to assuage their fans' demands for "canon" answers, but *Legend of Zelda* fan community was vocal in their disappointment towards Nintendo's "official" timeline, pointing out inconsistencies throughout its narrative. I attempt to reconcile these inconsistencies through Jan-Nöel Thon's concept of storyworld, emphasizing the imaginability and plausibility of storyworlds despite the contradictions that exist within them. In this sense world-building and franchise-building go hand-in-hand in *The Legend of Zelda*, and navigate the collective agency of fans within these processes.

In 2011, Nintendo and Dark Horse Books released *Hyrule Historia*: a fully colored, 250-page compendium meant to be a treasure trove of information and lore for fans of one of Nintendo's most successful franchises, *The Legend of Zelda*. It was created in conjunction with the franchise's 25th anniversary, commemorating the giant impact *Zelda* had made in the game industry through its memorable characters, engaging puzzle design, and immersive fictional world. The book contains almost all the original artwork for the series' main games, concept art and production commentary for the newly released *Skyward Sword*, and an official chronology of the games' stories, combining and arranging the narratives of eleven *Zelda* games into one master timeline. This timeline, like many fan-made versions, is far from straightforward; it splits into different branches, a consequence of the time travel performed by the player in *Ocarina of Time*.

The latter section is what interested fans most, especially those who engaged with the community through fan theorizing. *Hyrule Historia* was not the first time someone had attempted to weave the games together into one coherent narrative. The fans had been doing it for years; a quick Google search will prove that their efforts are well documented over various fan sites and forums. That the game developers finally released an official chronology of events supposedly meant that fans could lay down their theories and rest—except they could not. *Hyrule Historia* and its version of the timeline sparked backlash from the fan theorist community; in a Rolling Stone article, Winkie calls it “a mess, and that's *before* you factor in the lazy canonical implementation of minor titles... which seem almost deliberately out of place”.¹

In the final pages of *Hyrule Historia*, series producer Aonuma Eiji gives a disclaimer excusing the inconsistencies of the official timeline:

“The History of Hyrule” allows players to determine where each *Zelda* game is positioned in the chronology of the series. One thing to bear in mind, however, is that the question the developers of the *Legend of Zelda* series asked themselves before

1 Winkie, “The Obsessive World of ‘Zelda’ Timeline Fanatics.”

starting on a game was, “What kind of game play should we focus on?” rather than “What kind of story should we write?” ...Because the games were developed in such a manner, it could be said that *Zelda’s* story lines were afterthoughts... It is my hope that the fans will be broad minded enough to take into consideration that this is simply how *Zelda* is made.²

If Nintendo intends for *Zelda* players to focus on game play rather than story line, why is there an entire subgroup of fans dedicated to building and debating upon the *Zelda* timeline? This paper posits that *Zelda’s* use of repeated elements in both game play and story line naturally lends the franchise to the creation of a greater narrative that ties everything together, “an expansive mythological chronicle”, to borrow Otsuka Eiji’s words.³ Using his theory in “World and Variation”, I analyze *The Legend of Zelda* series as a whole, demonstrating how Nintendo’s design philosophy of “game play before story line” creates a formula, or *Zelda* “world,” from which the game developers make “variations” that become each unique game in the series. Furthermore, I explain how each game builds upon its predecessors to ultimately create its “grand narrative”.

In “World and Variation,” Otsuka Eiji analyzes “narrative consumption” in audiences for long form media franchises such as comics, TV shows, and video games. He explains the Japanese animation concept of “worldview,” or “grand narrative,” which is the amalgamation of “countless detailed ‘settings’ prepared yet not directly represented” in a franchise’s official releases (single comic book issues, TV episodes, or game titles).⁴ The sale of these isolated commodities is tied to “the consumer’s awareness of this grand narrative”;⁵ fans of the series, aware of and wanting to experience the fictional world represented in the franchise—its worldview— “[use] the information outside that found in the drama of each individual episode as a clue...[to try to] dig out the worldview

2 Aonuma, “Wrapping Things Up,” 238-239.

3 Ōtsuka, “World and Variation,” 106.

4 Ōtsuka, “World and Variation,” 107.

5 Ōtsuka, “World and Variation,” 107.

hidden in the background”.⁶ This is essentially what *Zelda* timeline theorists do; using narrative elements and imagery found within each separate title, fans are able to make connections between games, constructing the history that constitutes the “worldview” of *Zelda’s* fantasy setting, the kingdom of Hyrule. Jenkins’ concept of “embedded narratives” also plays a part in explaining the enjoyment taken from comprehending worldview: “Narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypothesis about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues... In games, players are forced to act upon those mental maps, to literally test them against the game world itself”.⁷ This happens in a much wider scale in the *Zelda* games, where clues are dropped throughout multiple game titles. An example to illustrate this process is fan analysis of the Rito tribe and its evolution within the series.

The Rito are a race of bird-people first introduced in *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*. In *Wind Waker*, they sport beaks instead of noses and are given wings by their patron spirit, the dragon Valoo. A Rito girl named Medli is a major supporting character in the game; she helps the player obtain a magical gem known as Din’s Pearl, and later becomes the Sage of Earth. In her journey towards realizing her destiny as a sage, Medli meets with the ghost of her “predecessor”. The predecessor, as she is called in *Hyrule Historia*, is a Zora woman named Laruto.⁸ The water-dwelling Zora had been another recurring race in the *Zelda* series, first appearing as monsters in the original 1986 *Zelda* and becoming benevolent in preceding games. The spiritual connection between Medli and Laruto led fans to believe the two are related by blood, despite their drastic differences in appearance. Other visual cues point to a connection between the Rito and Zora; the Zora royal family crest, for example, appears on both Medli’s dress and in Rito homes. Clues like these, when combined, create a semblance of narrative continuity within the series, connecting the events of *Wind Waker* with previous titles that feature the Zora. Medli’s ancestry was officially confirmed in *Hyrule Historia*: “Some of the peoples...

6 Ōtsuka, “World and Variation,” 108.

7 Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” 9.

8 Thorpe and Patterson, *Hyrule Historia*, 127.

underwent drastic changes in form during the tumultuous eras of the past... The Zora tribe, who now bear birdlike beaks, have transformed into the Rito.”⁹

In “World and Variation”, Otsuka Eiji appropriates Kabuki terminology when analyzing texts in Japanese popular culture. To summarize, the “world” constitutes the set of rules, conventions, and tropes that govern a collective body of texts, while “variation” corresponds to the unique result of a creator taking from the set of rules and conventions and arranging them into one single text. This world/variation framework is highly relevant when dealing with long-running video game franchises such as *Zelda*, which over the years had developed somewhat of a predictable formula—at least before the revelation that was 2017’s *Breath of the Wild*. In this next section, I attempt to define the “world” of *Zelda* in terms of both game play and story line, picking out the most essential elements that make up the overall *Zelda* identity. I then enumerate different examples that show how different games create “variations” of this “world”.

From the very beginning, the *Zelda* series has defined itself as an adventure game. The player controls a silent character named Link.¹⁰ The general flow of the game consists of taking Link through Hyrule’s grassy overworld and discovering dungeons to explore. The dungeons are arguably the most ubiquitous game play mechanic in the series; the player must venture into their depths to obtain items essential to finishing the game. These items may be tools that allow the player to access previously unexplored terrain, or relics that contain important magical power; oftentimes, both types can be found in a single dungeon. There is also often a sacred sword obtained by the player midway through the game; this sword is likely the only weapon powerful enough to defeat the main villain. Link’s adventures are littered with obstacles; these come in the form of both dangerous monsters and thought-provoking puzzles. The puzzles are another definitive *Zelda* game play mechanic; the player must use Link’s tools and their wits to find hidden doors, secret treasure, alternative paths, and enemy weak spots.

9 Thorpe and Patterson, *Hyrule Historia*, 128.

10 This is the character’s name by default. The player is given the option to rename him.

This is the gist of what players can expect to *do* when playing a *Zelda* game; these game play mechanics have been repeated throughout the series, and thus have come to define the *Zelda* experience. Coupled with the “world” of game play mechanics is the twin “world” that constitutes the narrative of the game; this is what players can expect to *witness* through the story line. Each *Zelda* game revolves around the adventures of Link; he is often aided by the Princess of Hyrule, named Zelda, in defeating the embodiment of all evil, an entity named Ganon. These three characters are special in that they are bearers of the Triforce, a sacred relic passed down to Hyrule from the gods: Link possesses the Triforce of Courage, Zelda the Triforce of Wisdom, and Ganon the Triforce of Power. When all three parts of the Triforce are combined, the wielder is granted unlimited power; it is this power that Ganon seeks in order to wreak havoc on the world. Together, Link and Zelda are able to stop Ganon and save Hyrule from impending doom. However, the threat of Ganon remains; many games usually end with the knowledge that Ganon will inevitably rise again. In *Hyrule Historia*, general producer Miyamoto Shigeru gives the reader a good glimpse into what the mythology of *Zelda* is essentially about: “Even though Ganon is defeated time and time again, he is evil incarnate and will come back time and time again, with a vengeance. Each time, when the world is blanketed in evil, a young boy and girl will be born.”¹¹

This reincarnation plot device is essential to *Zelda* lore, and from a practical perspective, it allows game developers the creative freedom to interpret the “world” of Hyrule in any way they desire. Link, Zelda, and Ganon return to Hyrule again and again through an endless cycle of rebirth. Games can thus depict Hyrule at any given point in time, allowing for drastic changes in its landscape and culture; the Hyrule in each game is effectively a “variation” of the “world” that has been built through the aforementioned repetition in game play and story line elements.

To reiterate Aonuma’s words, the *Zelda* creators always begin with conceptualizing game play before delving into story line. This

¹¹ Miyamoto, “Introduction,” 3.

design philosophy is evident in the way *Zelda* games are often structured around a central gimmick: *Minish Cap* has a shrinking mechanic, allowing Link to shrink in size and access new areas through cracks and holes. Likewise, *Wind Waker* has a sailing mechanic, allowing Link to travel vast distances on a magical sailboat. These gimmicks greatly affect central elements of game play in each game, and in turn affect the setting, with each game approaching the kingdom of Hyrule in vastly different ways.

Compare, for example, the Hyrule of *Minish Cap* and the Hyrule of *Wind Waker*. *Minish Cap* features a unique race called the Picori, unseen in any of the other games; they are tiny, ant-sized people. Using a magical talking cap named Ezlo, Link is able to shrink down to Picori size and enter their dwellings. This mechanic is vital to the plot of the game; an evil sorcerer places a curse on Zelda that turns her into stone, and the only way Link is able to save her is by finding the Picori and using the sacred power of the Picori Blade to purify her. It is thus evident that in *Minish Cap*, the game developers have constructed an entire race with a unique culture, history, and story line to fit in with its central shrinking gimmick.

Minish Cap places emphasis on the unseen Picori villages and dwellings that litter the landscape. There are hardly any large bodies of water, at least by regular human standards; these would interfere with the emphasis on the Picori, who would drown in the tiniest puddle of water. The Hyrule in *Wind Waker*, on the other hand, is vastly different from that of *Minish Cap*, and this is largely thanks to its sailboat mechanic. In *Wind Waker*, the grassy plains of Hyrule seen in *Minish Cap* and *Ocarina of Time* are nowhere to be found; everything has been washed away in a great flood, turning the old Hyrule into an Atlantis. Instead of a grassy overworld, Link traverses The Great Sea, visiting different islands in a quest to defeat Ganon. Zelda also plays a significant role in the story, but she initially appears as the tough-talking pirate leader Tetra, a young girl who eventually discovers her ancestry and takes up her destined role as the keeper of the Triforce of Wisdom.

There are smaller instances of variation in *Zelda*, in the form of recurring races, characters, tools, and settings. The name “Din” is just one example of the repeating motifs in the franchise. It first appears in a flashback in *Ocarina of Time* as the name of the Goddess of Power, one of the three goddesses who leave the Triforce with Hyrule and its people during its mythological creation. From then on, other characters named Din pop up throughout the series, such as Din of Holodrum, the titular Oracle of Seasons from *Oracle of Seasons*, and her traveling ancestor in *Minish Cap*. Her influence can also be seen in other in-game elements, such as the Din’s Pearl of the Rito people in *Wind Waker*, the province of Eldin in *Twilight Princess*, and the dragon *Dinraal* in *Breath of the Wild*. With each new appearance in the series, the recurring motifs are never the same as their previous iterations; they are “variations” of the “world” from which they are pulled, building upon their own history and growing in depth as a result. This is one of the reasons why *Zelda* is so compelling as a game franchise; it expands its own lore by repeating the same motifs over and over again, making each game familiar and recognizable to fans and at the same time changing the elements of its formula to create “the sense among audience members that the drama of each episode is real”.¹²

This tradition of repetition and variation in *Zelda* is also what makes its 2017 release, *Breath of the Wild*, such an anomaly in the series. It was met with widespread critical acclaim; critics called it a much-needed deviation from what had become standard and predictable *Zelda* formula. It is the first open-world *Zelda* game; gameplay mechanics such as traditional dungeons are done away with in favor of vast, lush, and varied landscapes. The unbreakable tools essential to accessing key terrain are replaced with weapons and tools that can be lost or broken after enough use. The sacred sword needed to seal Ganon away is no longer even necessary; with enough effort, the player can defeat him with an inventory of old mops and boat oars. *Breath of the Wild* seems to blatantly disregard the official timeline as well; both the Zora and Rito coexist in this iteration of Hyrule, leaving fans to wonder where the events of the game stand in the chronology of Hyrule’s history.

¹² Otsuka, “World and Variation,” 107.

Still, for all its tradition-breaking, *Breath of the Wild* retains much of what defines *Zelda* as a series, especially in terms of story line. The player still commands Link, the chosen Hero of Courage, in his quest to defeat Ganon, save Hyrule, and rescue Zelda. The game's commercial success thus points to a possibility that the official *Zelda* timeline is not as essential to enjoying the games as the experience of seeing the familiar world of Hyrule—its rich collection of characters, settings, items, dungeons, and monsters—in a new light. *Hyrule Historia* itself, without undermining the importance of story lines, points to a possibility that the grand *Legend of Zelda* narrative should be enjoyed not only as a definitive history, but also as an ever-growing, ever-changing mythology:

This is a telling of tales, passed on through the ages by humans... Is it a legend? Is it an accurate history of a cycle of rebirth? ...This chronicle merely collects information that is believed to be true at this time, and there are many obscured and unanswered secrets that still lie within the tale. As the stories and storytellers of Hyrule change, so too, does its history. Changes that seem inconsequential, disregarded without even a shrug, could evolve at some point to hatch new legends, and perhaps, change this tapestry of history itself.¹³

These words echo Jan-Nöel Thon's own convictions about the process of building storyworlds. In *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, he writes: "The importance of 'filling in the gaps' of narrative representations notwithstanding, some 'gaps' can never be 'filled' in an intersubjective valid manner... While recipients' may *pretend* that storyworlds are complete in the process Marie-Laure Ryan calls 'fictional recentering,' most if not all theorists of fictional worlds agree that these worlds are *actually* incomplete."¹⁴ Thus, the grand narrative must constantly be recontextualized with new information and content, because it is in itself much emptier than it seems. This works to the advantage of game developers of series like *Zelda*; because the world is perpetually incomplete, they can continue to create more sequels, "form[ing] and revis[ing] models of the story, detailed structures

13 Thorpe and Patterson, *Hyrule Historia*, 68.

14 Thon, *Transmedial Narratology*, 56.

with characters, events, motives, and so on”,¹⁵ and in effect recreate the world of Hyrule again and again.

Breath of the Wild was the first *Zelda* game to be released after *Hyrule Historia*. With its particular mix of races, iconic buildings, and historical anecdotes, the game seems to go directly against the official *Zelda* timeline. This could be taken as confirmation from Nintendo that they indeed do not intend to take timeline theory as seriously as their fans do. Still, *Zelda* fans have attempted to come up with ways to fit *Breath of the Wild* into Hyrule’s grand narrative; for example, many video essays involving the “merged timeline theory”—wherein the different branches of the timeline somehow converge back into one path—were published on YouTube soon after the game was released. This insistence on order and comprehensibility is in line with Thon’s assertion that consumers of a text “will generally try to exhaust every possible explanation before trying to imagine a logically impossible, contradictory local situation or a logically impossible, contradictory global storyworld”.¹⁶ It is this insistence upon a coherently connected mythology that drives, and will perhaps continue to drive, the tradition of timeline theorizing in the *Zelda* fan community.

This, however, brings up the issue of Nintendo’s accountability to their fans; is Nintendo obligated to build the *Zelda* narrative in a way that pleases the fan theorist community? Should their “game play before story line” design philosophy be compromised in order to better integrate the individual *Zelda* variations into one world? Nintendo has historically been non-communicative to their fans, especially in comparison to their western counterparts in the game industry. Still, with *Breath of the Wild*’s unprecedented success as a game, I am inclined to believe that Nintendo’s current strategy works well enough to ensure fan loyalty. Thon writes that storyworlds need not necessarily be logically consistent all the time; he proposes to instead “treat apparently inconsistent storyworlds as compounds of two (or more) logically consistent storyworlds”, with “logical inconsistency as ‘a *local* and not necessarily *global* anomaly’ (Rescher and Brandom 24...), understanding

15 Hogan, qtd. in Thon, *Transmedial Narratology*, 47.

16 Thon, *Transmedial Narratology*, 61.

storyworlds as noncontradictory ‘by default,’ with exceptions to this rule... best described as *compounds of non-contradictory subworlds*.”¹⁷ This neatly fits in with the nature of *Zelda* as a series; the games are loosely interwoven by a timeline, but are primarily enjoyed as separate, individual narratives.

It is interesting how the mythical and the popular intersect in *The Legend of Zelda*; in both its fictional history and its history as a franchise, one can see how fandom and geek culture consume and construct popular media as an entity that is larger than life. Ōtsuka Eiji confirms this much when he states, “What is being consumed is not an individual drama or thing but the system itself that was supposedly concealed in the background”.¹⁸ The creators of *Zelda* have found a way to merge this kind of narrative consumption with its design philosophy, building a solid identity through repeated game play and story line elements, and then deviating from that identity just enough to keep their players interested. Though inconsistencies undoubtedly exist among the individual games, these inconsistencies have the opportunity to enrich, rather than cheapen, the experience of Hyrule’s grand narrative, especially when viewed as an example of myth.

A society’s mythology constitutes a wide body of work created by countless participants; the individual tales may sometimes contradict one another, but all are tied together by a shared history and culture. In the same way, the creation of a popular and influential game franchise involves the participation of hundreds, if not thousands, of creators: game developers, artists, designers, programmers, musicians, players, and fans all come together to build the game’s ever-changing world over the years. The enjoyment of *Zelda*’s world is thus similar to the enjoyment of traditional legends, tales that have been passed down through generations; both keep their audience in the space between familiarity and wonder. It is apt, then, that the game series’ title should be what it is; *The Legend of Zelda* is, after all, a legend.

17 Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, 62.

18 Ōtsuka, “World and Variation,” 108.

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