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# Review of Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia

J. HOLDER BENNETT

This definitive work on the history of Hyrule, both as a nation in its own conceptual world and as a creative process in this one, is the long-awaited translation of a work in Japanese to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the original *Legend of Zelda* release in 1986. Miyamoto's foreword clearly places the games within the overall construct of his creative process and provides a finalized internal chronology for the games (3). The occasional editor's notes embedded within the text may seem redundant for old-school gamers but will provide a welcome contextualization for newer gamers. Better still, one does not need to have played through all of the licensed games in order to appreciate this book and product placements are at a minimum. Much of the games' design was intentional, but some important aspects were random. As it turns out, the entire reason for having such a coherent story for the original game was from an offhand comment from a public relations agent to make a game story book. Though not used directly, Miyamoto continued the conversation and expanded upon its ideas. With that kind of off-the-cuff remark, a *Legend* was born. Through it all, Miyamoto believed that "the name Link came from his role as a connector, but Link is you, the player. The series has been so successful because the player must solve puzzles and defeat tough enemies in order to ultimately save the world" (3).

One of the major components of this book is a look at how the art evolved from concept to final product, including a section of characters kept out of the final game labeled "Characters Born of Trial and Error" (33). Link appears later in all his incarnations in a single drawing (66). Even the original marginal notes in Japanese have been translated for the English-language reader. The rationale behind Link being a left-handed swordsman, unusual in a Japanese game, is explained as being entirely aesthetic for the original game platform (138). This was maintained through later games but occasionally switched as formats permitted more flexibility. The first section, on *Skyward Sword*, demonstrates the ongoing themes of Link as a connector of worlds, which is in fact part of the rationale behind his name (19). This and many other points have long been fan speculation but are now confirmed by the games' creators as canon. In a later chapter, comprising most of the book, the art is chronicled from earliest to newest stages, demonstrating the evolution of characters even as their overt appearances greatly differ, as is perhaps best demonstrated with Link, Zelda, and Ganon (169, 176 – 177, 228 – 232).

The internal history of Hyrule makes up the next chapter, and "there is evidence that the story of the *Legend of Zelda* begins with *Skyward Sword*" (68). The chronicle is intentionally left incomplete and "there are many obscured and unanswered secrets that lie within the tale" (68). In many ways this mirrors real world chronicles as historians routinely have to cope with records that are incomplete, contradictory, or presented only from a single point of view. Indeed, Eiji Aomura compares the compilation process with hunting through a dungeon for treasure, a high compliment historians seldom receive (238). As with actual history, the player-reader must make

a mental asterisk to note that, as the story continues to unfold, our understanding may be radically altered. Also in close parallel to the real, the chronicle points out that there are many possible ways to connect the different versions of Link. They may be the same person, different people in the same familial lineage, or entirely different people elided into one folk hero as happens so often in traditional narratives. The intentional ambiguity limits the player's ability to have absolute knowledge but infinitely expands the narrative potential for the game makers. In the *Hero with a Thousand Faces* sense, Link thus becomes the quintessential culture hero. What the individual versions lack in uniqueness they make up for in narrative unity, thus strengthening the overall storytelling game play experience.



Again in realistic fashion, much of the timeline is mutually contradictory if understood to be chronicling the actions of one person or one nation. In fact, there are three distinct, interrelated timelines, each showing the consequences of the various Links' actions (69). The Triforce features in the world's history from the very beginning but its original and ultimate purposes are unknown (70). There are many such unanswered questions in this book, a point that makes it all the more intriguing to the historian of popular culture. One point that is elucidated, however, is the ancient Hylian language, with a one-to-one chart equating it with Japanese (87). Though a fan had previously worked out the system on her own, this confirmation demonstrates that the artwork has been consistently purposeful throughout the series and that the games' creators value fan opinions. The Gerudo alphabet and other systems are similarly explained (90, 116, etc.). The narrative splits after *Ocarina of Time* and gets somewhat complex though understandable by those who have played through at least some of the respective games in the various streams (91). Within each stream, though, the presentations are consistent and highly detailed.

The work closes with an afterword by Eiji Aonuma and a manga by Akira Himekawa, the joint nom de plume of A. Honda and S. Nagano, who include chibi self-portraits (273). This manga has a brief introduction on how to read them in Japanese fashion for those unaccustomed to the format. The manga is intended as an extension of the *Skyward Sword* story and should be taken as such. This artist team has been making *Legend of Zelda* manga since 1999 and continues to love their work. They envision their story as the real conclusion to the game. In many ways they are right.

In all, this book is a must have for fans and scholars alike who are interested in the Hyrule universe in particular and video game culture in general. So many other games pay homage to the *Legend of Zelda* conceptual universe that a definitive list would be prohibitively lengthy, but it ranges from various little nods *Super Mario* games to quest chains in *World of Warcraft*. Get this book.

## References

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