Playing the Ocarina Across Cultures: Explicating Ludo-Narrative Experience in The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

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Abstract

It has become commonplace in recent years to talk about narrative in games, but generally such discussions are limited to isolated concepts about the nature of game narrative, particularly that it is interactive and emergent. Such concepts are certainly essential, but their usage has too often been limited to the modes of reading and analysis used in other media (visual analysis, textual analysis, etc.). This paper presents an alternative—a unique theoretical framework and methodology for the analysis of game narrative. Our paper will explore new narrative concepts such as determined, personal, and collective narrative (Narrative Expression Model) in games that speak to larger relationships between play, narrative, and experience (Mejeur 2013). This exploration is enabled by the proposed CIMI method (Yap 2014), which lays out specific processes for the identification and analysis of ludo-narrative mechanics.

To that end, this paper focuses on one of the most critically-acclaimed games of all time (Guinness 2008, Schneider 1998): Nintendo’s The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998). In fact, it is the titular Ocarina itself that represents the nexus of several important phenomena in game mechanics, narrative, and culture. As a unique game mechanic, it constitutes one of the first uses of memory and rhythm in an epic fantasy adventure video game. As a semiotic narrative symbol, it accounts for the focal point of meaning in the greater plot of the game. Finally, through the collective player narratives of the digital communities and international acclaim surrounding the game, the ocarina becomes a truly cross-cultural object.

By drawing these elements of Ocarina of Time together and exploring the relationships between them, we demonstrate both the presence of multiple narrative forces in the game and methods for analyzing them. Further refinement of our approach not only enables the analyses of individual games, players, and stories, but also how they fit into larger social and cultural...
contexts. In this way the story of a single cross-cultural object, the ocarina, can become part of a collective narrative of Nintendo on an international scale. This novel approach to the study of game narrative is not only useful on a scholarly or critical level, but could also help game designers in the imagining of new game mechanics and the potential creation of new cross-cultural objects.
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Intro to Theoretical Concerns/Narrative Expression

Amidst the proliferation of discourse on games—digital and otherwise—in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift toward understanding how, where, and why games convey meaning to their players. To be more specific, game scholars, critics, and developers have begun to realize the vital importance of narrative in games, and how our concepts of narrative alter within the oft-referenced magic circles of play. Several recent books, including Tamer Thabet’s Video Game Narrative and Criticism: Playing the Story (2015) and Koenitz et. al’s Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice (2015), demonstrate the need for theoretical frameworks and methodologies for the study of narrative in games. Such a framework and such a methodology is our project today, and in order to demonstrate the workings of these models we turn to one of the most popular games of all time and a masterpiece of game narrative: The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (Nintendo 1998). Ocarina of Time is much more than just a popular game, and The Legend of Zelda is much more than just a longstanding game series. Both the game and the series continue to accrue cultural significance, and more importantly, cultural meaning that becomes truly cross-cultural in Nintendo’s international success with the franchise. In order to understand both the success and the meaning bound up in and around the game, one must look to the game’s narrative, a narrative always intertwined with play and particular game mechanics. Here we present an analysis of the eponymous Ocarina of Time as both narrative and game mechanic, and in so doing, take the first steps toward unpacking both its cross-cultural meaning and the insights it can provide for better design and development.

For the purposes of this paper, we will be framing our discussions around the Narrative Expression Model (Mejeur 2013) in conjunction with the CIMI Method (Yap 2014) to explicate
the ludo-narrative experience of Ocarina of Time. To begin this analysis, a brief explanation and exploration of the theoretical concepts of the Narrative Expression Model is necessary.

Because narrative expression takes place within the framework of storytelling, it is possible to develop a model of its structures in games (see Figure 1). Game narrative is the confluence of multiple narrative expressions proceeding from different authorial sources, the first of which is the development team who makes the game. The narrative laid down by the developers of a game is generally scripted and exists independently from player interaction, though players do have means of affecting it and pushing it forward. I refer to this as determined narrative. This narrative consists of the lore and backstory embedded in the virtual world of a game, such as the history and current events of the world of Hyrule in Ocarina of Time, the game we are concerned with today. Determined narrative is distinct from, but intricately tied to, the stories that the players can produce for themselves within games. I call the stories created by players personal narrative. Personal narrative emerges through the stories players attach to the characters they play, as well as the choices they make in exploring and playing in a given virtual world. To put it another way, no two players encounter a game in exactly the same way, but rather they have different (if similar) experiences as they work to progress and beat the game. Finally, I use collective narrative to describe what happens when players come together in groups and create group narratives either within or outside the game. Determined, personal, and collective narrative are interrelated and codependent; there is no moment within a game when any of them exists purely unfettered from the other two.
Figure 1: The Narrative Expression Model. Game narrative can be considered the confluence of three major forces: the Determined Narrative, which originates from the Developers, the Personal Narrative, which is comprised of the individual play experience of the player, respective to each playthrough, and the Collective Narrative which is made up of the shared personal narratives of players (Mejeur 2013).

The CIMI Method

The aforementioned Narrative Expression Model constitutes a feasible way to conceptualize the dimensions of game narrative inherent in a game and the people that activate and surround it. But as games are interactive systems in flux, how can one begin to observe the narrative phenomenon which the Narrative Expression Model highlights? What are the methods and practices that would make such a study possible? In response to that very quandary, the CIMI Method provides a feasible solution.
Games are an amorphous, ever-changing beast—such is the nature of play. More than precedent media such as film and literature, the medium of the video game is one in which constant innovation, redefinition, and re-genre-ification seem to characterize the progress and development of the medium itself. With such a high volume of output (Cerny, 2013), frequency of change and iteration, researchers in Game Studies have also found it equally difficult to devise and agree upon methodologies to utilize when analyzing games from any given aspect (Quijano-Cruz, 2008). Put simply, it is very difficult to draw a picture of a creature whose form is growing and shifting each and every second. Considering this, it is necessary to devise and propose methodologies with the modularity and flexibility necessary to observe the target medium in flux.

To address this point, the CIMI Method (pronounced "see-me") was proposed and tested (Yap, 2014). This method—which is comprised of a Close Critical Reading, an Isolation of Mechanic, and Player Interviews—is designed from the start to retain a degree of methodological and analytical flexibility which can account for the ever-changing landscape of video games. The CIMI Method is outlined in detail below as follows (and in brief in Figure X):

1. Close Critical Reading: In this phase, we designate a singular Candidate Text (game) for study. The criteria for game selection can be tuned by the researcher. For the purposes of our study, we have designated Nintendo's 1998 game entitled "The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time" (referred to here as OoT) as the Candidate Text. OoT was so selected for this trial of CIMI due to its overwhelmingly positive reviews and relative historical endurance as a legacy game in the greater franchise, which belies the game's international cultural influence. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of the Ocarina itself as a cultural touchstone and symbol is of particular interest in this new digital narrative. With OoT, the special relationship between the Ocarina and the incremental advancement of the
narrative in the game was analyzed, and the results of this analysis discussed. After selecting a trait to investigate (in this case, the Ocarina of OoT), we can then move on to Step 2 of CIMI, which is the Isolation of the target game mechanic.

2. Isolation of Mechanic: In order to better understand the target mechanic and resulting experiential phenomenon in a time-feasible manner, the second step of CIMI involves creating a prototype mini-game which is essentially the target game mechanic of the original Candidate Text, stripped down and rendered as an experimental facsimile. It is not feasible to collect player data from only players of OoT, which is a considerable investment of time. Instead, in this step of CIMI we would design and build a smaller game that only takes an average of 5-minutes to complete. This mini-game is then followed by a research survey used to collect the necessary data. While this step is occurring, researchers can concurrently begin Step 3 of CIMI, which is composed of Player Interviews.

3. Player Interviews: While Step 2 of CIMI is designed to isolate the target mechanic for more expedient, wholesale data collection, Step 3 of CIMI is focused more on in-depth, exploratory textual analysis of actual player experiences with the original Candidate Text. In other words, it is quite necessary to grab the opinions of the actual players of OoT and explore their opinions of their gaming experiences. Analysis of player answers in this regard will be helpful in addressing dimensions of Player Experience with respect to the Model of Narrative Experience introduced earlier in this paper.
Figure 2: The CIMI Method Explained. In Step 1, a Close Critical Reading is conducted on a Candidate Text, and it is analyzed using Narratological methods in order to designate the target study phenomenon. In Step 2, the target phenomenon/game mechanic is isolated in the form of a short, time-feasible mini-game prototype which can be distributed on the internet for data gathering using a custom research survey. In Step 3, Players of the original Candidate Text are interviewed for their opinions and experiences of the Candidate Text.

CIMI and The Ocarina

It is important to note that the steps of the CIMI Method are modular in that the steps can generally be done in the order which is most appropriate for the candidate game. In CIMI’s initial application the steps took on the form and order depicted above. For the purposes of this study of OoT however, we have chosen to start by applying the Close Critical Reading Step of the CIMI Method to OoT in order to select an appropriate ludo-narrative mechanic for study: the

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1 The CIMI Method has been previously (and initially) applied to the Namco-Bandai game Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War (AC0) after an initial vetting phase of Close Critical Reading (Yap, 2012, 2013). The CIMI Method was subsequently formulated and applied in its current form, with respect to AC0’s particular ludo-narrative mechanic which was peculiar in the sense that it was altering the game narrative experience incrementally, and mostly without the player’s overt knowledge of said mechanic (which for the purposes of those studies, the mechanic was dubbed the “Stealth Narrative Mechanic”). The results from this initial application of the CIMI Method on a single game with respect to a particular ludo-narrative mechanic were helpful in gaining insight into how subtle, intentionally-stealthy narrative mechanics function for and with players (Yap, 2014).
Ocarina itself. From this point, we can then do the Player Interview Step in order to gain a sense of what was most experienced by the actual players in relation to Ocarina mechanic. After gaining that insight, it will be then easier to proceed to the Isolation of the Mechanic Step of CIMI, as we are basing the isolation of the game mechanic prototype on the player interviews. For the scope of this paper, because this is a preliminary usage of the CIMI Method with the Narrative Expression Model, we will be dealing primarily with the Close Critical Reading Step.

OoT represents an intriguing opportunity to examine a game artefact which is simultaneously a semiotic symbol and a game mechanic. With this preliminary application of the Close Critical Reading step of CIMI and the consideration of the Narrative Expression Model, we hope to gain some insights as to how OoT succeeds in both telling its Action RPG narrative and creating a myth that transcends borders both digital and cultural.

**Ocarina Analysis**

The Ocarina itself is the cornerstone of this installment of the Zelda franchise, the titular, defining characteristic of this sequel, and (with respect to the narrative of the game fiction) the most important magical item in the game. In fact, the Ocarina is arguably more important than both the Master Sword and Triforce in this game in particular due to the ubiquitousness of the Master Sword and Triforce in several of the Zelda games, and also due to the unique and significant function that the Ocarina has in this game. If the Master Sword and Triforce are the mythological constants in the Zelda mythos, then the introduction of the Ocarina of Time in this game serves to create a new branch of the tale, completely characterized by the magical potency of the Ocarina and further developed by the Ocarina’s use as an indispensable hero tool. Having considered that the Ocarina is essential and effective as both a game mechanic and an narrative element, we can treat the Ocarina as a ludo-narrative mechanic which can serve
as our central point of interest with the first step of the CIMI Method with respect to the Narrative Expression Model.

The ocarina stands out as a significant and meaningful element of *The Ocarina of Time* and its narrative for several reasons, one of which is its prominence in the game’s determined narrative. The determined narrative of the game is the story of a boy (Link) who awakens to a destiny that is much greater than he is, and he embarks on a journey to save the land of Hyrule from the treacherous machinations of the evil Ganondorf. Early on in this story Link receives an ocarina from his friend Saria, and throughout his journey he uses either this ocarina or the Ocarina of Time to progress beyond obstacles that would be insurmountable without them. Here one might note that Link acquires a sword and a shield before an ocarina, but these items do not persist throughout the story and time in the way the Ocarina does. Thus the Ocarina takes on special importance and meaning within the game as that which persists with Link throughout the determined narrative. The Ocarina represents an immutable part of a larger story that plays itself out endlessly in Hyrule, a story of Courage, Wisdom, Power, and the struggles between them. This determined narrative does not change and exists quite independent of a given player.

However the Ocarina is not merely a significant (we use this word deliberately, it signs or signifies something) object in the determined narrative, rather it is also a crucial game mechanic without which the player cannot progress in the game. In many instances in the game, such as confronting the guard in Kakariko Village on the way up Death Mountain, Link is presented with an obstacle that can only be surmounted by playing a particular tune on the Ocarina. Here the Ocarina functions as an intersection between narrative and play in the game, revealing how the two are intricately bound up in one another. As an instrument the Ocarina makes this point especially lucid—music itself is both narrative and performance, it is variable in its play even as it
is bound to particular notes and orders. The Ocarina is not either narrative device or game
mechanic, it can only be understood as both.

In a similar fashion, the Ocarina stands at the confluence of determined and personal
narrative. While the Ocarina is an inevitable feature of every personal narrative in the game
because of its prominence in the determined narrative, exactly where, when, and how it is played
can vary from player to player. This is especially true of songs like Saria’s Song and the various
dungeon songs that can have their effects anywhere they are used. The Ocarina thus exists as
narrative expression of both the developers and the players, involving creative acts on the parts
of both parties. Here the Ocarina’s nature as a sign becomes apparent. As a sign, the Ocarina is
created and used by the different parties that use it to communicate or play, but it also takes on a
life of its own independent of any given individual. This is not limited to the game itself, but as
we shall shortly see the Ocarina becomes a cross-cultural object outside the game as part of
collective narratives much larger than itself.

Hereto the discussion has focused on the nature and structure of the Ocarina, but good
analysis must eventually turn to its meaning. The meaning of the Ocarina proceeds logically
from what it is and what it does—it is an instrument (albeit a magical one) that plays music. What
it is used for throughout the game hints at its true meaning; in short, the Ocarina means
relationship. In almost every instance where the Ocarina is played, its music is used to establish
and further relationships between characters and each other, characters and locations, or
characters and time itself. The earliest example of this is in Saria’s gifting of an ocarina to Link
mentioned earlier, an example built upon later when Saria teaches Link Saria’s Song. Here the
Ocarina itself and the music it plays continues a relationship between two friends. A similar
relationship is built between Link and Zelda or the royal family through the Ocarina of Time and
the use of Zelda’s Lullaby. All of the different dungeon songs build relationships between Link (or the player) and particular locations, allowing the player to quickly return to them. In building these relationships, the Ocarina and the music it plays take on meaning, meaning that can be communicated through the universal language of music. It is important to remember that though the Ocarina and music have the universal effect of building relationships, this does not mean that they have the same meaning in all situations or to all people. The variable nature of the sign remains.

The Ocarina’s meaning–building relationships–is not limited to determined and personal narrative within the game. Rather, the Ocarina has become a central figure in much larger collective narratives built up around the game. Nintendo’s success with *Ocarina of Time* is well documented, and the game along with its series remains wildly popular internationally (Metacritic still lists *Ocarina of Time* as the highest rated game of all time). Within this setting, the Ocarina (along with a few other iconic items such as the Master Sword and the Triforce) has become a truly cross-cultural object in the sense that it is immediately recognizable in gaming cultures across the globe. This success and recognition is not accidental, but stems directly from the meaning of the Ocarina and its ability to construct meaningful experiences and relationships. The Ocarina allows players to relate to narratives, myths, and legends much greater than themselves, and in so doing becomes a focal point through which players can relate to each other. The ability to construct similar objects in other games has the potential to become a powerful game development goal because objects that lend themselves readily to cross-cultural meaning can engender the collective narratives that make games successful.

Towards understanding the Ocarina as a Cross-cultural Object
Within the context of our study with narrative in games, we define the term “Cross-Cultural Object” as any narrative symbol, mechanic, or even character, which exists within and can extend outside of a game to become adopted by the fan community on the international level. A cursory survey of many games of modern acclaim will reveal several such ubiquitous cross-cultural objects which are an integral part of a game’s ludo-narrative world. A couple of prominent examples are the cardboard box from Konami’s Metal Gear franchise, or the desert cape from thatgamecompany’s Journey. The Nintendo intellectual properties have several long-standing cross-cultural objects of their own which have incredible staying power: the pokeball from Pokemon or the cult of all things Mario. Furthermore, the Super Smash Bros. franchise utilizes the marketing potential of cross-cultural objects to potentially maximum effect by placing all of their most recognizable franchise characters into a single game, and allowing players to choose from a plethora of memorable characters, now unrestricted by the bounds of their respective games.

As it pertains to the Legend of Zelda franchise, there are indeed several citable cross-cultural objects, most notably the Triforce and Master Sword, and the triumvirate of Zelda/Link/Ganon as constant characters who persistent through all games in the series. Every single one of these game-borne artifacts and characters have been adopted positively in the popular culture of modern gaming society. They all enjoy a considerable degree of ubiquity and are easily recognized by the gaming community at large. Furthermore, not only are such symbols merely recognized, the meanings they carry by association through narrative and gameplay experiences is what truly qualifies such objects as cross-cultural. In other words, the contextual significance of the game object exists and can be interpreted (and felt) by the gamer, regardless of their particular cultural identity. In our research, we contend that not only do such cross-
cultural objects exist in and from games, but also that games are an ideal medium for creating such symbols which achieve a fascinating degree of universality amongst gamers of all cultures. It would appear that the ubiquity of play across cultures is similar to the ubiquity of music (both of which are bound up in the Ocarina), and the communicative effects of both reach beyond boundaries of language in significant ways.

Considering this, we contend that it is very much within the interests of game development teams to consider and cultivate means for the potential creation of cross-cultural objects within their own games. By striving to create a ludo-narrative mechanic which has dual-functionality as both symbol and mechanic—as in OoT—developers can create potentially meaningful signs of their games which inspire a cycle of myth-building centered around that cross-cultural object. Fandom feeds the context and tale of a cross-cultural object through the collective narrative of the player community. According to Jenova Chen for example, fan art can be an ideal place to look if one wants to understand what parts of a game were the most memorable for the player (Chen 2013). We would further propose that such art can indicate what is valuable to fan communities as collectives of players and their stories.

This was precisely the case with the Ocarina of OoT. The Ocarina itself has reached a status of international recognition as the signature item of this particular installment in the Zelda franchise. We contend that when developers can strive to create such a cross-cultural object with the potency to reference an associated mythology and build further meaning via the traded personal narratives of the collective game community, then they can potentially succeed in not only creating a good game, but also in creating an enduring new digital mythology through cross-cultural objects. The overall objective of this research into the Narrative Expression Model
and the CIMI Method is to help developers to gain insights into how developers can create cross-cultural objects in subsequent games.
Future Work

With a game as vast and deep as OoT, much more work remains to be done in order to further explicate the narrative experience in terms that echo effectively back to both game developers and the true stakeholders of the medium at large--the gamers themselves. In this paper, although we were able to take those first important, yet tentative steps towards understanding how a game can utilize a mechanic that functions simultaneously as a symbol, more analysis and discussion are needed in order to gain further insights into how the phenomenon and meaning around the Ocarina of OoT both 1) exists in the collective narrative of the game, and 2) creates that meaning within the varying contexts of said communities of collective narrative.

To that end, based on the Close Critical Reading of OoT using the Model of Narrative Expression undertaken in this paper, the next step for the investigation would be to initiate the Player Interview step of CIMI (as opposed to proceeding directly into the Isolation of the Mechanic step). As it was mentioned prior, while the Close Critical Reading phase can offer insights into symbol and meaning as well as understanding how the mechanic of the Ocarina paces the gameplay and narrative, it would be highly advantageous to commence the Player Interview step of CIMI in order to further understand the collective and personal narrative forces of the Narrative Expression Model. By gathering player testimonies which pay particular attention to how players both interpret the Ocarina as a symbol and mechanic and how they feel about the Ocarina as a cross-cultural object, we believe we can more accurately design the Isolated Mechanic Prototype of this study.

The work is indeed arduous and the undertaking by no means trivial, but any game which has been able to establish a legacy such as Ocarina of Time is more than deserving of such depth
of academic inquiry. The benefits of such a quest are many: to help to further establish the quality of the game medium at large, to show how the game medium also has “classic texts” which can be considered a kind of canon, and to better understand how these interactive digital classics help our modern current society to collectively create their own meaning and meaningful experiences. Thus we stand at an opening, and a path forward for future work and inquiry.
References


