IAT 313 - Video Game Analysis

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Murray's Characteristics

To many fans of the esteemed *Legend of Zelda* franchise, the N64 title *Majora's Mask* has been a matter of great contention. It simultaneously remained largely the same as its more adored predecessor, *The Ocarina of Time*, while deviating in such a way that it remains one of the most drastic departures from the series' norms. Because of this it has been highly divisive, with most fans either holding it up as among the greatest titles in the franchise, or even the industry, or contrastingly, one of the worst. From a personal standpoint, I highly believe it is a shining beacon of the video game art form's potential, and in the following analysis will attempt to uncover some of the core facets that make it so.

Beginning from a spatial standpoint, the game continues the setup of its direct predecessor, in being composed of a three dimensional environment with a camera that follows, for the most part, the protagonist in an over the shoulder fashion. At times the camera can remain fixed, pulled back, or shift to a first person perspective (Fig 1.) for mechanics such as precise platform navigation, easier combat, or aiming a projectile. The latter is highly important in that it not only facilitates puzzles and exploration in far more ways and precisely than with only a third person camera, but brings the player into the shoes of the main character

Fig 1. First person aiming of projectile

of Link, creating a greater connection by contrasting how the player sees the world vs. how Link sees it. The secondary aspect of the spatiality of the game comes in its division of game world into distinct regions that make up the game's overworld, with only specific dungeons and town areas taking up more space when inside

Fig 2. Minimap on main gameplay screen

than they do in the otherwise completely relative scale world. Navigation of these spaces are eased by the integration of a map system, both for the whole game world accessible in a menu (with various 'warp' points to speed travel between distant locations) as well as more detailed overlay maps on the main gameplay screen of the specific area the player is located. This minimap features a yellow arrow indicating the player's position and orientation, while exits are clearly visible and the one the area was entered from is marked with a red arrow. (Fig. 2) In a dungeon setting, more

spatial analysis is required for puzzle solving, and as such details are available on a paused menu to peruse multiple floors and view treasure chest and boss locations. Finally, this sense of space is fantastically managed in that the entire game world is open from the start of the game, yet many areas cannot be reached upon initial sighting, and rather must be come back to once a specific skill is obtained to enable greater mobility. The unique way this is handled, particularly in one astonishingly well designed later dungeon one must partially complete, then flip upside down and renavigate to complete, is well done in every 3D Zelda game, but was extremely well done and cohesive in this installment compared to the previous game in terms of smooth transitions and progression of navigation cues such as the minimap, as well as integrating them into the game world by buying maps of new regions from a particular character.

While these spatial aspects are all some of the better executed examples in the genre, it is in the encyclopedic that *Majora's Mask* truly begins to shine in comparison to its contemporaries. There is of course the vast array of enemies and items, all with different properties and rules of interaction. (Ice arrows creating frozen platforms in water, Fire arrows burning off the bandages of a mummy, etc). (Fig. 3) But that is all, while

Fig 3. Ice Arrows can interact with enemies to create ice blocks

well done and integral to a believable world, simply par for the course. Rather, it is in the storytelling that the game's encyclopedic nature is the star. The story at its core is about a young boy hero saving the world. A world that in three game days from the start, will end from the crashing of the moon. In order to accomplish this heroic feat the protagonist needs more time, and thus is introduced the time travelling mechanic, where the hero gets to relive these three days over and over through magical intervention, while the rest of the world must go through what look to be their final days over and over, unaware of the quest being undertaken. As such the developers opted to create an extremely intricate game world considering the era it was made, where nearly every NPC, or non-player-character, had their own backstory and schedule that they were to live out over the course of these days, effected by the actions of the player. Most puzzles, whether required for progression or optional, relied on this mechanic and the player discovering and learning the lives of the gameworld's people in order to be able to intervene and help them at the moments they needed it. Whether it was stopping the mugging of an old lady in town, the extremely elaborate process of reuniting a cursed to-be groom and his fiancee, defending a ranch from mysterious forces abducting cows and wiping the mind of a young girl, or simply teaching a pair of dancers a new piece for their fair performance, the amount of connections made by a

player into the lives and stories of all these side characters (Fig. 4) was unprecedented for the franchise. In being able to relive these moments, challenge oneself to help more people the next time around, or simply see the results of a world where you didn't intervene in people's lives, a la the classic movie *It's A Wonderful Life,* or more relatedly, *Groundhog Day,* the game provided an immense bank of possibilities and information that made up its world that truly differentiated it and brought the narrative to a whole new level through this integration of

Fig 4. The game provides a notebook to keep track of character's individual schedules and key interaction points.

side stories. But this was not all the encyclopedic content the game offered. There was of course also an overarching story, with its own background, but also the integration of elements relating the game to the mythos of the entire franchise. One small game area alone has prompted vast multi page analyses by fans of the metaphors, symbolism, and mythos of the game world, drawing parallels to the Tower of Babel, amongst other things.
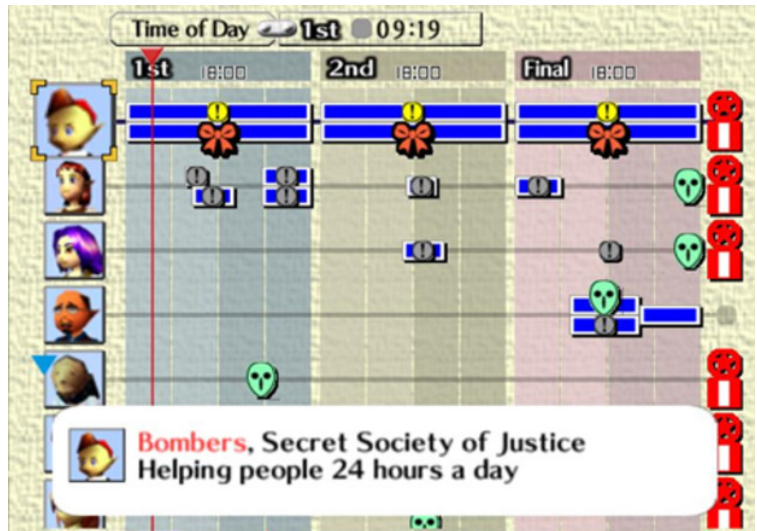
As discussed in the above paragraphs, procedure and participation are highly integral mechanics and aspects of making the world of this game a believable and immersive one. The different actions and events that will play out over the course of the three day timer based upon a player's choices of interactions at appropriate times are the core example of this. Again, the encyclopedic nature of game item properties, both player controlled and environmental, are highly successful in making a world where the player feels like their actions effect things. Grass can be cut, balloons can be popped, pots can be broken. The variety of responses from NPCs for various actions and variables also adds to their believability. The banker for instance, will comment on what a cheapskate you are when you deposit a small sum, compared to being highly shocked when you deposit the maximum amount allowed. (Fig. 5) Similarly, for withdrawals, responses range from

Fig 5. The banker character's shock at a large sum being acquired

"That's It?" to "Don't spend it all in one place". As a central gameplay mechanic is the ability to change form through the use of masks, many characters will also vary their speech to you based upon your present state. While a character may laugh you off and refuse to speak to you in child form, as the adult form of the game world species of a Zora or Goron, they will treat you as an equal or may even be intimidated by your strength. Certain characters will refuse you access to areas or minigames if you are not in the form of one of their own species. (Fig. 6) Other masks do not completely transform the player, but will still fool and change actions of certain enemies, such as one mask that causes all but the toughest enemies to not notice you and thus not attack. Overall, the game has a large focus on choices and their corresponding results,

Fig 6. Guards at the Deku Palace will only allow entry to fellow Dekus

with infinite opportunities for fresh attempts and strategies (even dungeons are re-playable and bosses able to be challenged to a rematch, a unique aspect of the game within the franchise). As such, the characteristics of Procedures and Participation are deeply entwined within the fabric of the game.

While these aspects are key to the game, the amount of effect Agency has on the overall outcome is still somewhat less than one would expect. This is due to the nature of the game as being focused on an immersive game world with deep side stories and narrative rather than a game with a multitude of possible endings and complete choices. The game really only has two possible endings, one with variations and one that does not completely count. The latter is of course the outcome of the game world if the player does not warp back in time before the end of the third day. Upon this point being reached, the player loses control and a cutscene takes over in which the people of the gameworld, Termina, see the end coming and proceed to all be obliterated by the cataclysmic event which is the moon crashing into the earth. (Fig. 7) Upon the finish of this cutscene, the mysterious and likely magical, if not mythical, character of the Happy

Fig. 7. The moon proceeding to crash and destroy everything

Mask Salesman appears with the quote "You've met with a horrible fate haven't you?", and the player is transported back to the beginning of the game's three day cycle with everything again reset. This shows the Mask Salesman character as a likely guiding god-like figure assisting the hero, but also eliminates the 'bad'

ending no matter how many times the player refuses to save the world. (Fig 8.) Again, much like *Groundhog Day*, the player, like Bill Murray's character, must come to realize that if the time loop is to stop they must accomplish a specific goal. In this case it is defeating the final boss of the game that is causing the moon to fall in the first place. The 'good' ending on the other hand has a sobering, yet hopeful resolution for the main characters, while the majority of the game's characters, unaware of the deeper events that occurred, are

Fig 8. The iconic screen of the game starting the time loop over

simply celebratory they are not actually experiencing the end times. This ending can vary in scenes that are shown based upon how many people the player managed to assist throughout play and the amount of secrets uncovered, but for the most part it remains the same. Thusly, Agency is largely left to the player's experiences rather than the game's storyline as a whole.

The game's level of Immersion is rather high considering the era of graphics and general technology it was produced during. Aesthetics are a large player in this field, with most everything thoughtfully designed and planned out, from the apparent materials used in construction in the world's geographical regions, to the effects of weather and rain on an area, to the symbology and basis for designs that were created within the game world (such as the intended reasoning behind statues and insignias of varying species and societies). (Fig. 9) Colour was also well utilized to create atmosphere, constructing a twisted and 'dark' motif without the use of the modern dirty brown and grey trend, but rather a heavy dose of unsettling shades of reds, purples, and greens. The music is

Fig. 9. Even minor platforms have deep symbology and meta narrative embedded within them

also a vital aspect of this immersive quality, with every track reflecting the moods and nature of a region, with appropriate intensities and lack thereof in varying levels of action. The impending doom from the three day countdown was also incorporated into the soundtrack, with more urgency subtly added the closer to the moment of impact the player currently was, with a masterful final countdown motif taking over by the end, no matter what location the player happened to be in the game world. Both diagetic and non-diagetic music exists within the gameworld, which was a largely underutilized technique in that console generation. The most important aspect of immersion in the game however, was yet again, the NPCs and their lives based upon the time cycle. By creating an organic world with unfolding interactive events and backstories for nearly everybody, compared to the vast majority of similar games at the time that utilized static scripts and character locations, the game gained a whole new level of immersion, where the player could believe that these were like real people, worth caring about, with emotions, lives, reactions, and choices.

Transformation is a key element of *Majora's Mask*, with the transformative masks (Fig. 10), the changes in regions when a curse is lifted, the effects on characters' lives the player can have, and the protagonists' (and antagonists') journeys of self transformation. As explained in the Agency and Procedure & Participation sections, the level of transformation and effects a player's actions can have upon the game world can seem very deep and personal to the player thanks to the immersive environment, regardless of negligible effect on the overarching storyline. However, players have still managed to fundamentally transform the game world, albeit outside of the game environment. The amount of research, insight, and theories into the mythos of the franchise, and this entry in particular, is astonishing. Many theories that have been debated back and forth, with evidence from the games for both side, have essentially begun to work themselves into series canon. The producers themselves have stated that

Fig. 10. Enchanted transformation masks integral to gameplay relate to the story's themes of self growth and tranformation

they believe fans may understand the overarching timeline better than they do, as the games were initially created as mostly independent works, within the same world and mythos but with little distinct and deliberate connections. As the question of whether the game can inflict transformations upon a player, the answer is a resounding yes. Personally, (and knowing a few other individuals) this game was the penultimate tipping point that began a life's devotion to the medium and its possibilities, as well as the desire to create and work within the industry. The fundamental questions at the core of the game's storyline about identity, one's effect on the people around them, friendship, order vs. chaos, and the journey of self growth are universal themes that

transcend the game and how well they are executed has inspired many to truly stop and reflect upon them, as witnessed by the devotion of fans craving insight into the game.

Narrative Concepts

The characters within *Majora's Mask* display a wide range of emotions, from sorrow at the loss of one's son, to anger over the loss of old friends, to solemn reflection upon past times, to love and devotion in the face of tragedy. As The core characters are waged in a conflict of maturity and self growth, and the search for friendship. The story begins with the protagonist Link on a journey to find a lost friend. The antagonist proceeds to knock him out and steal a valuable item with emotional attachment from him. A chase ensues and Link proceeds to fall down the 'rabbit hole' as it were into a twisted world where he is promptly magically transformed into a weaker form before chasing further and arriving in the new world of Termina. In this beginning of the game the hero becomes scared and confused, his past successes no longer bearing on the extreme difficulty he finds himself in. (Fig. 11) He learns that the world is to end in three days and he has that

Fig.11 The antagonist taunts the hero as he toys with him in the beginning of the game.

time to win back his item to use it to reverse the flow of time. Upon achieving this he is able to return to his true form and start to win back some of his lost confidence. (Fig. 12) As the game progresses he learns to deal with the issues of the townsfolk to help brighten their lives in what little ways he can while searching for more items and resources to help him prevent the moon disaster. He learns to save cursed guardian protectors, who plead with him to 'help their friend'. As the game goes on the young boy gains even more maturity, having to

Fig. 12. The hero receives encouragement to be courageous

heal souls of the dead (Fig. 13) and help them make their peace, performing more adult roles in his Zora and Goron forms, saving eggs and caring for a child whose father is likely to not make it through the ongoing blizzard in the mountains. (Fig. 14) It can be learned that the imp causing all of the trouble was a lonely outcast, seeking friends and having none, and under the influence of a dark magical powered mask, has sought to wreak havoc on the world through its destruction and causing problems for all of the villagers. Link's courage grows with every cycle as he eventually manages to call all 4 guardians to hold the moon in place. Upon this event, the mask discards its host and retreats into the moon, where Link follows. This leads to a completely surreal peaceful dreamscape of a vast meadow with a single tall tree with children wearing the masks of

Fig. 13. The player pays respects at the grave of a departed acquaintance

defeated enemies play, while one child wearing the titular mask sits lonely at the base of the tree. The playing children question Link on what it means to be a friend, the role of making others happy vs making yourself happy, and what one's true face really is. The 'true' ending to the game upon completion of all sidequests grants the player a final transformation mask upon talking to the lonely child. That of a tribal coloured adult version of Link. Regardless of that achievement, the lonely child states upon being talked to: ''Let's play good guys against bad guys. Are you ready? You're the bad guy. And when you're bad, you just run. That's fine, right? Well? Shall we play?'' (Fig. 15) before launching into the final battle. This is the point that the roles change. No

Fig. 14. The player takes on the role and responsibilities of a child's guardian

longer is the game a straightforward struggle between good and evil. Unlike countless other games with a knowingly evil villian, *Majora's Mask* invokes that of order versus chaos. A hero who has matured and gained a sense of true responsibility and caring for others, versus the mindset of a reckless child, assigning things it doesn't like to the role of 'bad guy' and playing with them, causing chaos and destruction with no regard for the consequences, all in the name of fun and games. The final chapter results in the antagonist imp realizing what he has done and being completely distraught, although his guardian friends maintain they had still thought

of him as a friend though they had left. Thinking the contrary having been the root cause behind his actions, the imp solemnly reflects on what he has needlessly done. Link, having matured greatly over the course of the game, realizes what he has done in recklessly leaving his home in search of a lost friend and neglecting those he did have was childish and selfish, sets off to return from whence he came.

As the player has no control over the overarching story, they have little to no influence on the outcome of these character emotions or storyworld. However, the deep

Fig. 15. The titular antagonist reveals itself as a reckless child like entity rather than a malevolent and calculated evil.

immersion into the game world through the environment, characters, ability to guide the hero, and even playstyle and camera positioning, contribute to the player identifying greatly with the silent protagonist who is explored through body language and other character reactions, and really allows the player to embed themselves within the narrative and experience the story as the hero would. The addition of all of the side character quests and lives greatly adds emotion to the player's perspective that does not rely on winning or losing. There is often a sense of guilt experienced when one finds out too late what tragedy has struck a character and a desire to go back and fix it. The structure of events also makes it impossible to solve simultaneously occurring issues, and the moral choice of which character seems to deserve help better often arises. The fact that not everybody can be saved in one cycle and that when you go back in time everybody has to start over is a highly guilt laden and sobering thought. The twists at the end particularly throw the player for a loop when they realize the antagonist they have been led to hate is a highly sympathetic character with traits of many protagonists in various media. (Fig 15)

The story world is divided into distinct regions in the major compass points each with a more or less self contained quest to go through and guardian to save. Distinct environments lend a chapter-like feel to these segments of the narrative, while the central town and field area are more homogenized and belong to the entire story universe at once. The chapterization helps generate pacing and an increase in difficulty curve in the game, with previous areas becoming easier to go through upon completion of later ones. Many players utilize this as a way of trying to accomplish as much of the story as possible within their final cycle so that when they stop the moon at the

Fig. 16. The world map of the game is divided into four core regions of mountain, beach, canyon, and swamp.

end, they feel that they have truly helped as much as they can within the cycle that is to become a continuing flow of time upon game completion. This division also enhances the groundhog day effect where choice can dictate very different results, as the player starts at the central hub town to begin every quest adventure upon the start of a new cycle, going from familiar to gradually more new.

Micro narratives proliferate this game, though the most in depth is that of the lovers Anju and Kafei. Kafei is the son of the mayor of Clock Town, and the two were to be wed on the day the moon is destined to crash. However, the imp magically transformed Kafei into a child and he went into hiding. Through various investigation and conversations with townspeople, the player learns of this and may decide to try to help these two on their next cycle. This begins with inquiring Anju on the whereabouts of Kafei with the mask of his face given to the player by Kafei's mother. She tells you she has information and will meet you later. From this meeting you are given a letter to send to him which you can accomplish via the town postman. Upon watching the delivery, the player discovers Kafei's whereabouts and can inquire him as to the situation. He asks for your help and gives you a pendant for Anju. Upon giving this to her she will wait in her room for him on the final night rather than attempt to evacuate with her family. (Fig. 17) Kafei also states he is watching for the man who stole his wedding mask. If one has stopped the mugging of the old lady, the micro

Fig. 17. One of the more dramatic and emotional moments from the Anju and Kafei sidequest

narrative ends here. However, if not, the thief is still at large and Kafei will spot him and follow him to his hideout. If the player also follows, one can help Kafei solve some puzzles, defeat some enemies and retrieve his mask. He returns hours before impact to be with Anju. There is also a letter at this point one can take and deliver for the mailman to let him evacuate since otherwise he would prioritize his job. This is but one example of the plethora of complex side interactions within the game that give the characters life and cause a far greater player attachment to the fate of the game world were they not in place.

The interface does not particularly change to reflect the game world aside from a generalized look and feel that represents the game's motif as a whole. There is however the aspect of the map system in that maps must be purchased or located in the game world in order to be accessed in the interface, as well as locating and activating warp locations.

Lighting and costuming are aspects of the overall aesthetic feel of the game and are pulled off quite well. Though the main character transforms into different species, they maintain the iconic green hat and tunic (at least partially) (Fig 18) to clearly mark them amongst the rest of the characters in the game world. As a whole, the game is less lit than other entries, largely to maintain the moody atmosphere. Some puzzle areas even require torches to be lit with fire in order to unveil aspects of the room that could not be seen in the dark that are necessary to utilize to progress. Intentional lighting and focus is also utilized to emphasize aspects of combat and required actions, though subtly and not in a distracting manner. The costuming of game world characters (and the designs of environmental aspects like buildings) all fit well

Fig. 18. The hero in Zora form maintains his green suit. The environment of this half fish species incorporates much marine life.

within the game mythos and their geographic environment (Fig 18) and none feel out of place, unless intentionally. This adds a further level of realism and believability to the game world.

As mentioned earlier, the music is deeply integral to this game, with every piece reflecting the regions in which they play near perfectly. Appropriate dynamics are applied to intensity, and lack thereof, depending on the amount of action currently taking place. Music plays an important role in gameplay as well, with various magical songs able to be utilized and played to affect the game world in a variety of ways, such as causing rain,

signifying to a character that one knows the royal family, puzzle solving, (Fig. 19) or most importantly, slowing or reversing time. The impending doom from the three day countdown was also incorporated into the soundtrack, with more urgency subtly added the closer to the moment of impact the player currently was, with a masterful final countdown piece taking over by the end, no matter what location the player happened to be in the game world.

Fig. 19. Playing the lead character's instrument can be utilized to help characters or access items and rewards.