

How *Pokemon Legends: Arceus* Leans on Nostalgia

The main *Pokemon* franchise, at least in terms of their games, generally consists of variations on the same formula. The mainline games share the same core mechanics and story structure, with the largest differences being in the setting of the game and the creatures that are available to catch, train, and fight. *Pokemon Legends: Arceus* is not from the main line of the franchise – instead of introducing a new region, it instead recycles an older region but sets the story in a different time period. Not only is the setting familiar to longtime fans, but most of the new characters also strongly resemble established characters from other titles. Much of *Arceus* is interwoven with references to previous games, from the aforementioned setting and character designs to the music and overall story. Nostalgia is integral to *Arceus*, and while that is rewarding to players who already have in-depth knowledge of the past games, it also means that lacking that knowledge can make the game feel lacking.

Pokemon Legends: Arceus shares its setting with the recently remade *Pokemon Diamond* and *Pearl* games. While much of the world map mirrors that of the other games, the overall locations aren't where the references end. Specific landmarks and locations are also alluded to in the explorable regions of *Arceus*. In some cases, this works well, with one reviewer claiming, "One of my favorite moments was returning to Jubilife Village after completing some side quests to find that the town's theme had begun to build to the Jubilife City song from [*Pokemon Diamond* and *Pearl*]" (Flynn, 2022). Jubilife Village is a place where the player spends a lot of time. Other places that are referenced in the environment aren't given much attention or detail, with an underwhelmed reviewer saying, "There are a number of map-named places referencing towns or

landmarks in Diamond and Pearl that are clearly intended to be their precursors but, aside from maybe having a few extra flowers or trees or slightly differently colored grass, there's little reason to really explore or appreciate them. Just catch your Pokémon and be on your way, nothing to see here” (Valentine, 2022). These shallower nods are even less likely to be appreciated by players unaware of what they reference.

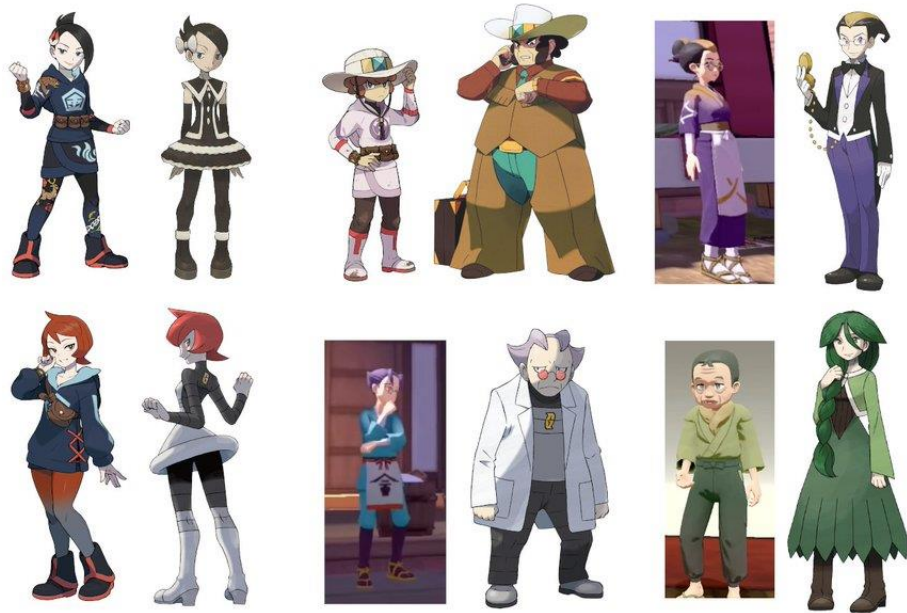


Left, from *Pokemon Legends: Arceus*. Right, the place being referenced from *Diamond/Pearl*. Of note, the left image captures about the entirety of this landmark.

As previously mentioned, most of the character designs from *Pokemon Legends: Arceus* reference characters from already-established titles. These characters are implied to be related, usually in an unspecified way, and their resemblance can range between ‘near identical except for their outfits’ to ‘people on the internet debate for various candidates based on factors like hair color.’ Even the default player character shares striking similarities to a protagonist from a previous game, though they and another character aren't implied to be ancestors of the established characters. The other character in question, Ingo, is a bit of a strange occurrence: like the player character, he has been taken from the time period in which the rest of the games are set. Unlike the player character, he is confirmed to actually *be* from one of the established games – he was an optional non-playable character in *Pokemon: Black and White*. Rather than an exception to the way characters are used for nostalgia in *Arceus*, Ingo instead serves as a reinforcement: they are used as callbacks to established titles that leave the player, upon recognition, wondering about how they (or their descendants) got to where they are. With all that said, what about the characters themselves? *Pokemon* as a franchise isn't exactly known for

its well-developed characters, so even if they aren't too deep it doesn't matter too much. As it stands, however, a good portion of their appeal lies in their connections to previous games, which is lost on players who aren't familiar with those games. (Or aren't familiar with everything in them, like me: I personally only vaguely recognized a few characters, and never actually encountered Ingo in my playthrough *Pokemon Black and White*.)

Several examples of the new characters from *Arceus*, with their established counterparts to their right. Most of these pairs have easily recognizable similarities.



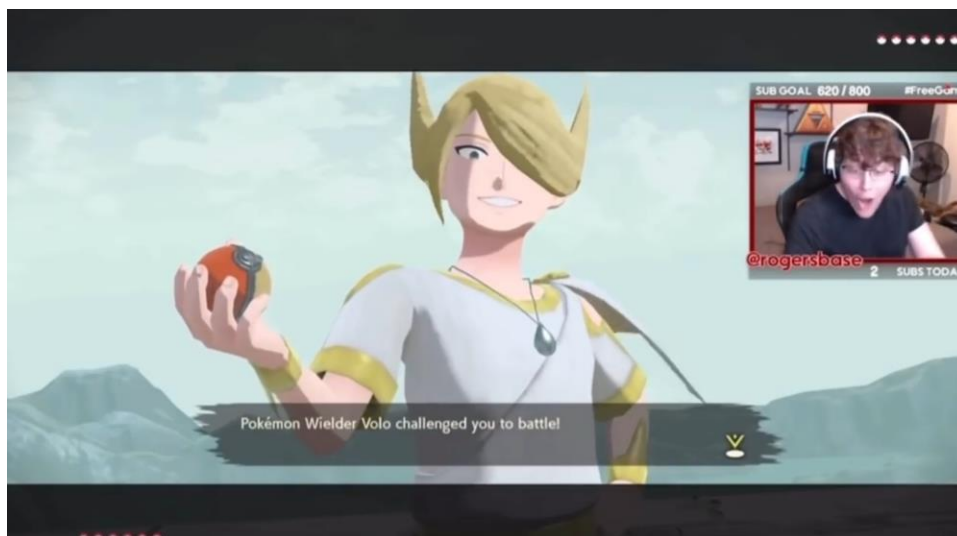
Much of the climax of *Pokemon Legends: Arceus* also pulls from or

heavily references *Pokemon Diamond and Pearl* – or, rather, their combined re-release *Pokemon Platinum*. First, there are the mirrors in the plot: to protect the world (or at least the region) from destruction, the player must fight a legendary pokemon – either Palkia or Dialga – before eventually confronting the final antagonist, who wants to change the world, and finally fighting against the legendary pokemon Giratina. Additionally, it has been theorized that the player's actions in *Arceus* prompted Giratina's own behavior in *Platinum*. Regardless, the point is that the plot of the later story in *Arceus* is steeped very heavily in references, even when only considering the surface level.

A screenshot from the opening cutscene of the battle against the main antagonist of the game, Volo. Behind him is the legendary Pokemon Giratina.



If one looks a little closer at the final antagonist, things become a bit more interesting. It is here that *Arceus* diverges from its established patterns and starts actually playing with long-time players' prior knowledge and, therefore, their expectations. Many players initially look with suspicion upon the ancestor of the main antagonist from *Diamond* and *Pearl*, who is actually one of the player's allies. In an inversion of expectations, *Arceus*'s antagonist, Volo, resembles Cynthia, one of the allies from the aforementioned games – and one of the most famous ones, at that. Much of what the player sees of him also calls her to mind: he appears sporadically throughout the game, offers some tips to the player, and has an avid interest in the mythology of the land. In later portions of the game, *Arceus* can't be said to hide Volo's maliciousness, but even so his resemblance to Cynthia can have players not realizing this for a surprising amount of time. If the player doesn't have these preconceptions, the revelation is considerably less shocking. Even entering the final confrontation, *Arceus* leans hard on the players' memories of Cynthia. As the opening animation plays, so do the beginning few phrases of Cynthia's theme. This, combined with Volo starting the fight with the same pokemon as the first of Cynthia's team, has provoked strong enough reactions in long-time players that it's become something of a joke. And, once again, all of this will not have the same effect on players who are new to the franchise.



While there's a case to be made for exaggerated reactions, it can be funny to pinpoint when streamers recognize the opening phrases of Cynthia's theme music playing. This screenshot is from a video compilation of this exact thing.

So, what do all

of these callbacks mean for the players? For long-time players, the way that nostalgia is integrated into the storyline of the game can mean increased investment. More attention is paid to even background characters, as side-quests often feature other 'ancestor' characters that don't appear in the main storyline. However, it also means that the developers are relying on these things to keep audience attention without fleshing out the new characters and storyline – and some people clearly think they did. An article from *The Beta Network* calls the story "... not very engaging at all. It's pretty much just a bunch of bickering and infighting between the Diamond & Pearl clans purely because they hold different ideologies. The writing simply isn't memorable enough. The plot might be interesting for diehard Pokémon lore fans, but for everyone else, you'll probably forget what happened the next day" (Culinas, 2022). As another writer for IGN puts their feeling towards the ending, "...suffice to say it involves one admittedly fantastic, memorable boss battle, and then nothing. The story never really resolves. Multiple characters repeatedly hinted to have suspicious and interesting motives never explain who they are or what they're really up to." They conclude, "While I'm thrilled by this new gameplay direction, I wish the same care and attention was put into every aspect of the adventure" (Valentine, 2022). Overall, it feels like *Arceus* overly relied on nostalgia and previous knowledge of the franchise to

carry a player's engagement with the story. Without that (or just looking closer at the characters and story), everything feels a little underdeveloped and underwhelming.

A lack of engagement with the story is, unfortunately, a pretty broad problem, and one that doesn't have a simple fix. In addition, *Pokemon* as a franchise is usually fairly light on both character and story depth, and as an established series departures from that norm may not be appreciated. However, *Arceus* is already a departure from the main series, so why not put a bit more thought into the characters and story? If I could alter things, I'd try to make sure that at least a few more characters had either arcs or depth (ideally both), as I think only a couple really develop over the course of the game. At the moment, the rest either only have a handful of traits or their story arcs feel a little shallow. There are already a lot of side-quests involving secondary characters – why not add a few for the more major characters? Even just spending a little more time with them outside the main story could help deepen the players' emotional attachment to them. As for the story itself, I think it's weirdly open-ended, with several plot threads left unaddressed. This could be for future DLC, but that's still not ideal on the players' end. Closing off these threads would make it a bit harder to integrate additional content in the future, but it would also likely improve people's overall impression of the game, which I think holds more importance. To sum things up: there's nothing wrong with using nostalgia – *Pokemon Legends: Arceus* even uses it to great effect at sometimes - but it's important to have enough substance behind everything to back it up in case the players don't have the background knowledge required.

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