

Following the Hero's Memories: The Role of Memory as a (Re)construction of the Narrative in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the concept of the hero and the role of memory as an object of (re) construction of the world in the narrative of the Nintendo digital game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Through the analysis of how memory is reconstructed in Link and the characters that inhabit Hyrule, memories, historical and social memory, monuments, documents, space, and gameplay within the same digital game are also reconstructed. Testimonial memory, in turn, will help remember and construct the narrative of Link's personal and social history by reconstructing the story. The personal experience that the player has while interacting with the game through the act of playing can build the meta-discourse between memory and narrative to understand the hero and his journey through the world. In this sense, the importance of the character Link within the game is affirmed, as he is a much more complex subject than a simple archetype within the game mechanics.

KEY WORDS:

digital games, hero, memory, narrative, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

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Introduction: The Wild and Narrative

Since the appearance of the first game in *The Legend of Zelda series*¹, which “combined a well-thought-out fairy tale with perfectly crafted gameplay mechanics”,² and being S. Miyamoto's first “free-roaming game”,³ it has managed to establish itself as one of the most innovative games in the digital game industry. 30 years later, a new instalment emerges where the environment presents a narrative that allows “infusing story elements into the physical space of a game or alongside the actions of the players”.⁴ Thus, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*⁵ is born, which returns to the origins of creating a completely open and unexplored world.

The vastness of *Breath of the Wild* is explicitly and symbolically established the moment Link runs from the Chamber of Resurrection, a confined space, to an overlook, an open space, to gaze upon Hyrule. For a brief moment, we see C. D. Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) come to life, and just like the painted traveller, Link stands with his back turned, alone in the immensity of the landscape (Picture 1). In the distance, mountains, lakes, and valleys can be seen, which will be explored, presenting the adventure in material form within an open space. As this happens, a particular feeling arises; the music in this part introduces a desire for experimentation with the environment.

1 NINTENDO R&D4: *The Legend of Zelda (Famicom version)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1986.

2 KENT, S.: *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. New York, NY : Three Rivers Press, 2001, p. 468.

3 Ibidem.

4 WOLF, M.: *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology and Art of Gaming*. Santa Barbara, CA : Greenwood, 2021, p. 684.

5 NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo Switch version)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.

The excitement of exploration emerges while witnessing the beginning of an adventure behind the hero, and the space is tinged with a nostalgic 'reflective' feeling,⁶ which persists throughout the ruined world into which the character and the player are introduced, where loneliness and the passage of time over the landscape evoke a past that cannot be accessed at the moment. This spatial nostalgia responds to the character's interaction while navigating a ruined and immense world, where the sounds of wild nature have taken over a civilization that once existed, as evidenced by abandoned buildings and temples, normalizing contemplation and reflection so that the player experiences solitude in the face of nature taking over the place. The music creates a dual harmony, first towards the connection with this space, and second, towards the musical construction⁷ of a leitmotif that will expand throughout the gameplay, becoming part of the game's narrative itself. Hence, nostalgia is evoked even if the player has not played any other game in the Zelda franchise. After this scene, a question arises: What has happened to this world? It seems that a dense nature has buried an entire kingdom, along with a narrative that must be explored from every possible angle.



Picture 1: Game opening. Link emerges from the Chamber of Resurrection on the Great Plateau

Source: author's screenshot; NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo Switch version). [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.

Now, the relationship between the narrated world and the game's storytelling is particular to the gameplay. It presents a non-linear storytelling⁸ that can be replayed over and over again. This means that the story can be explored through various paths and folds, which are segregated within the game's open world. In relation to the latter, it presents a space with "powerful environmentalist aesthetics and the immense pleasure of wandering through a virtualized natural world without a proper goal".⁹ Link awakens in a post-apocalyptic time, without his memories, gazing upon a vast world and following a voice.

6 FORD, D.: The Haunting of Ancient Societies in the Mass Effect Trilogy and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. In *Game Studies*, 2021, Vol. 21, No 4. [online]. [2023-10-25]. Available at: <https://gamestudies.org/2104/articles/dom_ford>.

7 For more information, see: PONS, M.: *La música de The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Málaga : Applehead Team Creaciones, 2022.

8 CANAVAN, G.: The Legend of Zelda in the Anthropocene. In *Paradoxa*, 2019-2020, Vol. 18, No. 31, p. 155.

9 Ibidem, p. 161.

Through gameplay and the use of different mechanics, the narrative of the wild space is understood, a space that conceals the ruins of Hyrule's golden ages. Within these ruins lies something of great value to Link – his memories. They represent what once was, what he couldn't do, and what he did in the face of his own identity as a champion. This time, Link decides to be a hero. His memories will embody the experience of having lost everything. As a champion, he was defeated along with the others, but he still has a journey to undertake as a hero. Now, in the present time of the game, Link develops a truthful version of himself in accordance with the discourse of Hyrule's prophecies – the victory of the hero.

In this sense, W. Bradford considers narrative as an “impulse to communicate, and anything that contributes to this impulse is an element of narrative”.¹⁰ The narrative becomes immersive and constantly interacts with the player when they listen to its music, serving as a crucial bridge to communicate symbolism, signs, tension/relaxation situations, and, in general, any information within the gameplay. Thus, the game's narrative also includes its soundtrack, which portrays situations according to each location in Hyrule, such as places where nature or ancestral mechanics are the topics.¹¹ This is complemented by the nature of a ludonarrative structure,¹² where archetypal characters of good and evil are established.

It is precisely this narrative that will be reconstructed through experimentation and the adventure itself, fulfilling the two elements for the elaboration of a digital game's rhetoric: game proficiency and world design,¹³ which must be discerned through the game mechanics.

As the space is discovered in gameplay, the player can realize that, depending on their decisions, the fragmented story of the past and the understanding of the present can be reconstructed if desired. However, the following question arises: What role does the hero Link, play in the narrative reconstruction of the game?

Based on these background details, Link's memories will be approached through a methodological analysis that establishes the aesthetic-literary dimension for the narrative reconstruction of *Breath of the Wild*, both in terms of the construction of the past and the conceptualization of the heroism attributed to Link. Likewise, the (re)construction of memory allows us to understand the heroic dimension associated with Link, not only in the characters but also in the very setting itself. All of this serves to grasp the complexity of the journey that Link undertakes, not only to save Zelda but also to safeguard the past of all of Hyrule and his own. In this way, the meaning of his role is (re)interpreted, emphasizing its significance as a hero, from the present to the past, where the key elements to establish the journey are the analysis of the memories themselves within the digital game's narrative.

10 BRADFORD, W.: Exploring the Narrative Implications of Emerging Topics in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. In *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, 2020, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 3. [online]. [2023-11-01]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2020.1.4.1>>.

11 Ibidem, p. 7-15.

12 WOLF, M.: *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology and Art of Gaming*. Santa Barbara, CA : Greenwood, 2021, p. 567.

13 QUIJANO, J.: *The Composition of Video Games: Narrative, Aesthetics, Rhetorics and Play*. Jefferson, NC : McFarland, 2019, p. 109-117.

The Memories of the Hero and the Narrative Reconstruction

In the Hyrule of 100 years ago, the hero Link appears as just another character among the five champions. When the Calamity of Ganon occurs, Link is destroyed and buried in the Chamber of Resurrection as a champion, only to be resurrected a century later as a hero and find his way through the historical, social, and individual memories of the survivors and new generations of Hyruleans. Link also confronts his own memories and his own identity, witnessing his defeat and loss of everything, but also finding meaning in them as he (re)constructs himself as a hero.

The act of (re)constructing a narrative through memory involves two factors. First, the temporal aspect of storytelling, understanding time as a set of interconnected and nested times between memory and discourse.¹⁴ Link becomes this memorial connection of time, becoming a paratext for the narrative of the game itself. The macro history is seen through gameplay, but the stories of the characters are experienced through the hero's experimentation. This dialogical nature of memory with history reveals the layers of the past Hyrule and, at the same time, the truth of the present. Thus, between social and historical time, memory mediates and has a narrative character of "saying the present, not just the past",¹⁵ always involving a social memory of those who narrate and articulate time, including its narrative dimension, which includes "rhetorical, argumentative, interactional, and aesthetic dimensions".¹⁶ These articulations "form chronotopes, forms of space-time"¹⁷ where, among many things, the various images that the character lives and develops in that space-time are produced. At this point, one may wonder, do these chronotopes have a linear order?

To understand this question, one must comprehend the dimensions in which the hero operates within the narrative, not only in traversing space but also in terms of memory, which associates narrative events from any point in the story, distinguishing between the historical and the fictional, between 'virtual acts' and 'actual occurrences'.¹⁸ Link's memories are necessary for the forms of evocation of a past required by the present. Their intentions are not necessarily historical; memory serves as legitimization, reclamation, or condemnation, structurally linked to current and 'updating needs'.¹⁹ Link is the primary witness of the past, both in space and concerning the characters before the Calamity of Ganon. Therefore, he is needed to provide answers to the unsettling confusion and the fate of Hyrule, as well as to the new protagonists who inhabit it. In this sense, Link, metanarratively, becomes a character who helps give meaning to the leaders and warriors of the surviving tribes.

Secondly, there is the act of remembering in the tensional struggle against forgetting. At the beginning of the game, we find a hero devoid of memories, unable even to discern his own identity. Only through interaction with the space and the characters can

14 HAYE, A. et al.: Tiempo y memoria: sobre la mediación narrativa de la subjetividad histórica. In *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 2018, Vol. 17, No. 65, p. 22.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 25.

16 *Ibidem*.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 26.

18 GARCÍA, F.: Ética y narración audiovisual. In GARCÍA, F., RAJAS, M. (eds.): *Narrativas audiovisuales: el relato*. Madrid: Ícono 14, 2011, p. 24.

19 GALÁN, F., RUEDA, J.: Hibridación, televisión y memoria. In GARCÍA, F., RAJAS, M. (eds.): *Narrativas audiovisuales: el relato*. Madrid: Ícono 14, 2011, p. 250.

he gain access to these memories and remember who he was and who he desires to be. Thus “the tension between remembering and forgetting is constitutive of memory, not understood as a closed and immutable space where past experiences are stored as museum pieces, but as a process in time that is redefined from and through the present, open to new readings and interpretations capable of revealing other conceptions of the past and new possibilities for imagining the future”.²⁰

Moreover, one must not forget the character of the journey. The hero is undertaking, which naturally drives the fictitious interaction with the virtual space represented, imbuing it with meanings through the player’s gameplay, not limited to mere exploration from the character’s perspective, “but rather, much like our experience of actual space, shaped by our own (albeit fictional) spatial practices”.²¹ This spatial practice is one of the greatest features of *Breath of the Wild*, an interactive space endowed with meanings, storytelling, and mechanics to be discovered.

Another notable characteristic is the story sense, which constructs the entire game’s narrative, not just the act of traversing from point A to point B, but rather “the way players can unearth details of the world – the story sense, the narrative ambiance, is richly underscored through the item design, NPCs, and metanarrative discussions around the different games in the series and any links between them”.²²

To discover Hyrule and himself, Link must not only pursue the objective and purpose of saving Zelda and the rest of the survivors of the kingdom after Ganon’s Cataclysm but also find himself. He will do so through the vastness of the world in which he awakens, a world different from what he once knew, a ruin of what Hyrule used to be. Among many things, Link must recover his memories, which will begin to unveil themselves through the space and the way he interacts with it.

This aforementioned experience goes beyond a mere intermediation between the archetypal character of Link and the player who controls him through mechanics and gameplay. It is the closeness of the protagonist to the player and the creation of strong projection bonds, due to ingenuity in the face of adversity, fighting against insurmountable odds, and being a stranger in his own world.²³ However, Link has a purpose, which he will fulfil by leveraging his internal resources. Nevertheless, depending on the player’s decision, Link could remain devoid of his memories throughout the game if that were their choice.²⁴ However, the exploration itself allows for almost accidental encounters with beams of light found in the corners of nature and ruins of Hyrule, which grant access to fragments of his memory.

The narrative of a digital game is based on the player’s interaction with the game system, which allows them to access the story. Thus, the player interacts with it at some point through the gameplay process, meaning that “interactive narrative”²⁵ is closely tied to the

20 SARACENI, G.: *Escribir hacia atrás: herencia, lengua, memoria*. Rosario : Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2008, p. 24-25.

21 VAN DE MOSSELAER, N., GUALENI, S.: Representing Imaginary Spaces, Fantasy, Fiction, and Virtuality. In GOTWALD, D., TURNER-RAHMAN, G., VAHDAT, V. (eds.): *Virtual Interiorities. Book Three. Senses of Place and Space*. Pittsburgh, PA : ETC Press, 2022, p. 37.

22 WADESON, D.: Building A Universe. In HEUSSNER, T. (ed.): *The Advance Game Narrative Toolbox*. London : CRC Press, 2019, p. 37.

23 BEAN, A.: Therapeutic Use of Video Games. In KOWERT, R., QUANDT, T. (eds.): *The Video Game Debate 2: Revisiting the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2021, p. 86.

24 See also: VAN VUGHT, J., MITCHELL, A.: The Missing Link: Demonstrating Videogame Formalism Through an Analysis of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. In RYAN, M. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2023*, Sydney : DiGRA, p. 1-4. [online]. [2023-11-05]. Available at: <https://digraa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-CAMERA-READY_Jasper-van-Vught.pdf>.

25 PANG, Q., LI, J.: *Interactive Narrative Design Methods for Video Games: A Framework Based on Game Development and Design*. Released on 7th November 2022. [online]. [2023-11-02]. Available at: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4270227>>.

design of the digital game itself. In the case of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the plot, main and secondary characters are necessary for gameplay and the development of the story, which is conditioned by the player's immersion through the interactive narrative of the digital game.

In this context, it is understood that: "In all media, a story is never perceived exactly as it was conceived. We all possess different mental models – composed of our own feelings, thoughts, and experiences – that directly affect our individual perception of stories. Due to their abstract and subjective nature, games with a high emergent narrative may face more difficulties in communicating something more significant to players".²⁶

Thus, a process of narrativity emerges, where "the receiver actively constructs the story provided by the narrative medium".²⁷ For *Breath of the Wild*, these narrative elements are formed through dramatic tensions and a dramatic curve, constructing an emergent narrative in which the player interacts with the game, and these elements are "contextualized by a specific story".²⁸

Considering all of the above, it is evident that Link is a metanarrative character, encompassing the three distinctions made by K. L. Walton: a) fictional/represented memory of the avatars, b) actual/performed memory of the players, and c) virtual/imaginative memory of the virtual subjects.²⁹ Going beyond discrepancies, the act of remembering in Link will make him a character that stands out from other franchises and digital game instalments³⁰ that include memory as part of the narrative.

Memory and Narrative in *Breath of the Wild*

In the book *Creating a Champion*, the following is introduced: "In the Great Plains, a young man awakens after having been asleep for 100 years, losing his memories. Guided by a mysterious voice, he travels through the vast lands of Hyrule on a mission to defeat Calamity Ganon and recover his memories".³¹

These are the two main elements that shape the narrative of the game: memory and journey. "While the century-long Restoration Sleep heals Link's wounds, it also steals his memories".³² The hero had no emotions like the chosen champion from a hundred years ago. He awakens in a relatively unknown time. Only a few people who knew him before are still alive. Freed from the attention and expectations of people and with no memories of

26 BRANDÃO, L.: *A narratividade e a narrativa emergente gerada pela mecânica nos jogos digitais: uma proposta de modelo ludonarrativo de análise*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Recife : Centro de Comunicação e Artes Departamento de Design Programa de Pós-graduação em Design, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2020, p. 15. [online]. [2023-11-05]. Available at: <<https://repositorio.ufpe.br/handle/123456789/41083>>.

27 ALVES, J.: *Narratividade. E-Dicionário de Termos Literários de Carlos Ceia*. Released on 24th December 2009. [online]. [2023-11-12]. Available at: <<https://edtl.fcsh.unl.pt/encyclopedia/narratividade/>>.

28 BRANDÃO, L.: *A narratividade e a narrativa emergente gerada pela mecânica nos jogos digitais: uma proposta de modelo ludonarrativo de análise*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Recife : Centro de Comunicação e Artes Departamento de Design Programa de Pós-graduação em Design, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2020, p. 45. [online]. [2023-11-05]. Available at: <<https://repositorio.ufpe.br/handle/123456789/41083>>.

29 VAN DE MOSSELAER, N., CASELLI, S.: The Narrative Effects and Value of Memory Discrepancies in Digital Games. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2022, Vol. 5, No 1, p. 30.

30 For the list of games that can be used for comparison, see: VAN DE MOSSELAER, N., CASELLI, S.: The Narrative Effects and Value of Memory Discrepancies in Digital Games. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2022, Vol. 5, No 1, p. 24-41.

31 RICHARDSON, M.: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Creating a Champion*. Milwaukee, WI : Dark Horse Books, 2018, p. 59.

32 Ibidem, p. 65.

the past, the Link of this era “is more expressive and joyful than the stoic knight he was before”.³³ We play as him in *Breath of the Wild*, experiencing the burden of memories he carried long ago as we search for the twelve scattered memories in the vastness of space.³⁴

As a result, another question arises: why is it necessary to remember while constructing the game’s narrative? Simply because Link’s individual memory is associated with the collective memory of Hyrule. It is important for understanding the past, comprehending the present, and envisioning the future.³⁵ Thus, the two types of long-term memory that characterize Link are explicit or declarative memory, which is a “conscious recollection of a fact or event”,³⁶ meaning selective memory. The other type is implicit memory or practical skills,³⁷ reflected in the character’s swordsmanship and agility, which surpasses that of other warriors in Hyrule.

Now, “memory is narrative in a twofold sense, as a progression of events over time and as the shaping of a plot (with actors, settings, and actions)”.³⁸ As the gameplay progresses, we understand that memory is a central substance throughout the game. The act of reconstructing memory aims to bring back meaning and remembrance. It is important to note that the surviving people of Hyrule carry the Cataclysm of Ganon latent in their memories, maintaining a ‘shared knowledge’³⁹ that grants them an identity. Two examples of these practices are reflected in characters within the game. First, there is the figure of the bard embodied by Kass, who narrates feats, myths, legends, stories, and prophecies of Hyrule. This character also evokes the macro-meaning of the adventure the hero must undertake. Second, there is Pikango, who helps find and evoke Link’s past memories into the present, giving new meaning to the century-old recollections. Both characters traverse the entire space and can be found in villages, inns, and the fields of Hyrule. Their objectives are two sides of the same coin, not to reconstruct a non-existent past, as memory is not merely a “reconstitution of the past but an exploration of the invisible”,⁴⁰ but rather, “transcending the boundaries of an ephemeral present, they bring to light what remains hidden behind appearances”.⁴¹ While Kass traverses the space to recover stories, legends, myths, and feats, Pikango does so to represent the world of Hyrule through his paintings.

The above leads to the following question: is there a procedure for remembering? For recalling memories? In *Breath of the Wild*, the mnemonic object of ancestral technology, the Sheikah Slate, systematically arranges memories “inserting them into a spatial context that can be traversed in parts”.⁴² As the hero uses this tablet to identify the places where he can recover his memories, he gains access to intimate experiences from the past. In this sense, the way individual memory unfolds within the collective becomes a journey in itself. In these interactions, the hero’s narrative information becomes key to giving meaning to the purpose of his journey in the present. In this regard, Link, through his individual memory, preserves elements of self-knowledge that are not collective but rather exclusive to himself.

33 RICHARDSON, M.: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Creating a Champion*. Milwaukee, WI : Dark Horse Books, 2018, p. 65.

34 BEATTY, L., PARGNEY, V.: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild: The Complete Official Guide*. London : Piggyback, 2017, p. 98.

35 CHANGEUX, J., VERNANT, P., RICOEUR, P.: Introducción. Definiciones. In BARRET-DUCROCQ, F. (ed.): *¿Por qué RECORDAR? Foro Internacional Memoria e Historia. Unesco, 25, marzo 1998, La Sorbonne, 26 marzo, 1998*. Barcelona : Ediciones Granica, 2002, p. 15.

36 Ibidem, p. 28.

37 Ibidem, p. 18.

38 GARCÍA, M. J.: Las formas del recuerdo. La memoria narrativa. In *Athenea Digital*, 2004, Vol. 4, No. 6, p. 6. [online]. [2023-11-04]. Available at: <<https://raco.cat/index.php/Athenea/article/view/34157>>.

39 CHANGEUX, J., VERNANT, P., RICOEUR, P.: Introducción. Definiciones. In BARRET-DUCROCQ, F. (ed.): *¿Por qué RECORDAR? Foro Internacional Memoria e Historia. Unesco, 25, marzo 1998, La Sorbonne, 26 marzo, 1998*. Barcelona : Ediciones Granica, 2002, p. 21.

40 Ibidem, p. 22.

41 Ibidem.

42 Ibidem.

There are three specific examples where this is established. The first occurs during Princess Zelda's training to access her power, which leads her to undertake arduous tasks and rituals without any success. At the Spring of Power, Zelda is praying to the goddess Hylia while embracing despair for not being able to fulfil her potential (Picture 2). In this intimate moment, she confesses her thoughts and shows her vulnerability. Link is present, listening from behind, close to her, experiencing all her emotions. No one else knows about this experience except Link. No one else has seen Princess Zelda in such a delicate state as the champion has, demonstrating the humanity that exists within the archetype expected of someone who inherits one of the Triforce powers.



Picture 2: Memory #13. Slumbering Power. In Spring of Power, Zelda becomes frustrated for not being able to awaken her sealed power.

Source: author's screenshot; NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo Switch version). [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.

The second moment occurs between Link and the four fallen champions. As the Hylian champions prepare for battle, individual experiences with each of them take place. For example, we see Link listening to the arrogant Revali from the Orni tribe, who proudly expresses his opinion about having to support the chosen one who wields the Sword that Seals the Darkness. On another occasion, we see him interacting with the skilled Urbosa from the Gerudo tribe, who explains to Link the effort, displeasure, and powerlessness of Princess Zelda in not being able to awaken her power while the chosen one with the sword had already done so. We also witness his interaction with Princess Mipha, the chosen one from the Zora tribe, whom he has known since childhood (Picture 3). Mipha tells Link that she will always heal his wounds and asks if he will visit her once the battle is over. Lastly, Link encounters the powerful Daruk from the Goron tribe, who encourages him to continue defending and fulfilling his duty, even though he knows that Princess Zelda is tough on Link. In these four moments, we see fragments of the champions' personalities, representing the identity of their tribes, and we also see the affection the hero has for them.

A third moment is found in the Post-Calamity period when Link escapes with the Princess after the champions have fallen and much of the kingdom is already destroyed. Here, we witness Zelda's decline into sorrow, on the verge of giving up, mourning the death of the champions. We can see a unique moment of intimacy when Link comforts her with his embrace amidst a powerful storm (Picture 4).



Picture 3: Memory #10. Mipha's Touch. Above Vah Ruta, Link and Mipha discuss the future of Hyrule and the trials that will come.

Source: author's screenshot; NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo Switch version). [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.



Picture 4: Memory #16, Despair. In Northeast from the Bottomless Swamp, Zelda falls into despair while fleeing from the Cataclysm's destruction over Hyrule, the death of her father, King Rhoam, and Four the Champions

Source: author's screenshot; NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo Switch version). [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.

In these three moments, Link attempts to “reconstruct the individual past and project one’s own identity into the consciousness of each person”.⁴³ Moreover, a particular situation arises in the recovery of memories, as testimonial memory occurs within the protagonist’s own consciousness. Link is a witness to himself, observing himself through his memories, a century after the events occurred. He can affirm that what existed, that he was there, and that there are witnesses to it, as the ‘others’ are no longer present.⁴⁴

43 CHANGEUX, J., VERNANT, P., RICOEUR, P.: Introducción. Definiciones. In BARRET-DUCROCQ, F. (ed.): *¿Por qué RECORDAR? Foro Internacional Memoria e Historia*. Unesco, 25, marzo 1998, La Sorbonne, 26 marzo, 1998. Barcelona : Ediciones Granica, 2002, p. 24.

44 Ibidem, p. 26-27.

On the other hand, Link is part of a collective memory of the Cataclysm. He is one of the few survivors and embodies the discourse of a ruined, defeated, and fallen Hyrule. Link is a living memory, bridging the past and the present, the individual and the collective. This allows us to understand the function of history for memory and its role as a debt to what was, just like the abilities of the guardians, the empowering objects, the emotional relationships with the champions and Zelda. Link becomes a sort of archon of the memories of past and present Hyrulians who survived the Cataclysm, in the face of the destruction of memory itself and the significant loss of the history of those who came before. Since it is not very safe to communicate the memory of the past to others, the aesthetic and figurative name of Link is powerful; he is a character from the past who now lives in the present, 100 years later.

Regarding the narrative and considering the strong oral tradition in Hyrule, the fragments of the story are the involuntary result of a previous selection, which is subjective and random. This can be reflected in the NPCs of the game, many of whom assume the role of telling the story through the perspective of the defeated. In addition, there are two additional ways to record and preserve memory in the kingdom of Hyrule. On one hand, there are various books, which are records that can be seen in the characters' journals: King Rhoam Bosphoramus, Paya, the warriors of the tribes, the cooks, travellers, etc., also turning Hyrule's collective memory into an "archived collective memory".⁴⁵ On the other hand, there are various statues of the goddess Hylia, some dark and others reminiscent of past heroes, as well as memorials of great deeds by the Gerudo, Goron, Zora, Orni, and Hylia, scattered throughout the game map. In this sense, J. Le Goff stated that the document and the monument are elements that perpetuate historical and social memory, with the monument being "everything that can bring back the past, perpetuate the memory",⁴⁶ and the document being historical evidence.

The journey undertaken by the player in *Breath of the Wild* will vary based on the decisions they make. If desired, they can directly confront Ganon, or they can follow the story according to the characters they encounter in the open world they must explore. They can also choose to only explore and discover the events for themselves, or even ignore them to fulfil the main storyline of the adventure. In these situations, the player can access the memories that Link has of what happened 100 years after Ganon's destruction of Hyrule, both his pre- and post-cataclysm memories.

This style of storytelling belongs to the fragmented narrative, in which the player must piece together the narrative puzzle of the protagonist's memories since "they probably won't unlock them in order".⁴⁷ Due to this, "the kingdom of Hyrule is organically filled with emergent micro-stories [...] in this case, the player, according to their actions, creates their own (micro) narrative".⁴⁸ This also applies to: "Missions that require going from point A to point B, [which] don't have the player on a specific and obligatory path to follow. What will happen at those points A and B is the same for all players. But it will be a completely different journey, with each player having their own narrative. The player doesn't even necessarily have to go directly to point B, while others may perform actions or missions, or directly abandon that mission".⁴⁹

45 CHANGEUX, J., VERNANT, P., RICOEUR, P.: Introducción. Definiciones. In BARRET-DUCROCQ, F. (ed.): *¿Por qué RECORDAR? Foro Internacional Memoria e Historia. Unesco, 25, marzo 1998, La Sorbonne, 26 marzo, 1998*. Barcelona : Ediciones Granica, 2002, p. 27.

46 LE GOFF, J.: *El orden de la memoria. El tiempo como imaginario*. Barcelona : Paidós, 1991, p. 228.

47 JARAMAGO, A.: *Bideo-joko narratibaren gaitasunak. Bi kasuren azterketa: The Last of Us eta The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. [Master Thesis]. Leioa : Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y de la Comunicación. Universidad del País Vasco, 2021, p. 38-39. [online]. [2023-11-10]. Available at: <<https://addi.ehu.es/handle/10810/55617?show=full>>.

48 JARAMAGO, A.: *Bideo-joko narratibaren gaitasunak. Bi kasuren azterketa: The Last of Us eta The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. [Master Thesis]. Leioa : Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y de la Comunicación. Universidad del País Vasco, 2021, p. 40. [online]. [2023-11-10]. Available at: <<https://addi.ehu.es/handle/10810/55617?show=full>>.

49 Ibidem, p. 41.

Conclusion:

The Role of the Hero in Memory and Narrative as Personal Experience

“Digital games involve the planning of a dynamic, consistent, and reactive world capable of absorbing all player actions and providing simultaneous diegetic, rewarding, and challenging responses that keep you immersed and engaged”.⁵⁰ In this way, the player takes ownership of the immediate object, which is the character, Link in this case, giving rise to gameplay that goes beyond the plot “where the character becomes a blank slate upon which we add details and experiences as we uncover them”,⁵¹ providing a character creation mechanism that takes on a much more prominent role, beyond the needs of their background: “recovering an object, saving someone, or defeating an evil entity that pursues us”.⁵²

The manipulation of time, in this case being a digital game, occurs in the narration of a world that is not alien to the protagonist but rather events that directly impact their life. If the protagonist accepts and becomes involved in these events, their real life is (re)interpreted through meaning, changing their feelings and thoughts in symbolic and aesthetic planes of memory and the events that have taken place. Link directly intervenes in his socio-political context, taking the initiative rather than merely reacting to events. As Link’s memories are recalled and assimilated, his identity is not left intact; his personal life is interpreted through the socio-political events he carries out. In this sense, the protagonist is (re)signified as their identity is unveiled through their own memories and those of other characters.

The reproduction of memory not only allows for the reconstruction of the past but also “to distance oneself from the present and generate from this distance images that liberate social and individual thought from the task of recognition-based reproduction, opening dimensions of historicity that in turn frame plural historical and subjective times, so that action can respond to distant conditions and voices, and not just to immediate ones”.⁵³

The champions, including Link, are those distant voices who subjectively manage to involve themselves in the meaning of the present through their memories and the dialogue they establish with the protagonist as they act in the story.

Based on all of the above, it can be concluded that Link experienced a loss in three dimensions: his memory itself, the memories of his friends and acquaintances, and his own space, the glorious Hyrule before the cataclysm. Accompanying these losses is a setting of solitude that, in no case, presents itself as a negative effect on the hero or the player. In fact, the game and its narrative have allowed some players to better understand their loneliness and feel more comfortable with themselves in this situation.⁵⁴

50 BRANDÃO, L.: *A narratividade e a narrativa emergente gerada pela mecânica nos jogos digitais: uma proposta de modelo ludonarrativo de análise*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Recife : Centro de Comunicação e Artes Departamento de Design Programa de Pós-graduação em Design, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2020, p. 117. [online]. [2023-11-05]. Available at: <<https://repositorio.ufpe.br/handle/123456789/41083>>.

51 TATO, G.: Análisis del personaje en el cine y en los videojuegos. Inmersión y empatía. In *Quaderns de Cine*, 2017, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 108. [online]. [2023-11-14]. Available at: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.14198/QdCINE.2017.12.09>>.

52 Ibidem, p. 109.

53 HAYE, A. et al.: Tiempo y memoria: sobre la mediación narrativa de la subjetividad histórica. In *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 2018, Vol. 17, No. 65, p. 31.

54 For example, see: LAY, C.: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild as Philosophy: Teaching the Player to Be Comfortable Being Alone. In JOHNSON, D. et al. (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, p. 1-24. [online]. [2023-11-01]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97134-6_107-1>.

The powerful effect of reconstructing the game's narrative through its mechanics and gameplay allows for the realization of something much more implicit. Link forgets, that is, he detaches himself from his past and lightens the burden he carries.⁵⁵ In this way, he can make new promises, such as the archetype of Zelda games: to save Princess Zelda by defeating Ganon(dorf), whereas before he was only limited to protecting Zelda. Also, it is concluded that Link is the connection between narrative and space, between memory and the present. As mentioned by D. Lecourt et al: "History does not teach us to act [...] however, it is the memory of the past that tells us why we are who we are and confers our identity".⁵⁶

Regarding the testimonial narrative of the game, due to a traumatic and contextual situation, the surviving Hyrulians and their subsequent generations have not forgotten; rather, they strive to live with this identity and even be part of the resistance. In other words, the survivors of Hyrule are witnesses.

Finally, Link is a hero with memory, witness to his own death, and we have the opportunity to know this through him, to (re)interpret his present through his past. This experience is complete in both the player and Link. The legend of what was is also an important part of what will be. Outside the overarching narrative of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*⁵⁷, where the story presents an adventure that transcends and folds through time, in *Breath of the Wild*, it will be through Link, in an intimacy shared by the player, who will witness the entire story and the path this hero will undertake, so the journey will be through memory, (re)constructing his present.

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55 RÉMOND, R., RICOEUR, P., SCHNAPPER, D.: La memoria contra el olvido. In BARRET-DUCROCQ, F. (ed.) *¿Por qué RECORDAR? Foro Internacional Memoria e Historia. Unesco, 25, marzo 1998, La Sorbonne, 26 marzo, 1998*. Barcelona : Ediciones Granica, 2002, p. 75.

56 LECOURT, D. et al.: ¿Sólo puede construirse el futuro sobre la memoria del pasado?. In BARRET-DUCROCQ, F. (ed.): *¿Por qué RECORDAR? Foro Internacional Memoria e Historia. Unesco, 25, marzo 1998, La Sorbonne, 26 marzo, 1998*. Barcelona : Ediciones Granica, 2002, p. 185.

57 NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom (Nintendo Switch version)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2023.

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