

Video Game Analysis and Comparison

By Francisco Souki

Shadow of the Colossus and The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

In late 1998, Nintendo released its first Legend of Zelda title for the Nintendo 64. The Zelda franchise had made a name for itself with previous successful entries, but this particular title brought it to a whole new level by revolutionizing the Action-Adventure genre. Seven years later, in 2005, Shadow of the Colossus was released for the Playstation 2, developed by the same team that had already proven their worth with Ico, a superb game. Colossus was very well received by critics and audiences and was successful in adding a twist to the classic Action-Adventure formula. Other than their genre and the fact that they were very well-received, these titles do not have too much in common. That is the official story.

My personal story differs a bit, though. In order to read the analysis I am about to make about these games, the reader will have to cope with my subjective view now and then. I consider them to be two of the greatest games ever made and feel they have contributed in making me who I am today. Both these titles have branded me in one way or another, and it is in this light that I will talk about them. The reader is not required to share this view, of course, but knowing this will help him understand the passion with which I speak about the games.

So, why those particular games?

As we start framing both titles in Aristotle's (Traditional) and Janet Murray's (New) poetics, we will understand the details that set them apart from the norm; from the groundbreaking decisions up to the minuscule details. It will be more evident in the case of The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, since it is already regarded by many as one of the best games ever released. In the case of Shadow of the Colossus, we will learn that it is a game that is harder to identify with, as well as "easier" to dislike. What has made Ocarina great is the way it defined the genre by introducing new mechanics and implementing design decisions that are now considered the industry standard. Colossus, on the other hand, worked its way out of that formula by breaking some of the genre's conventions in a satisfactory way – even some of the very conventions set by Ocarina.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time is a coming of age story, and a very compelling one at that. Aided by the device of time travel, the game narrates how a little boy goes from living in a peaceful village to aiding the Kingdom's Princess to save the world, seven years later. The game's story revolves around three main characters: Link, the Hero; Zelda, the Princess; and Ganondorf, King of Thieves. The first part of the game sets up the land of Hyrule as a peaceful place, and has Link and Zelda meeting as children for the first time in one of the game's most emotional moments. Their attempt to stop Ganondorf from obtaining the Triforce, a powerful

ancient relic, fails though Link manages to gain access to the Master Sword, which was made to vanquish evil. Link is kept dormant until he is able to properly wield the sword, and so awakens seven years later to find Hyrule corrupted and controlled by Ganondorf. With the aid of Sheik, a mysterious masked character, Link rids the different parts of the Kingdom of Ganondorf's minions and proceeds to defeat the King of Thieves himself. Sheik reveals herself to be Princess Zelda and, in an attempt to seal Ganondorf into another world for eternity, is captured by him. Our Hero goes to her rescue and so they work together to defeat the Evil King. In the game's final scene, Zelda transports Link back to the past so he can live the complete childhood he never had.

Even though the time travel mechanism seems like it has been worn out from so much use in every possible storytelling format, Ocarina manages to make good use of it by progressively increasing its importance while keeping it pivotal to the story. By providing only two time periods to travel to and from we are able to see the effect the passage of time has on every character in the world, including ourselves. There even is a shocking moment when we realize that our childhood friends do not grow up with the passage of time because they belong to a different race; it's a fact we knew since early in the game, but that truly gets to us when the same characters we interacted with not so long ago don't seem to recognize us anymore. In this sense, the first approach to time travel is merely for the sake of storytelling and it isn't until some progress has been made that it starts becoming an important mechanic: first, by letting us discover clues and secrets based on the behavior of characters on both time settings and then increasingly until the point that we need to cycle back and forth between our child and adult self in order to solve size-sensitive puzzles. One of Ocarina's great merits is that it manages to put one of its main mechanics (time traveling) at the service of storytelling.

Ultimately, the best indicative that Ocarina's story is strong is the fact that we never question that it isn't. We let the narrative drive us back and forth through space and time and not once do we wonder if it's really worth it. Alternately, the game counts with several side stories that can be developed into self-contained side plots that the player may choose to explore, although he is not required to do so. These side quests, as it has come to be expected, reward the story-driven player with a sort of backstory to the world and the goal-driven player with a reward that enhances gameplay.

Until now, I had reserved pointing out the detail that sets Shadow of the Colossus apart from the other games of its genre, and I chose to do so just so I could underline how a strong story could have been the only way to support that decision. As any one that has played at least a bit of it would know, Colossus is known for providing a visually rich environment to play in, though almost completely devoid of characters. The Forbidden Land that makes for the game's setting is home to only sixteen characters, all of whom the player must defeat in order to beat the game. It is, in a player's terms, a game consisting of sixteen consecutive "boss battles" and nothing more.

To pull this off, the story must act as an infallible supportive pillar – and even then the game takes the risk of not appealing to players that find the change too weird to be worth adapting

to. That said, Colossus's story does a good job at supporting the gameplay decisions, although at times it seems as if it is rather working against them.

Shadow of the Colossus starts with a gorgeous introduction of the main character riding a horse through a seemingly unfamiliar land. On the front of the horse we can barely make out the shape of another body – most probably dead. The journey through the land takes him to an imposing temple that gives the feeling of being situated on the very center of the (huge) area – this temple will serve from now on as a kind of “home base” for the character, and the game does a very good job as setting it up as the most prominent feature of the Forbidden Land. In this temple, he places the body of his lover in a pedestal and then is approached by a disembodied voice. By his interaction with this being we learn that he is in possession of a sacred sword and that the being will do his best to revive the woman if the player kills every single one of the colossi that inhabit the land. At this point, the colossi are nothing more than words to us: we know there are sixteen of them and that we must kill them and, for now at least, that doesn't raise any questions in us.

We learn soon enough that every Colossus is an emotional journey of its own. We have to go through richly detailed grounds to get to them and then engage them in battle. To do this it may be enough to simply approach them but sometimes these massively intimidating beings are just minding their own business, interacting peacefully with their surroundings. In those cases we attack them, get their attention and then proceed to vanquish them by (usually) sticking a sword repeatedly through their skulls. In order to defeat them though, we must get acquainted with their ways and their surroundings and devise an effective way of turning their own strengths against them. As the colossi fall, something that seems to be their spirit flies out of them and into us as we become unconscious and then wake up by our lover's resting place, ready to take on the next one.

More relevant bits of the story are fed to us in an irregular basis and, at some points, I found myself desiring that I knew a little bit more about the character I was playing – where does he come from, how did he get here, what is his backstory? Eventually, we learn that this Sacred Land was sealed off as the place of banishment for the evil being that offered us the bargain. After defeating the sixteenth colossus we free the beast from the spell that kept him under check and he proceeds to take our body as a new medium for his existence. Just then, a group of priests arrives in time to subdue him, killing us in the process. As the priests leave the land behind our lover awakes, thus confirming that the evil being kept his promise after all. Since the player never has information that confirms that the evil being was in fact evil, the scene where the girl wakes up ignites in us a feeling that the concepts of "good" and "evil" in this land may not be in line with what we are used to. We are shocked after realizing that the "bad" guy kept his promise while the "good" guys killed the leading character, who had given so much to bring his lover back to life. Finally, a baby appears on the spot where our body was vanquished along with the being's spirit, and so the girl and the baby decide to stay in the land.

Until now, I had purposefully left out an important character from each game in order to make a meaningful comparison. In both cases we find that our horse is the most loyal companion we

have throughout the adventure – although this could be debated about Ocarina, where a fairy called Navi plays the part of the guide in times of confusion. In both games we perceive our horse as much more than just a means of transportation. In Ocarina we get to know Epona when we are still young, as she is, and we learn a way to calm her. When we meet her again seven years later, we free her from an oppressive owner and she repays us by giving us her loyalty. On the other hand Agro, our horse in Colossus, is with us from the very beginning and very quickly establishes himself as our only companion through the whole adventure – in a way it is Agro who keeps us sane. It's interesting how both games make the player care about the horse and see him more as an equal than as a means of getting around, and it is more interesting that they do so in very different ways. Also, in both cases the reason why each of these relationships has an impact on the player is because of the game's theme.

In Legend of Zelda, an enormous part of Epona's importance comes from the fact that she is able to identify you as the same boy who once befriended her – she is actually one of the very few characters to do so. The way she recognizes you is also very important, because it brings together the two most important aspects of the game: time and music. Yes, music. If this was a game review for a magazine, I could get fired for not mentioning the music aspect of the game until now but the truth is that the music is almost exclusively an element of theme and mechanics, as opposed to one of plot. Early in the game, Link gets a wooden ocarina that enables him to create music. Throughout the game he learns certain songs that have different effects on the world and that enable him to solve puzzles, find secrets, travel through space and time and so on. When we encounter Epona as adults we play her a song that she identifies with friendship; by doing this, we establish a bond with her that goes through time because of music. It's a symbolic gesture that encompasses the essence of the game and that makes us understand that both temporal and musical details will play a big part in the adventure to come.

The musical theme accompanies the player throughout the whole game to the point that, even though to play a song it is only necessary to play the notes in succession without regard for rhythm, one finds it infinitely more rewarding to match the song's exact tune; the game offers no reward for this, but the mere satisfaction of knowing one got it right becomes enough. Ultimately, as Ocarina is a game about exploring a vast world, one finds an equally vast amount of songs to show for one's travels. Each song is learned in a special way and conveys a special meaning. Each song has its own mood, and when it is played it fills the player with the emotion associated to it, even if just for a few moments.

The vastness in Ocarina is the exact counterpart to Shadow of the Colossus's barrenness. In a world where there is absolutely nobody to talk to or to interact with, Agro immediately becomes a best friend. Whenever we need to separate from him in order to reach tricky parts of the terrain, we feel doubly anxious: both for leaving him behind and for having to continue alone. In Ocarina, we quickly come to accept that Epona may not come with us into dungeons and other closed spaces, and so we very rarely see her as a tool to solve a puzzle. The opposite happens with Agro: we will always try to have him come with us wherever we go, because we know that he can be a key part of the process of defeating any given colossus. Agro also makes

the game playable at all, since transportation without him would be unbearable in such a gigantic world.

Shadow of the Colossus is more than anything a game about solitude. It doesn't take too long before we start to see ourselves reflected in the beings we are killing off. They are no more than solitary creatures, leaving peacefully in areas they have visibly adapted to and made their home. The very fact that we are willing to hunt these creatures down and slay them to bring a person back to life says everything about our character – and I wish the game went more out of its way to stress this point. The character is, after all, a killer; disposing of magical beings that have nothing to do with him only for a chance to have his lover back. It is in a sense an implementation of the old “would you kill off twenty random persons just to save your loved one?” question. Colossus is a game that becomes ten times as significant if at any time during the game, and it is enough with only once, the player stops and asks himself “why?”.

The video game controller is our port of entry into the virtual world. It is, as Janet Murray states, the game's fourth wall. She states that the wall must be kept up, and the dividing line between game and reality must not be violated. I believe that for a game like Colossus to succeed, that wall must be taken down and the line crossed: the player must escape the trance of just playing the game and try to connect with his character. Would he do what the character is doing? In the case of Colossus, the ensuing reflection can be invaluable. All of this is also backed up by the fact that Colossus's main character starts getting visibly affected by his quest to the point that he becomes paler, scarred and even shows signs of sprouting horns – the mark of the evil being who is slowly possessing him. It is important to know, though, that the player does not have enough information to conclude that the being whose bidding he is doing is in fact evil; although the game provides more than enough clues, it is easy to disregard them. In my case, I chose to believe that these colossi were evil and that I was doing the land a favor by vanquishing them. When the story proved me wrong I wasn't all that surprised: I mostly knew all along that I was tricking myself to justify the morality of my Colossi-slaying quest.

What a big part of the Colossus experience comes down to, then, is immersion. In this day and age, willing suspension of disbelief is almost a given for anyone willing to pay the price of a new video game, and it is certainly not enough to get the full experience out of Shadow of the Colossus. The game requires, I feel, a commitment to immerse. Now don't get me wrong, the game does a superb job at getting you immersed by providing stupendous visuals, sound, theme and general feel but it does not have that sense of being easy to get into that characterizes Ocarina of Time.

A big part of Ocarina's success comes precisely from the fact that players who are just to this side of the casual-hardcore game border can get an incredible experience out of it. By having the player embody a child they are sending a message to inexperienced players to not be afraid; hardcore gamers may initially be put a bit down by this fact, but for their hardcore nature they will give the game a chance – and surely be rewarded for it. Immersion in the Zelda world is widely facilitated by both a big world and a seemingly endless cast of supporting

characters. Geography becomes a big part of the adventure and the player eventually comes to associate characters, climates, time of day and locations with one another.

Mechanics-wise, both games differ greatly. Just a few minutes into *Shadow of the Colossus's* gameplay are enough to certify that the mechanics are heavily reminiscent of the platformer genre. Jumping, running, gripping and climbing are the main activities to be performed, and invariably play a big part of the strategy to defeat any of the colossi. Also, the game has a puzzle-solving side to it that is only evident when fighting the creatures themselves: each battle in and of itself is half physical and half mental, and no colossus can ever be defeated by facing him dead-on. In terms of weapons, only a sword and a bow are available to the player, though the bow is mostly used to get the colossus attention and the sword must always be used to deliver the killing blow. In terms of navigation, the sword serves as a compass of sorts by channeling sunlight into a beam that directs the player towards the next colossus to beat. That is, for the most part, the extent of the game's mechanics.

As with so many other aspects, the opposite is true for *Legend of Zelda*. For starters, the game wisely ignores the platformer side of navigation thus making movement easy and less frustrating for more casual players. The camera angles are easily controllable and mostly correct, which keeps the player oriented the whole time. But, most importantly, the game introduced into the genre the nearly immaculate implementation of a mechanic they called Z-targeting, which allowed the player to lock the camera into enemies, making combat extremely simple and enjoyable. The combination of these aspects made it easy for all kinds of players to get hooked into the game.

As the game advances, though, it subtly incorporates new interactions by using a simple formula: they give the player an item that allows him to do something new, make him use it in order to solve a determined puzzle so he gets acquainted with it and then periodically present him with a situation that will make him remember to use the item again. One example of this implementation that can be found throughout the whole game is the one that constitutes the main mechanics for dungeon-exploring; the player must go through several dungeons to beat the game, and each is constructed from the same formula: there is a central item that the player must find to solve the dungeon's main puzzles and then again to defeat the dungeon's boss. By keeping the puzzle structure fresh every time around, though, they manage to capitalize on this simple formula and make it seem like every dungeon is unique. Even in modern *Zelda* games the formula is still applied and continues to deliver great results.

All these mechanics contribute greatly to increase the sense of agency the player has while playing the game, mostly because they enable the player to make new discoveries with time. It is possible to gain access to new areas, to discover secrets or to aid characters by implementing the mechanics that one learns with time. The access to bombs, for example, allows the player to destroy barricades that prevent him from getting to new places – until he encounters boulders that survive the explosions, that is. When bombs prove not to be enough, he must gain access to a mighty hammer that can deal with most barricades. A similar situation develops with places that are unreachable until the player acquires the hookshot, a grappling hook of

sorts. In Zelda, new items don't just imply new interactions, they usually make the player wonder how he can modify the world by using them.

A final form of experiencing agency comes from the time travel mechanic. As it would be expected from time travel implementations, the player's actions in the past have consequences in the future. This mechanic, although very widely used, makes the player feel that his actions are relevant.

Both of these games do a great job at representing a journey that the player goes through. In the case of Ocarina, we come to care immensely about the hero Link, and while we are sad because Zelda chooses to send us back to the past, we are also happy because he will get a chance to experience a childhood that was skipped. In Shadow of the Colossus, we are held breathless for a moment when our character dies and the game seems to end, and then we feel inexplicable joy when our loved one comes back to life as if she had just been sleeping.

In both cases, it becomes clear that the games have made an excellent job of telling their story when we forget that our characters are mere pixels programmed to resemble humans and we start caring for their well-being and that of their loved ones.