A Comparison of
Mystical Ninja: starring Goemon, and Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

The two games I have selected for my comparison were both released in the year 1997 by Konami. This was an interesting time for games, as some companies had begun adopting and shaping the landscape of 3D games, where others continued to refine the tried and true realm of 2D. In this case, Konami was moving one of their franchises to 3D with Mystical Ninja: starring Goemon for the Nintendo 64, and innovating another franchise with a new style of gameplay with Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. Castlevania was developed in their Tokyo studio while Mystical Ninja was at their Osaka location. During the move to new platforms, both games innovated on their predecessors by pushing the boundaries of not only graphics, but also gameplay design.

Mystical Ninja

The previous game in the series, The Legend of the Mystical Ninja, was a side scrolling action adventure game for the Super Famicom and Super NES systems. It featured a pseudo-three-dimensional gameplay design which is common amongst 2D "brawlers". It differentiated itself from those brawlers with RPG-esque systems such as NPC dialogue, currency, and items.

The series made the move to full 3D gameplay with Mystical Ninja in 1997, one year before Nintendo would release their blockbuster – The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Mystical Ninja featured many mechanics iconic of the Zelda series, so it's impressive that they adapted them for 3D so similarly to how Nintendo would for Ocarina, and in less time.

The game begins in the setting of a cartoonish feudal Japan. You can control two different characters at the beginning, swapping between them with the press of a button. Later on, you gain more companions who have different special abilities.

You start in the town of Edo, after a strange UFO has done something to the castle. As you explore the town, the first things the game teaches the player is to talk to townsfolk and to read signs. The game gives you no direction as to where to go, and the task is not obvious. The townsfolk urge the player to check out Oedo Castle to see what's up.

The player is essentially told wher to go, but the act of learning it from the townsfolk makes the process non-gamey, and also exposes them to the humourous dialogue, which grounds the game in tone. When the player arrives at the castle, they find that there is no bridge across the water. They find "star blocks" which can only be used with a special item, the chain-pipe.


This kind of obstruction is the primary mechanic for progression in the game. The player is able to explore the world freely, but must gain abilities and items to access new areas. This accomplishes a few things. First, because the player is denied access to certain areas, there is a sense of mystery in the world. The player will want to get to those areas, and it creates motivation to continue. Also, it makes the world seem much larger than it is in reality.

After the player discovers the star blocks and cannot continue, they must again find out what to do next. This element of uncertainty is what makes the game appeal to Seeker-type players from the BrainHex model.

If the player is ever unsure of the next objective, a hint can be purchased from the crazy fortune teller in town. In this case, the goal is to get to the top of Mt. Fuji to attain the chain pipe. Once the player exits the town and enters the next area, they encounter their first enemies. At the top of the mountain is the chain pipe needed to progress in the game. The NPC tells the player that it can be used on the star blocks, just in the case that the player has not yet encountered the star blocks or any NPCs that have talked about them.
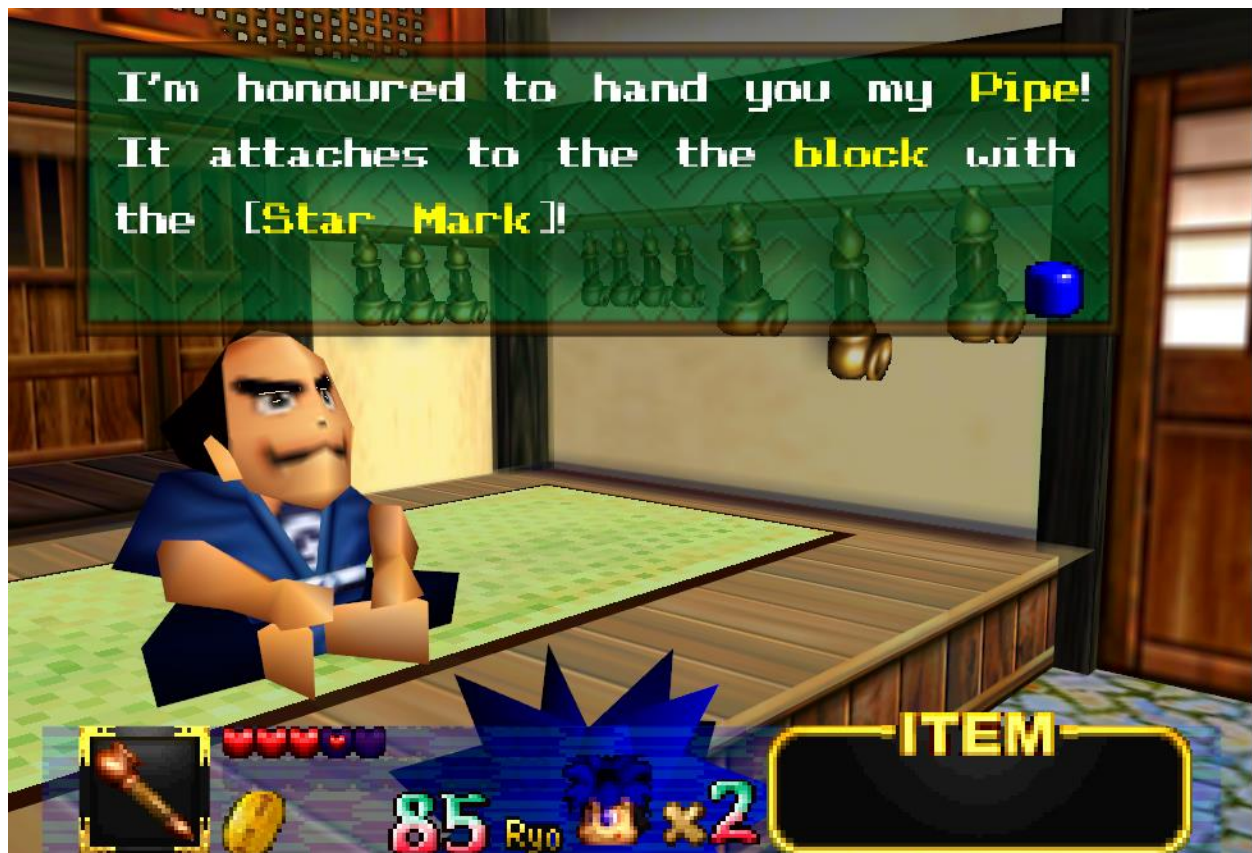
The player then must backtrack down the mountain and through the town to get to the castle. Upon arrival, the player has already been taught how to use the chain pipe, how to fight enemies, how to backtrack, and how to talk to townsfolk and read signs for clues.

These gameplay designs have been used before previously in games such as The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, but Mystical Ninja was one of the first to translate them into 3D.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

The Castlevania series was also making the jump to a new platform, the Playstation. Previous incarnations were sidescrolling action games with linear level design. The games were mostly a test of skill, with the difficulty ramping up as the player progressed. Most mechanics in the previous games were centered around different types of enemies, with the player having to learn their abilities and quirks in order to move forward.

Symphony of the Night, in its leap to the more powerful Playstation, did not attempt to move the series to 3D. Instead, it marks a shift in the series from skill based platformer to nonlinear action RPG. The castle was now not only to be defeated, but to be explored, too.

This gameplay style appealed to both the Seeker type, as well as the Achiever type, since most of the castle was actually non-critical to the completion of the game. If the player completed the game using a specific item, there would be an entire second upside-down castle to complete. The save-select screen displayed a completion percentage, which would show what percent of the castle the player had explored. Reaching over 200% was possible with the reverse castle and secret areas.

The beginning of the game is a prologue, showing the events of the previous game: Dracula X. This served as exposition for the story, but also contrasted the vastly different gameplay style of Symphony. Once players defeat Dracula using the classic whip gameplay, they then take control of Alucard, who uses a sword. Alucard's movement is much more free than the previous games, so this contrast of gameplay between the old and the new is very powerful.

In the first part of the game, Alucard is able to take out enemies in one attack. The player gets used to the new controls and moves through the castle with ease. There are areas in this part of the game that will later become accessible once the player can fly, and players will notice them above.

Once the player reaches the end of the corridor, they encounter the character Death. After a brief dialogue, he removes all of the player's items. The player then finds out how much Alucard sucks without weapons and armor. This gives items value for the player early on, where the difficulty curve would otherwise trivialize them.

Comparisons

While very different games in terms of tone, art style, and perspective, Symphony and Mystical Ninja share fundamental gameplay design paradigms. Both encourage the Seeker in players to explore and discover the world set before them. They are action adventure games at the height of their design quality. Whether they are trying to convey cartoony irreverent humour, or epic gothic drama, they succeed in immersing the player in it.

Core mechanics in both games comprise of running and jumping, with one in the third person 3D perspective and the other in a side scrolling perspective. Symphony has the players exploring the castle, collecting abilities which give them access to new parts of the castle – Mystical Ninja has players exploring Japan, collecting items and characters to access new areas.

In Symphony, you collect items which must be equipped with the inventory screen. They can then be used to attack enemies in the castle. Mystical Ninja does have multiple weapons for each character, but they aren't like items that can be picked up, equipped and sold. They are more like permanent upgrades to that particular character. This difference in how items are collected and used is quite distinct, where Symphony's system allows for simple marginal statistical upgrades while Mystical Ninja's offers fewer items for specific use cases.

Mystical Ninja uses a variety of techniques to guide the player through its vast open world. It uses NPC dialogue, cutscenes, signs, and fortune tellers to try to give the player an idea of where to go next. This is likely due to being a 3D game, which can be more difficult to navigate for players. Symphony, being 2D, is much more subtle in its player guidance. A player would come across a metal gate, for example, in an area that was often traversed, like a hub area. This constant exposure to the inaccessible gives the player a goal to strive towards.

Symphony's uncertainty comes from the inexperience with the castle – not knowing what kind of enemies you will fight or items you will attain. Some items and abilities, such as the bat form's sonar, have uncertainty in their use. They player must have discovered both the dark cave area as well as the bat sonar in order to make the connection and access a new part of the castle. Mystical Ninja's uncertainty is similarly structured. However, in Mystical Ninja, there are elaborate dungeons containing puzzles and bosses punctuating the otherwise open world.

The narrative structure in Mystical Ninja is entirely linear. The game lampshades this notion, though, giving the player false choice in many dialogue sequences. For example, the princess at the end of the first dungeon would offer you the passport to gain access to the town's exit. The player is given the choices "yes" and "no", with the "no" choice perpetually triggering the princess to ask "Are you sure?" The tension arc revolves around chasing the Peach Mountain Shogunate, and always being one step behind. Symphony has a narrative with many endings. The player can either end the game after the final boss of the first castle, or can find the secret items revealing the second castle. There are more endings dependent on how you defeat the true final boss, as well. There are also narrative elements which are localized to specific parts of the castle. Since the majority of the castle is technically optional to beating the game, these narrative elements are also optional, with some players having never seen them.

Being an RPG, Symphony's reward systems are tied to the experience and item systems. Items are collected in specific parts of the castle, but are also dropped from enemies at a variable ratio. Since the game's main appeal is the exploration of the castle, the game utilizes reward systems in that aspect as well. For example, there is a clock tower stage where a part of the stage isn't accessible until a specific time in the day. The player must be in the clock tower when the clock strikes that time, and they are rewarded with a new set of rooms as well as some valuable items (fixed interval). Mystical Ninja rewards its players with fixed ratios of currency dropped from enemies, as well as static power-ups situated in difficult-to-reach locations.

Both systems have a currency which can be traded for items with NPCs. In Mystical Ninja's case, these items are generally limited to health replenishes and extra lives. However, currency serves a dual purpose as ammunition for the only ranged attack in the game. Symphony has a variable ratio of gold dropped by enemies and destructible objects, which can be improved with the Luck statistic. There is only one place the player can spend this gold: the Librarian. This NPC sells a wide variety of weapons and armor at very high prices.

Conclusions

Though both of these games were released almost 18 years ago, they stand the test of time when it comes to their gameplay design. They manage to guide the player through a nonlinear world using level design and mechanics, which appeals to players who enjoy exploration and adventure. Making a platform debut in both cases, they each innovate on their past lineage in different but equally as effective ways.