

global network player authority PowerDiePie guilt god Let's Play anael lndead wti authentic m...atization Skill pvi contest
game rule system avatar WoW blessing noob kills memor face body fight pop spe lngame PST P discussion digital
religion game analysis representation healing lore relig o-scaps soul diablo class tradition experience with rebirth priest genesis 3a wedding
simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes immersion community symbol salvation image Xbox 360PVE
narrative

Issue 14 (2021)

articles

History Games for Boys? Gender, Genre and the Self-Perceived Impact of Historical Games on Undergraduate Historians

by Robert Houghton, 1

Inaudible Systems, Sonic Users. Sound Interfaces and the Design of Audibility Layouts in Digital Games

by Eduardo Harry Luersen, 50

Ghosts, Spooks, and Martyrs. Historical Hauntings in *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands*

by Megan Ward, 85

Feminist Gamer Social Identities

by Michael Winters and James L. Williams, 119

research reports

New Earth. Fantasy Pantheon Inspired by Afro-Brazilian Religion

by Eliane Bettocchi, 170

Holy Ocarina! Exploring Religion in/of/through *The Legend of Zelda* Series

by Johnathan Sanders, 198

“Link, the hero of the Legend of Zelda, does not yet exist. You create Link by first registering your player name.”

The Legend of Zelda Instruction Booklet (Nintendo of America 1987, 11)

It is statements like the epigraph above that launch dissertations. They are small, to be sure, and are almost certainly not intended by their creators to carry deeper meaning (this one is drawn from Nintendo’s attempt to explain the concept of the now-familiar in-cartridge save system to an 80’s audience) but neither of these caveats hampers their profundity in the mind of an imaginative reader. What was mere description of a menu screen becomes an ontological mystery: a creation ex-nihilo of a hero. What video game character could be said to exist before the game is played, before the player ascribes to it their name and animates it as if it were a rabbinic golem? And what does that imply about the one who puppets this avatar, their literal *link* to another world through which they can enact their will? Inquiries like these can seem silly or self-indulgent in the wrong context, but there is a sort of joy to this activity of conceptual expansion, of contemplating these accidental koans hidden within the mundanity of an instruction manual or blocks of mistranslated digital prose. Creating a space for this sort of activity and sharing it with the wider world is a driving force behind the *Holy Ocarina! Project*, a collaborative inquiry into the religious implications of *The Legend of Zelda* series (1987-2017) that cumulated in a talk at the 2020 Penny Arcade Expo (PAX East).

The ethos behind the whole project came after an initial application to PAX about a general religion in games panel was rejected (due, in part, to its use of academic jargon and its heavy subject matter). This prompted a reflection on the value of our work to the game-playing public. Classical academics in the humanities have a tendency to kill the proverbial frog, to take the fun and mystery out of a subject by reducing it to a distinct, verifiable set of concepts that explain how it functions and

the socio-political causes and effects of that functioning. Apprentice scholars are taught to leave any personal evaluations or emotional attachments to a subject at the door, excising / from our papers and propping every original idea up with at least two canonical, usually French, scholars who somehow got away with saying whatever they wanted (looking at you, Foucault and Deleuze). As a result, a great deal of the arguments we make are so provisional or hyper-specific as to apply to a tiny sliver of human experience, mired in arcane jargon that warrants polite but confused nods from our non-academic friends and family. Game studies is no exception to this: consider, for example, the early branding of digital games as a subset of “ergodic literature” by Espen Aarseth (1997), or the wide array of disciplines from which Ian Bogost (2006) had to draw in order to define games in terms of “unit operations.”

There are certainly valid reasons for writing this way, of course, and great work has been done and continues to be done in this paradigm. But, especially for those who study games and/or religion, this leads to a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. After all, few of us got into this business because they wanted to explain how Deleuze’s concept of the virtual maps onto the rhetoric of an HTC Vive commercial, or because they had to tell the world which version of *The Arabian Nights* inspired the depiction of a particular digital djinni. What drew us to this line of work were questions, big questions regarding the things that move us in all of the worlds we inhabit: the actual, the virtual, the spiritual, and all the places in between. The most enjoyable academic projects are those driven by questions that make us *want* to think deeply. One of the struggles of being an academic (and, arguably, being human) is fostering the innate curiosity that produces these questions while dealing in the minutiae of the everyday. By creating a presentation for a largely non-academic audience and making our research available for the curious to use, we aimed to do just that.

The *mitsuuroko* is far from the only real-world iconography that has made its way into the *Legend of Zelda* series, of course, nor is it the only one to inject further meaning into the *Zelda* universe if pursued to its origins. The influence of Christian iconography, for example, can be felt in the architecture of *Ocarina of Time's* Temple of Time or the stained-glass windows of *Wind Waker's* long-sunken Hyrule Castle, decorated with images of important game characters in the style of Christian saints. The original NES game (*Legend of Zelda* 1987) even explicitly features the Bible (*Baiburu*) as an obtainable item, although the English instruction manual insists it is merely a "Magic Book" that can allow Link to "chant some fiery spells and send out flames" (Nintendo of America 1987, 26). While the implications of this are rather benign, other iconographical borrowing is more problematic. The original symbol for the Gerudo people within the *Zelda* universe – a desert-dwelling race of brown-skinned women often dressed in pajamas, cropped shirts, and veils – was a star and moon, essentially a mirrored image of the international symbol of Islam. While this was altered in later releases of the game (along with the sample of an Islamic call to prayer from the music of *Ocarina of Time's* Fire Temple [1997]), it still bears the markings of problematic Orientalist depictions of Near Eastern peoples and their religious practices. Combined with the facts that *Ocarina of Time's* Gerudo are depicted as bandits, are the only visibly human-like characters Link can damage, and happen to be ruled over by the game's villain (the only man among their people), this depiction echoes the Islamophobia at the turn of the 21st century.

Certain cultural appropriations need not have directly religious origins to evoke religious ideas. For example, Link's green clothing, youthful elfish features, association with fairies, and occasional fights with his shadow mark him as being intertextually related to Peter Pan, a fact confirmed by creator Shigeru Miyamoto in a 2012 interview (Audureau 2012). While Disney's (1953) depiction of the ever-youthful

character upon which Link was based is not strictly religious, Peter Pan’s lineage can be traced all the way back to the fey tricksters of the British Isles and the Greek half-goat god of revelry. Aside from their associations with the natural world (something retained in Link’s frequent ties to rustic settings), all three of these supernatural figures are known for a chaotic playfulness that shows little regard for human morality: fairies lure children away from their families to play in their groves forever, Pan is said to inspire irrational fear in his enemies (hence the word *panic*), and the Peter Pan of J. M. Barrie’s original 1911 novel had no qualms with abducting Wendy and her siblings or killing hordes of Neverland pirates on a whim. Though this behavior seems much more befitting of a character like Skull Kid (the antagonist of *Majora’s Mask*) rather than Link, it certainly puts the common player actions like breaking pottery, harassing Cuccos, and indiscriminately fighting any creature with a health bar in a new context!

While some of our questions regarding the relationship between religion and the *Legend of Zelda* series certainly arose from the appearance of these appropriations of real-world icons, even more arose from a subtler source: the actions one takes in the game itself. We questioned what sort of religious worldviews were encoded into the tasks the game presents players and the ethos they present. Although one could read Link’s journey in any given game through Joseph Campbell’s concept of the mythical Hero’s Journey (1949) or the tropes discussed in James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1915), a more productive lens can be found in the Buddhist and Shinto traditions in its country of origin. As Sterrit (2019) visualized in his video essay “Ocarina of Time: A Masterclass in Subtext,” much of the plot of the *Zelda* games becomes about restoring balance to the natural world: the game’s villains frequently corrupt the land and its creatures, turning once gentle creatures into monsters (as in *Ocarina of Time* or *Majora’s Mask*’s many bosses). This is achieved by contacting and

releasing spirits, whether those are woodland sprites like Koroks from *Breath of the Wild* or *Wind Waker* (largely based on the Japanese nature spirits known as *kodama*) or guardians like the Giants of *Majora's Mask* or *Twilight Princess's* (2006) "Spirits of Light" (similar to Japanese *kami*) each of which are associated with a particular locale or part of the environment. This contact with spirits frequently involves Link playing music, also borrowed from Shinto practice (the practice of *kagura*). By playing these games, then, players are (unwittingly or not) participating in practices aligned with Shinto thought and philosophy.

Zelda as Religion

The final section of our PAX talk looked outward, towards how real-world engagement with *The Legend of Zelda* acts as a religion, creating an institution, shaping worldviews, and providing spaces for a community together. As an organization, one of the most interesting and overtly religious topics *The Legend of Zelda* engages in is questions of canon. Though it has been appropriated into fandom discourse to indicate which aspects of plot material are *real* within any given fictional universe, the concept of canonization carries the connotation of religious orders determining whether certain religious writings and figures fit into their worldview. The 2013 *Hyrule Historia* (Aonuma 2013, 69) brings together the various contradictory versions of the *Zelda* legend explained in the first section of this article into a single timeline, one that branches into three discrete paths based upon the events that might occur in the time-hopping antics of *Ocarina of Time* before somehow converging again into a single timeline with *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2021). How this occurs within the *Zelda* universe – how three possible timelines are in fact one – becomes a sacred mystery not unlike those in other traditions: while it cannot be fully explained by rational means, accepting it on faith affords *Zelda* fans a

religious communities. The fact that there are only two mainline Zelda games to date in which Zelda is the main player-controlled character – the infamously poorly received CD-i titles *The Wand of Gamelon* (Animation Magic 1993) and *Zelda's Adventure* (Viridis 1995) – calls attention to the character's recurrent role as a *damsel in distress*, an obtainable object of desire rather than a heroic avatar for the player (Sarkeesian 2013). Granted, modern games in the series have increasingly portrayed Zelda as having power and agency within the narrative, and the non-canonical *Hyrule Warriors* series (2014, 2020) have even made her a playable side character. But her active role in the scripted plot of these games is minimal when compared to her heroics in the CD-i titles, let alone Link's actions throughout the mainline games. Even Princess Peach – Nintendo's other famous damsel in distress – could be said to have stronger playable roles, whether within the playable segments of the *Paper Mario* series (2000-2020), her playable roles in platformers like *Super Mario Brothers 2* (1988) or *Super Mario 3D World* (2013), or her own original (albeit somewhat sexist) title *Super Princess Peach* (2006).^{viii} Despite many concessions by the developers, Zelda's role in the series that bears her name remains marginal; as is the case in many real-world religious communities, adherence to tradition trumps gender equality.

And yet, as is also the case with real-world religious communities, strict doctrine does not always define actual practice. As Katherine Hemmann chronicles in her article "The Legends of Zelda: Fan Challenges to Dominant Video Game Narratives" (2018), *Zelda* fans across the world have made and continue to make projects which simultaneously celebrate and critique the series through shifting perspectives to the series' female characters.^{ix} Others have modded or even made games that star female characters within the *Zelda* universe, as is the case with lierenwait's game *Fallen Kingdom* (2018) or the ambitious "Zelda Conversion Project" (Alexandra 2018) which aims to make Zelda playable in *Breath of the Wild*. That said, with Nintendo's hold on

Conclusion

While Covid-19 put the *Holy Ocarina! Project* on hold, the questions we raised and the research we pursued collectively gave us hope for deeper dives into *Zelda* and religion in the future. Our goal remains to ask questions and make connections that may inspire others – especially those outside of traditional academia – to think deeply about the religious implications of the things they love. Far from merely being a way to get through a school paper, such thought can be a creative endeavor in and of itself, one that grants texts new meanings that can resonate with one’s personal and intellectual interests. In an attempt to make this easier, our eventual goal with the *Holy Ocarina! Project* is to compile resources for those who want to engage with *The Legend of Zelda* series in this fashion, whether they are articles on religious studies, think-pieces about *Zelda*, questions raised by fans, or teaching materials that one could use to bring the study of games and religion to an even wider audience. The present research report aims to be a part of that effort, presenting a narrative of our thoughts and a list of resources (in the notes and bibliography) for those who want to delve deeper into the mysteries of the *Zelda* series and do not know where to start. In the words of a certain cavern-dwelling sage: “It is dangerous to go alone. Take this” (*The Legend of Zelda* 1987).

References

Aarseth, E., 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Alexandra, H., 2018. Ambitious Mod Reworks *Breath of the Wild* to make Zelda the hero. *Kotaku* [online], 7 May 2018. Available at <https://kotaku.com/ambitious-mod-reworks-breath-of-the-wild-to-make-zelda-1825834396>, accessed 21 March 2021.

Aonuma, E. and Thorpe, P., eds., 2013. *The legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*. Translated from the Japanese by M. Gambos. Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books.

Audureau, W., 2012. Miyamoto, la Wii U et le secret de la Triforce. *Gamekult* [online], 1 November 2012. Available at <https://www.gamekult.com/actualite/miyamoto-la-wii-u-et-le-secret-de-la-triforce-105550.html>, accessed 19 March 2021.

Barrie, J. M., 1991. *Peter Pan [Peter and Wendy]*. Duncan Research, Project Gutenberg. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16/16-h/16-h.htm>, accessed 21 March 2021.

Bogost, I., 2006. *Unit Operations: An approach to videogame criticism*. Boston: MIT University Press.

Bowker, J. ed., 2003. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. [ebook] London: Oxford University Press. Available through Syracuse University Website, <https://library.syr.edu/>, accessed 19 March 2021.

Campbell, J., 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York City: Pantheon Books.

Davis, R., 2006. Super Princess Peach Review. *Gamerant*, [online] 27 February 2006. Available at <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/super-princess-peach-review/1900-6144887/>, accessed 21 March 2021.

Fonseca, J., 2021. Princess Peach's Solo Platformer Game is Embarrassingly Sexist. *Screenrant*, 15 January 2021. Available at <https://screenrant.com/mario-princess-peach-solo-platformer-game-sexist-nintendo/>, accessed 21 March 2021.

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, 2006. [video game] (Gamecube, Wii) Nintendo, Nintendo.

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2011. [video game] (Wii, Wii U) Nintendo, Nintendo.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, 2017. [video game] (Switch) Nintendo, Nintendo.

Lyden, J. C., 2004. *Film as religion: myths, morals, and rituals*. New York: New York University Press.

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, 2017. [video game] (Switch) Nintendo, Nintendo.

McCullough, H. C., 1959. *The Taiheiki, a chronicle of medieval Japan*. [e-book], New York: Columbia University Press. Available through Syracuse University Website, <https://hdl-handle-net.libezproxy2.syr.edu/2027/heb.06024>, accessed 19 March 2021.

Nintendo, 2021. History. *Legend of Zelda Official Site (Japan)*. Available at <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/character/zelda/history/index.html>, accessed 21 March 2021.

Nintendo of America, 1987. *The Legend of Zelda Instruction Booklet*. Available at <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/clv/manuals/en/pdf/CLV-P-NAANE.pdf>, accessed 19 March 2021.

honor the gods of Hyrule. The central human town contains no temple, after all, and the game's four temples seem to be associated with four guardian giants rather than the mythical characters repeated through Hyrule's history. Our sly response to this question was it seemed like a very *Hyruleianist* way of seeing the world: the peoples of Termina may very well have their own religious practices apart from those in Hyrule (the task of the game, after all, is to awaken the Four Giants from their places of slumber), and rather than read the Terminans as a parable along the lines of the Tower of Babel, we might see them as a cultural force in their own right.

^{viii} In addition to the typical platforming of the *Mario* series, the gameplay of *Super Princess Peach* revolves around tapping one of four hearts – Joy, Rage, Gloom, or Calm – to unleash the title character's emotions (called *vibes*) in order to get past certain obstacles. The *gloom* vibe, for example, makes Peach cry a stream of tears which can make plants grow or put out fires, while tapping the *rage* vibe consumes her in a pillar of fire that can burn wooden platforms or melt ice. The sexist implications of *emotion powers*, as well as the game's uncharacteristic lack of difficulty and gendered marketing, has been noted by reviewers such as *Gamespot's* Ryan Davis (2006) and *Screenrant's* Joseph Fonseca (2021), and *Feminist Frequency's* Anita Sarkeesian mentions the title in her "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" series (2013).

^{ix} For more on fan practices and projects, see Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) and *Convergence Culture* (2006).