

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask

Platform: Nintendo 64

Genre: Action Adventure

Release Date: October 26, 2000

Developer: Nintendo EAD

Publisher: Nintendo

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Eiji Aonuma

Overview

Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, or LoZ:MM for short, is the sequel to the incredible Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time on the Nintendo 64, a game that defined an entire generation of games and gamers. LoZ:MM has a lot to live up to, and in many ways, not only does it meet those impossible demands, LoZ:MM even surpasses its predecessor, through gameplay, and its narrative.

LoZ: MM continues the story of The Hero of Time as he searches for his missing friend, Navi, who after the defeat of Ganondorf in OoT, has disappeared. Link travels to the land of Termina where he encounters a character called Skull Kid wearing a mysterious mask and learns of Skull Kid's plot to destroy this world by crashing the Laughing Moon onto the planet. Using the Ocarina of Time and his own wits Link must find a way to stop this from happening by gathering the Four Giant Masks and confronting Skull Kid atop the moon. However, before this can happen, Link learns that Skull Kid himself is not the one in control, but the mask that he wears has corrupted Skull Kid and now controls him.

On the surface, the story for Majora's Mask isn't very impressive. It establishes a goal and very rarely deviates from it, ultimately leading to the game's expected conclusion with very few twists and turns in its storytelling. But that is actually the strength of LoZ: MM as all of its meaning, its entire story is how the Player interacts with it and what the Player "felt" from it. The game's story is hidden in its world, its characters and its overall message, and it is up to the Player to experience it by exploring every corner of the game.

Characters

- **The Hero of Time (Link)** – Link (or whatever the Player names him) is the Hero of Time from Ocarina of Time. He is a young child, between the ages of 10 and 12 thrust onto a new adventure that is potentially more dangerous than his previous one. Link travels from Hyrule to Termina, desperately looking for his friend Navi. Link is a character who rarely (if ever) speaks, instead allowing his actions to speak for him. However, it is clear that Link will do anything in order to protect this world.
- **Skull Kid** – In Ocarina of Time, Link met a young Child known as Skull Kid in the Lost Woods where Link taught the lonely child a song on his Ocarina. Skull Kid then left, only to end up in Termina where Link would meet him again. But this time, Skull Kid, in his loneliness, accepted the begging of a cursed Mask to be her friend. Without friends, Skull Kid thought that he had finally found one, only to realize his mistake soon after as he lost his True Self to the evil Majora who now controls his body.
- **Majora** – Majora is an evil entity trapped within Majora’s Mask. Little is known about her and what is “known” is mostly speculation from evidence placed within the game. Unlike Ganondorf, the Player never learns Majora’s reasons for doing what she does or even where she came from. Even her gender is questioned as the Player never sees her true form. However, due to evidence scattered throughout the game (especially the final battle which has a very feminine Majora), Players have begun to compile certain theories, namely that Majora is the Goddess of Chaos and Mother to the three Goddesses that Ocarina of Time talks about. A common saying is “everything is born from Chaos”, and this fits in with the Creation Theory in OoT. Majora is seen as the middle of the Triforce, the black triangle. An upside down triangle often represents a mother figure, further implying Majora’s status as the Goddess of Chaos.
- **The Four Giants** – Located in different temples scattered throughout Termina in the four directions, lies the Four Giants, threshold guardians to Link. Link must defeat an evil that has crept into their temples and gain their masks in order to awaken these sleeping Giants. Without their help, without their friendship, Link will be unable to save the town. During the battles, Link learns more about himself as he gains their mask. Each time that he fights them, the battles become easier and easier as Link uses the lessons he learned from battling them before.

Breakdown

Friendship. Majora’s Mask is about friendship. The good and the bad that comes with it. This is where Majora’s Mask soars over most contemporary games. It has a story that is fairly simple on the surface, but digging down deeper reveals a message that is as profound and emotional as any from a book or a movie. Most Players will never know the true meaning behind Majora’s Mask, and they will be happy as they had a solid surface story. But those who continue down will realize how sad Majora’s Mask is, and how poetic it is as well.

Link starts the game alone, riding on Epona, seemingly lost in some dark and foggy woods thinking of his last meeting with Zelda as he searches for his friend, a character he has no idea

where she could have possibly gone. He is desperately searching for her, giving up the home that he had in Hyrule in order to make sure that Navi is safe. That is the start of the message about friendship, loyalty. Then Link meets Skull Kid, a lonely boy without friends who places a curse on Link, turning him into a monster Link normally kills so that Link can feel his pain, loneliness and a loss of Self. Link travels to the town where the townspeople refuse to talk to him, often calling him names where he experiences the loneliness and hate that Skull Kid felt being shunned from the town. But Link doesn't like this, and so he climbs the Clock Tower to face Skull Kid, to get his revenge against him, to only discover that Skull Kid plans on crushing the town with the moon. But more importantly that Skull Kid is not in control. Link recovers his Ocarina and travels back in time, giving himself more time to solve this new problem. Link's journey originally started off as a personal quest for revenge against Skull Kid, but became a much larger issue, where he pushes off his personal vendetta, forgiveness.

Within just the first thirty minutes to an hour of the game, the Player has experienced loyalty, loneliness, loss of Self, revenge and forgiveness. As the game continues, the theme of Friendship continues as well. Many of the side-quests that Link performs deals with an aspect of friendship, including Love in one particular quest. Even the major quests involve a subtle connection to friendship and throughout the game, In the game, Players learn of an old story (that runs parallel to this game's story) about an Imp (Skull Kid) who was friends with the Giants. The Giants were protectors of the people. When they weren't needed, they slept. The Imp felt saddened and hurt by their betrayal and started causing harm to the people, which in turn woke up the Giants who threatened to eat the Imp. The Imp left, losing his only friends. This is effectively the story of Skull Kid and the Giants. Skull Kid lost all of his friends, so, in his rage, anger and loneliness, he accepted Majora's friendship, though he knew he shouldn't.

This is seen towards the end of the game when a child wearing Majora's Mask sits underneath a tree curled up in a ball. At this point, Link is inside of the Moon, but in actuality, he is inside of Skull Kids Conscience, looking at Skull Kid's True Self that has been covered up by Majora's Mask. When Link talks to him, he talks about how everyone has left him, that he is all alone, and that all he really wants to do is to play. But Majora doesn't "play", causing Link to battle Skull Kid and Majora in the Moon in order to free Skull Kid and save the town. Once Majora is defeated, Skull Kid returns to himself and learns that the Giants never stopped being his friend and he made a new friend, Link. Link then leaves Termina as the town celebrates their carnival.

The theme of friendship is only one of the deeper stories hidden underneath the game's surface. Another one is the theory that the Stone Tower is essentially the Tower of Babel where the Goddesses tore down the Stone Tower because mankind was trying to get higher than they were supposed to. There are even more examples of these stories in the game, but once again, they are all hidden within its world, its characters, its art design, and of course, in its narrative. The best part is though, that none of the above stuff has to be discovered in order to enjoy the narrative of the game, but those who find it, often find a message that most games don't attempt to do.

Strongest Element

Time is supposed to be a constant stream, one that we can never change or go back into. But in *Majora's Mask*, the Hero of Time, Link, has this exceptional ability to travel back to when he first entered the town, nearly three days ago. At first, this exceptional ability sounds amazing. Who wouldn't want to be able to go back in time and change how something occurred? This is the question the game asks the Player and the Player responds with an "I do!" In the town of Termina, there are dozens of characters going about their daily lives. Sometime, these characters will give quests to Link to complete, due within a certain amount of time. Often, these quests conflict with other quests, requiring Link to be at multiple places at once. An impossible feat, except for one with an Ocarina of Time. Throughout the game, Link constantly goes back in time, completing side-quests, battling monsters and saving what would have been a doomed love. If Link were to make a mistake, if he let someone die, or wasn't able to protect the farm from aliens, or return the letter quick enough, he could simply go back and try again.

As mentioned earlier, this at first is exciting. The Player gets to experience so many different storylines and gain the rewards from them that they often get to keep on them as they travel back in time. So what's the catch? Simple, everything starts over, every time. The only thing that stays constant is Link. The farm that you saved before going back in time... destroyed. The doomed Love between the young couple... never completed. Without Link, without the Player, these elements are never solved. Link simply doesn't have enough Time to save them all. They, no matter what Link does, will eventually fall back into the same problems, over and over again. Now think about what that does to Link, and to the Player when they realize that they can't save everyone. They essentially give up. Amazingly, this is reflected in the gameplay and through the level setup. Very often, the Player will have to redo things, again and again, until they get them right or until they progress far enough to be able to avoid it completely. The Player will often find themselves stuck in a temple, running out of time with no choice left but to travel back in time. The majority of that progress inside of the temple is now gone, and the Player has to redo it at the start of a new day. But sometimes it requires that the Player go through a few steps until they are able to re-enter that temple or they have to re-defeat the bosses in order to regain their mask. This becomes very annoying for Link, and especially for the Player. Some quests, like the Lovers quest, require a very strict set of procedures throughout all three days. Messing that up, the Player must start over from the beginning.

This frustration for the Player mirrors Link's own frustration, whose goal is to save everyone and be a Hero. But Link quickly learns that his goal is impossible and he learns a valuable lesson from playing with time that he simply can't. More importantly, he learns that while he might be able to use his sword and shield to slay monsters, use his feet to deliver letters and what not, there will always be more people that need his help than he has time to deal with. Link effectively learns that while he can literally save their lives, he cannot live it for them. He cannot solve all of their problems. The people must live their own lives. The Player may not fully

understand the futility of Link's endeavors but they do share in his frustration of being tired of solving everything over and over again. When the Player has decided that enough is enough, they will start time over, collect all of the boss masks and then speed through time, leaving the people of the town of Termina to solve their own issues, until they make it to the last night where they can finally face Majora.

With Majora defeated, the town is able to finally take a new day and throw the carnival it had been planning. As the credits roll, the Player gets to see the outcome of their actions, some very happy, and some very sad. Depending on the side-quests that the Player completed, they will see different endings during the credit, giving further reward for the Player, and for Link, that their hard work paid off. At the end of Ocarina of Time, Hyrule threw a celebration for Link as he saved them all, but this wasn't the case in Majora's Mask. Instead, Link silently departs from the town and rides off continuing to search for Navi, leaving his new friends behind. In truth, most of the townspeople probably will never realize what Link did to save them.

Unsuccessful Element

The game's ending leaves a lot to be desired, not just because the game actually ended, but also because it doesn't fulfill some of the story elements it established early on (like finding Navi), but it also doesn't live up to its dark and somber tone as completely as it could have. The game overall has a very dark tone to it that pervades throughout all of the games interactions as it has a very serious message about friendship and heroism/responsibility. As mentioned just above, Link rides off alone into some dark and foggy woods as he continues to look for his friend. But just before that, depending on the Player's actions, the Player is shown epilogue scenes of the characters they interacted with, which, in of itself, is a good thing to do for the Player. However, if the Player didn't complete that storyline/side-quest during the three days before they defeated Majora, they shouldn't have been shown the "Happy Endings" of those characters. For example, if you get the Fox Mask (from the Lover's side-quest), the game shows the two of them getting married at the end. Now, let's say that you got the Fox Mask, then went back in time and didn't complete their side-quest before you defeated Majora. Instead of that "Happy Ending" the Player should have been shown what happens when they don't help out. The ending should have involved the two lovers glancing at each other and then walking away or something. This would have stuck closer to the dark and somber tone of the game as the Player would then get to see the actual extent of their actions, some good and some bad. It would have also stayed true to the idea that when you travel back in time, everything starts over.

From a Game Design standpoint, rewarding the Player for "completing" certain aspects of the game by a happy epilogue is highly rewarding and satisfying, but in the case of this game, it does detract from the overall story. Now then, it could be argued that these people, be it the farmers and the aliens, or the aforementioned Lovers, would have solved their problems on their own eventually, and that they actually didn't need Link at all. Perhaps Link (and as Players) we

believe that no one can do anything without us. That everyone is doomed if we didn't stroll into town to solve every little problem they have. Perhaps the ending is actually more a message to Link and to the Players of their own pretentious attitude when it comes to these beautifully created worlds we get to visit and eventually leave.

Highlight

Majora's Mask is one of the few games to ever explore the different layers of a Character's personality. Andrew Glassner, writer of "Interactive Storytelling" talks about the four Nested Masks of a Character: World Mask, Self Image, Conscience, and True Self. It is often described, that all of the gameplay takes place inside of the World Mask of a character, as that is the Mask that interacts with the game world and is the one that the Players see. However, Majora's Mask is able to circumvent this by introducing a Mask system that allows the Player to dig deeper into the psyche of The Hero of Time by exploring the deeper aspects of the Nested Masks.

In Majora's Mask, Players can collect various Masks throughout the game by completing story elements, either side-quest missions, or through narrative driven sequences. These Masks come in three forms, the Stat-Changers (like the Bunny Mask), the Shape-Shifters (like the Deku Mask) and the Giants Mask (the Boss Masks). When a Player equips any of these Masks, their World Mask is changed in some way. They automatically look noticeably different, but more importantly, something happened to the gameplay, something changed about the protagonist. When Link puts on the Bunny Mask, not only does he look different, but now he can move faster, allowing him to solve puzzles and/or defeat enemies in new and interesting ways. Link's Self-Image changed as soon as his Stats changed. While he has this Mask on, he feels more confident, more powerful and he knows what he is capable of with it on. And since Link at any point can remove that Mask, he knows and understands the effect it has on him.

These Stat-Changers are relatively harmless to Link as they only change his Self-Image allowing him to become braver or more scared depending on the situation. However, the Shape-Shifter Masks are incredibly dangerous to Link and have the possibility of destroying himself when he puts it on. This can be seen when Link begins his transformation into the Deku. His eyes become dark holes as he screams out in pain as his whole self changes into something it was never meant to be. When this first happened to Link, he was terrified and struggled desperately to return to being himself for his True Self was still intact, but the rest of him, including his Conscience, was changed. Once Link was transformed back into himself, a horrible realization occurred to him, that he would have to become that creature again in order to save this town, something that caused him great pain and suffering to do. This obviously speaks about how far Link would go to save the world that he would potentially risk losing his Conscience in the process as Link, in these different forms is able to do things that he could never do before, effectively changing not just how he plays, but how he thinks about how to solve a puzzle or problem. In Human form,

Link would never look at a strange flower and think “I can use that to fly”, but as a Deku, it becomes more than just a possibility.

The Giants Masks cannot be worn in the game. They are only collected and understood. They represent Link’s True Self. His ability to overcome any obstacle and every challenge in order to complete his goal. The fact that he cannot wear them is indicative of the metaphor of True Self that is the Giants Mask. A True Self can never be changed as it is the Character’s soul, their identity. To change that changes everything about who they are. Instead, the different parts of a True Self must be found and understood. Link goes through these obstacles in order to find and understand his True Self. The Giants and their Masks act as Threshold Guardians to Link’s self discovery and the defeat of them and collecting of their Masks are representative of the lessons that Link has learned through his ordeal. If Link were to face Majora on top of the Moon without learning everything about who he is, Majora would have won. Majora’s Mask itself represents the potential dark-side of Link. A possibility where Link would lose his True Self and instead of using his abilities to save people, he would use them to enslave and hurt people. Majora is a trickster who feeds off of people’s weaknesses and desires and worms a way into their True Self through these cracks. Without fully understanding himself, Link would have become captive to Majora’s allure.

But what about the hidden Fierce Deity’s Mask? The Fierce Deity’s Mask is Link’s True Self projected onto his World Mask. It is who Link is, without his Conscience or Self Image to get in the way. Link becomes insanely powerful when he fully unlocks himself, making even the powerful Majora nothing but a fly underneath his heel. If Majora is the potential dark-side of Link, a warning of what Link could become, it only makes sense that The Fierce Deity would be able to destroy it with such ease. A dark-side cannot stand up against the “Truth” of someone. The “Truth” of Link, his True Self, is that he is a Hero who will stop at nothing, no matter what, to save his world, making the potential dark-side of Link be impotent and impossible. Link would have never been able to gain the Fierce Deity’s Mask if he wasn’t willing to give up all of his power, all of the different masks that he has collected to a child who was lonely and in need of a friend if he wasn’t a True Hero.

Critical Reception

According to GamesRanking.com, Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask has a 91%, meaning that it is a game that is generally applauded by the gaming community and reviewers in general. The game is even featured in IGN’s Top 100 Games, typically placed below rank 50. Looking at two different reviews, one from ThunderBoltGames.com and the other from IGN.com, it is clear that while the two reviewers disagree on the gameplay and design of the game, they both agree its dark storyline is incredibly well done. ThunderBolt only gives the game a 6/10, saying that while the games storyline is darker and more mature, its gameplay is repetitive because of the

countdown timer. They believe that the countdown timer is just simply a cheap ploy to lengthen the game. IGN argues that the timer actually adds the storyline and intensity of the gameplay, instead of detracting from it.

Lessons

- **Game Narrative strength doesn't lie in writing** – Just like in other mediums a game's narrative strength doesn't come from its writing, but instead from its symbols and metaphors. From its characters and its themes. A well written book without a strong character or symbol wouldn't be a very good book and the same can be said about game narratives.
- **Game Narratives should be “felt”, not shown or told** – In movies and books, it makes sense to show and tell the audience everything that is going on as this is the only way that that medium can engage the audience, but that style of storytelling doesn't work for video games. While it can be successful, it often removes the Game out of it and becomes just a cutscene, or a cutscene that you can look around in.
- **Game Narrative and Gameplay can be one and the same, and should be** – The true strength of a game narrative comes from how the Player interacts with the game, not from the information that is told or shown to them. It seems that most developers and storytellers are afraid of the Player “messing up” their story by giving them the ability to control and dictate it, but instead of being scared, they should encourage Players to carve their own story in their world and framework. One of the ways to do this is to make sure the Gameplay matches the Narrative. Heavy Rain is a fairly good example of this as it allows the Player to make choices within a series of choices that that Character might actually say or do. Contrast this to Mass Effect's style where the Player can be completely good, and then suddenly decided, through a dialog choice, to be evil. Mass Effect doesn't stay true to its Character in that instance.
- **Graphics are a double-edged Sword** – Majora's Mask is not a particularly pretty game anymore, although it was cutting-edge when it came out. With today's modern games, with all of their beautiful and realistic graphics, they are able to capture the visceral feel of a place and action, but because of this, they seem to focus all of their attention to this turning the story into an action packed Transformers film, which is fun, but has as much depth as... a Transformers movie. When games didn't have amazing graphics that led to cinematic storytelling, the story had to be told in more subtle ways that mirrored the nature of poems more than anything else.
- **Being too subtle with Metaphors and Symbols means people will miss the story** – Most people don't really fully understand the true story of Majora's Mask, and for good reason. All of its depth of storytelling, that rivals even the best movies and books, all come from very subtle Metaphors and Symbols hidden throughout the game's universe and require the Player to “piece” the narrative together. While Majora's Mask did an amazing job at creating a message to its story through these Metaphors and Symbols, it is clear that they were simply too subtle about it. Movies often put these Metaphors out in the forefront of its story, giving the audience very clear cut examples of the Metaphors and Symbols. They effectively “force it down the throats” of their audience by giving attention to it. Because Majora's Mask is a game, Players are very often so focused on the

surface story and gameplay that they all too often miss the symbolism that the game is hinting at. Shadow of the Colossus is a game that hit a near perfect mixture of this, but that is also because the game WAS a metaphor, as opposed to Majora's Mask that is a game with a deep metaphor inside of it.

Summation

The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask is a game that rarely comes around. The story in this game is deep, dark, somber and more mature than the majority of "mature" games released on the market. The world is filled with hidden messages and metaphors that shed light on the true story and theme of the game. It is able to combine its gameplay and narrative to create one complete title, a shining example of how a game can be a poem based upon its own merits as a game, not because of how well a cutscene was written.