

The Legend of Zelda: Research and Analysis

The Legend of Zelda, designed under the supervision of Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka and released in 1986, is undoubtedly a classic. But what's really interesting are the features that made it stand out in spite of other adventure based RPGs of its time, and how its mechanics compare with games across time. We have chosen to compare the mechanics of three games, in order to understand what made *The Legend of Zelda* stand out as a game, and posit what mechanics could make it even better.

The first game we decided to compare with *The Legend of Zelda* is *The Battle of Olympus* made for the Nintendo Entertainment system in 1988. Similarly to *Zelda*, it is an adventure focused RPG that urges the player to explore the world presented to them in the game, fighting enemies and collecting weapons. The story is mostly focused in Greek mythology, where the player traverses the world to talk to 8 Greek gods, in order to gain more power in the game. Though the two games are similar in their inclusion of open world exploration, discrete regions to explore and power up your character, item drop collectables, and real-time battle mechanics, the similarities really end there.

The Battle of Olympus contains many distinct mechanics. For one, is a side-scrolling game. This changes the orientation of the player and forces them to use different kinds of strategies to navigate the game. Enemies might fall from above, or the player might have to jump over enemies. There are even parts of the game where you are able to walk on the ceiling. Another major difference is the presence of NPCs. In *The Battle of Olympus*, the NPCs talk to you a lot, giving you directions in the game, and informing you where not to go if they feel you aren't strong enough yet. This isn't present in *Zelda* to such an extent. In fact, it is very easy to miss the first cave of the game and never collect the sword (a

necessary item to survive your first encounters with enemies). Though there are NPCs, the form of guidance in *Zelda* is much subtler. Another interesting mechanic is the ability to “fly” on Pegasus, giving the player more free movement of the overworld, then what you necessarily get in *The Legend of Zelda. The Battle of Olympus* also divides the world into discrete areas that you can travel to via an overworld map. There are many more important mechanics and differences but we will cut it off there.

Taking these mechanics into account. It would be interesting if *Zelda* contained some kind of fast travel system. While the world isn’t too large, it would be nice to not have to traverse areas already explored to get somewhere new. At minimum, it could contain a slightly more detailed map, so you wouldn’t have to remember areas you have already explored, but you could have some kind of visual indicator distinguishing regions in the overworld. *Zelda* could definitely have more guidance for the player. When the game starts you are thrown in a field with no idea of where to go or what you should do. I know the first time I played it I never went to retrieve the sword, but instead died immediately when I arrived in a field filled with enemies. Frustrated, I immediately turned off my emulator, returning to the game many years later.

Keeping with the RPG theme, we decided to compare *Secret of Mana*, released in 1993 for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. *Secret of Mana* is interesting, in that it allows for cooperative real-time battles, opposed to the more common turn-based approaches at the time. It has a relatively complex character and weapon upgrade system, and the real-time battles are pausable to issue off more strategic commands. It also contains a system which allows the player to level up, a shopping system to upgrade the character, and a weapon upgrade system where the player could increase his/her skill level with that weapon.

This game is interesting because it shares many similarities but more importantly striking differences to *The Legend of Zelda*. Unlike *Zelda*, it has a story baked into the game. *Zelda* has a narrative, but it comes with the game in a booklet, and isn't explicitly referenced in the framework of the game. In *Secret of Mana*, immediately, you are drawn into the game by characters with complex storylines, as you gain companions, and learn what your ultimate goal is. One of the more interesting design decisions is the inclusion of cooperative play. It has the ability of turning the game into a social event, opposed to a single-player RPG play through. Another design choice that is quite different from *Zelda* is the ability to use spells which cost MP. This adds another layer of strategy in that the player has to worry about the amount of health he/she has left as well timings for when to cast spells, and how to reserve their remaining MP. Another difference is the camera movement. In *The Legend of Zelda*, the camera movement is room-based in that, even in the overworld, the camera doesn't move until you try to step off screen. When you step off the screen the camera repositions and you are in a completely different area. *Secret of Mana*, instead, uses a camera that is always above the player. In this case, *Zelda's* camera movement might be more interesting in the fact that it creates the effect of discovery—you never see a peak of what will be in the next room or area of the over world until you are there.

There are many aspects from *Secret of Mana* that *The Legend of Zelda* could take of advantage of. A spell system that costs MP fits perfectly into the feeling that *Zelda* creates, and also gives the player more chances to make strategic decisions. The focus on a story is also applaudable in *Secret of Mana*. It would be nice to be given some kind of narrative or context in *Zelda*, at minimum when the game starts. An inclusion of a narrative like that found in *Secret of Mana* could also be used to guide the player and give them goals. The way *Zelda* stands, there doesn't seem to be any goals when the game

starts besides to explore the overworld. *Zelda* could also benefit from a weapon upgrade system. This, again, would increase the player's ability to be strategic while possibly making them more engaged, and more willing to explore areas to find items to upgrade their items. *Zelda*'s main strength seems to be exploring, so most things that encourage this behavior would be good additions to the game.

For the last game we take a jump forward in time as we compare and contrast the 2007 game *Okami*. *Okami* is an action-adventure game that uses a unique cell shaded aesthetic and has interesting mechanics that make it stand out from most other games. The player follows the journey of a wolf goddess trying to reclaim her power to thwart an ancient evil. It features a unique Brush system where the player can draw shapes on the screen using the joystick in order to perform special moves in the game or progress plot points. These moves have limitations though, as they are based on the amount of ink *Okami* has left in her inkwell, and this ink replenishes overtime. It is extremely story based. In fact, the opening scene, which is nothing but images and dialogue, lasts more than 10 minutes. This may lose the player, as it is important to remember that the player comes for a game not a movie and 10 minutes is a long time to expect the player to sit there twiddling their thumbs.

In light of being a modern game with a strikingly different premise its mechanics share many similarities as well as differences with *The Legend of Zelda*. One similarity is its focus on puzzles, though the brush mechanics add another dimension to solving the puzzles in the game, puzzles are the main focus of areas (especially dungeons), just as they are in *Zelda*. One difference between the two is, as mentioned earlier, *Zelda* is a game with a focus on exploration, *Okami* on the other hand is relatively linear. Though, it contains some side quests, and the side quests help the player progress in the main story, the focus of the game is solely one that story, with a linear progression. An interesting note about

these side quests is that they allow the player to obtain items that they can use to increase their stats.

Another difference is the battle system. Though it does feature real time battles like *Zelda*, the battles take place in their own “arena” that seems separate from the rest of the world. There is a distinction between when you are fighting an enemy and exploring. This distinction doesn’t occur in *The Legend of Zelda*.

With these differences and similarities in mind it is easy to see some ways we could improve upon *Zelda*. One of the more important takeaways from *Okami* is the fact that it has a more complex battle system (Brush mechanics, spells, etc.) and *Zelda* could definitely benefit from more creative ways to present enemies to the player. Also, it would be interesting if in *Zelda* the player could somehow increase the stats of the player—this does happen to some degree, when Link (the protagonist) increases his heart count at the end of each dungeon. Some kind of inclusion of side quests (apart from dungeons) would also be interesting, as they would give the user a reason to explore all parts of the map, trying to complete whatever other duty was given to them.

All of this paints a negative picture of *Zelda*, but in reality it is an amazing game. One mechanic that makes it shine is its grid based movement system. When link changes direction he is always snapped into a subgrid that he then walks upon. This allows the player not to get stuck on the corner of things (like doorways) and just makes sense. We would imagine if a real person were to walk through a dungeon they wouldn’t get snagged on every doorway they passed. Also, though it doesn’t contain many NPCs, their scarcity add value to their appearances. They are usually hidden, and when the player finds them he/she is able to purchase special items, or will receive hints to help them in the game. One of the areas where *The Legend of Zelda* shines, though, is the aforementioned camera system. The fact

that the camera can only be in one room at a time, helps to build suspense, and a feeling of exploring that simply can't be achieved to the same extent as a camera that directly follows the player.

Bringing all these ideas together we see that *The Legend of Zelda* does amazing things, but like anything it can be improved upon. It could include more NPC interaction or guidance, a more interesting narrative—or at least more explicit, a system for weapon upgrades, a fast-travel system, and a spell casting system. Obviously this analysis was not exhaustive, and there are many more things that could be included in the game that this analysis didn't have time to touch. That being said, it is important to keep balance in the game. A designer has to be careful that adding too many NPCs, guidance, or narrative doesn't take away from the exploratory nature of the game. And that weapon upgrades and spell casting don't eventually make Link too strong and actually have a negative strategic effect opposed to the positive one proposed earlier. It's a complex issue but we believe the above additions can only make *The Legend of Zelda* better, as long as they are implemented carefully and with balance in mind.