

(RE-)BALANCING THE TRIFORCE: GENDER REPRESENTATION AND ANDROGYNOUS MASCULINITY IN THE LEGEND OF ZELDA SERIES

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Abstract: The Legend of Zelda series is one of the most beloved and acclaimed Japanese video game franchises in the world. The series' protagonist is an androgynous male character, though recent conversations between Nintendo and players have focused on gender representation in the newest title in the series, Breath of the Wild. Considering these discussions, this article provides an analysis of Link, the protagonist and player character of The Legend of Zelda series. This analysis includes a discussion of the character's androgynous design, its historical context, official Nintendo paratextual material, developer interviews, and commentary from fans and critics of the series. As an iconic androgynous character in an incredibly successful and popular video game series, Link is an important case study for gender-based game scholarship, and the controversies surrounding his design highlight a cultural moment in which gender representation in the series became a central topic of discussion among players and developers.

Keywords: *video games, feminism, gender, Legend of Zelda, Nintendo, androgyny.*



INTRODUCTION

Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* (TLOZ) series (1986–ongoing) is one of the most beloved and iconic Japanese video game franchises in the world. In all (currently) 19 installments in this action-adventure series, spread across Nintendo's many consoles, the player-character has always been Link, and his purpose has almost always been to rescue the titular Princess Zelda from forces of evil, generally in the form of the villainous Ganon or his human form, Ganondorf. The series has several transmedia tie-ins, including television shows and comics, and has been the inspiration for countless fan-produced films, fiction, art, as well as cosplay and even themed escape games. As one of the longest and most recognized, critically acclaimed, and commercially successful video game franchises, several aspects of this series make it noteworthy for game scholarship. For researchers focused on issues of gender representation in games—what David Leonard (2006) referred to as gender-based game studies—the fact that the series' protagonist, Link, has often been designed as an androgynous character is particularly important. Indeed, Link's somewhat ambiguous gender presentation has sparked several debates among fans and prompted responses from the series' developers. These discourses highlight the importance of gender representation for many players and have kindled conversations about gender performance, nonnormative gender identities, identification with Link as a player-character, and the broader issue of representation in mainstream games. These conversations, combined with Nintendo's responses and relatively open design processes, make the series a fruitful object of study for gender-based game scholarship. However, much of the existing academic gender-based research on TLOZ series has focused on Princess Zelda, either as an example of the damsel-in-distress trope (Gailey, 1993; Sarkeesian, 2013) or an example of a female character that subverts said trope as the incarnation of a goddess (Navarro-Remesal, 2018) or when she disguises herself as Sheik (Lawrence, 2018), a gender ambiguous character who will be discussed later in this article. Link's androgynous design, on the other hand, has received less academic attention.

In order to contribute to this growing gender-based game scholarship on TLOZ series, this article uses textual analysis methods developed in game studies (Carr, 2017) to examine the gendered character design of Link throughout the series, placing his design within a Japanese cultural context and studying it alongside fan and developer discussions about his gender identity. The focus on a single character throughout a long-running series allows for a thorough analysis of that series' development and what that character has meant to players and developers. This is particularly important for gender-based game scholarship because Link is one of the few examples of a popular and iconic androgynous protagonist. Because of his androgynous design, Link's identity and appeal is not tied necessarily to his masculinity. As Mizuko Ito (2008) pointed out, TLOZ series has always appealed to female players (p. 97), and it is therefore unsurprising that many fans called for a female version of Link for the series' newest installment. While Nintendo considered the idea, they ultimately chose the more conservative route. However, fans and critics demanded that they explain why they made that decision, and the entire episode revealed Nintendo's unwillingness to change the gender of the series' protagonist.

Despite the diversity of the player demographic, there remains a hegemonic hold on gender representation in the mainstream games industry and an unwillingness to allow for even modest change if it hints at the possibility of backlash. However, the conversations around the atypical

gender presentation of Link in TLOZ series are deserving of careful scholarship because they highlight a cultural moment in which gender representation in a specific game series became a central topic of discussion among players and developers. Normative gender roles are shifting and, as that shift enters public discourse, popular culture will reflect and influence how the multiple meanings and sites of gender roles and gender performance are understood and navigated. Examining and drawing connections between the TLOZ series' popularity, the developers' design choices, and the way fans have related to Link provides an important case study for androgynous gender representation in popular culture.

Although several critics have recognized that Link is an androgynous character (e.g., Peckham, 2016), academic discussions about Link's gender presentation are rare. Meghan Blythe Adams (2018) included Link's androgynous design as one of several examples in an analysis of heroic androgyny and villainous gender-variance. Emma Vossen (2018) noted in her doctoral dissertation the importance of Link's androgyny for her own identification with the hero, while Tison Pugh (2018) discussed certain iterations of Link as examples of a queer child protagonist. Though Pugh does not address androgyny directly, as I will discuss in this article, Link's child-like appearance is an important component of his purposefully androgynous design. Despite no prior academic study dedicated toward Link's design and what players have said about it, the precedent exists. In several studies, researchers have analyzed the gendered design of specific main characters in popular series, such as the iconic Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider¹ games (Kennedy, 2002; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Mikula, 2003; Schleiner, 2001). This attention to gendered character design, especially for popular characters and series, is important given the game industry's historically problematic approach to gender representation.

As Peter Buse (1996) observed, "Video game narratives are predictable and depressing when it comes to sexual politics: with a few notable exceptions, like *Tetris* and other nongendered games, they rather crudely reproduce the worst-case scenario of patriarchal gender relations" (p. 166, italicization in original). Gender-based game research has demonstrated that women have always been severely underrepresented in video games (Glaubke, Miller, Parker, & Espejo, 2001; Ivory, 2006; Scharrer, 2004), and even when they are present in the game, they rarely are playable characters (Ivory, 2006). Provenzo's (1991) study showed that only 8% of Nintendo game covers depicted women, and Dietz's (1998) study revealed that only 15% of Nintendo and Genesis games portrayed women as heroic, and 40% of the games analyzed did not include female characters at all. In general, female characters more often are designed to appear sexy, with sexualized poses and revealing clothing (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Ivory, 2006; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016; Scharrer, 2004). This applies also to advertising, as M. Miller and Summers (2007) found that, in video game magazines, women are more often portrayed as supplemental, sexy, and innocent, while men are far more likely to be portrayed as heroic, powerful, muscular, and violent. In Downs and Smith's (2010) sample of 60 best-selling console video games, only about 16% of characters depicted were women, and those women were far more likely to be depicted partially nude, with unrealistic bodily proportions, and wearing revealing clothing. Similarly, Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory (2009) found in a sample of 150 games that male characters were systematically overrepresented: Only 14% of the characters were female, and just 10% of games featured female protagonists.

This context of lacking, stereotypical, and offensive female representation in games is vital also for understanding why TLOZ provides such an important case study for how these issues are articulated and understood by players and developers. TLOZ's large fan base is vocal and

passionate: Players are not afraid to voice their opinions directly to Nintendo, which in turn engages with fans through interviews and Nintendo Direct announcements. This allows for a relatively close dialogue between fans and developers—a rare occurrence in the video game industry. Recent conversations between Nintendo and players focused on the newest title in the series, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017). During the 2014 Electronic Entertainment Expo—an important trade event for the video game industry commonly referred to as E3—Nintendo showed a brief trailer for this latest installment. This trailer featured a version of Link who appeared to many fans to be female—a first for the series. This sparked a widespread debate about the possibility of a female protagonist: either a “gender-swapped” Link or an empowered Princess Zelda.

LINK: THE BLANK SLATE HERO OF TIME

According to the lore of TLOZ series, in every age a hero arises to combat evil. This hero is always named Link because, according to TLOZ creator Shigeru Miyamoto (2013), the character serves as a “link” to connect the player with the game world (p. 2). *The Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*, Nintendo’s official guide to the series, states,

The heroes of these chronicles all share the name Link. These Links might have been the same person, a series of familial descendants, or a number of heroes with different names entirely. The Links of certain eras may also have been named after the legendary hero. (“A Chronology of Hyrule, Land of the Gods,” 2013, p. 68)

However, while the default name is Link, players almost always can give the protagonist a custom name at the beginning of each game. While the chronology of the games is somewhat convoluted, Link has always been a male hero—referred to using masculine pronouns—though designed to be as blank and relatable as possible to encourage the player to identify with him. According to one of Link’s lead designers, Ryuji Kobayashi (2013, p. 8), even Link’s face and facial expressions are designed to be “relatable.” He is also a silent protagonist, never speaking but simply grunting or shouting while combatting enemies. Silent protagonists are relatively common in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), from SNES classics such as *Chrono Trigger* through to more recent releases such as *Xenoblade Chronicles X* for the Wii U.² Other than his rather minimal history as a reincarnation or descendant of the legendary hero, Link never has a detailed backstory within each game. By never speaking, having no personality, and having little backstory, these protagonists serve as a *tabula rasa* (i.e., blank slate) for the player to use and potentially merge with during the game.

Taken together, all these factors render the protagonist’s identity as “Link” almost nonexistent. Link is, however, an extremely recognizable, iconic figure solely because of the visual cues that inform the player that the hero is indeed another Link. In terms of physical representation, Link is portrayed in a similar fashion in every game: a child or young adult, slim, with blonde or light brown hair, elvish features including pointed ears (often with an earring or sometimes two), large eyes (blue or black in the more cartoony design), and high cheekbones with no facial hair (see Figures 1–5). Link wears high boots and a tunic, usually green, which comes down to about mid-thigh. His outfit also features a pointed green cap and a belt cinching

his slim waist. Although the graphical capabilities and art style changed for each game, Link's highly recognizable design remained mostly consistent until Breath of the Wild.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Link as an adult from Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 1998).



Figure 2. In this screenshot from Wind Waker (Nintendo, 2002), Link is depicted in a more cartoonish way.



Figure 3. Child Link screenshot from the 3DS port of Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 2011).



Figure 4. Link screenshot from Skyward Sword (Nintendo, 2011).



Figure 5. Screenshot of Link from Hyrule Warriors (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2014).

NO LINK TO THE PAST

Given that Link's identity is tied to his physical representation, it is no surprise that the character's slightly altered appearance (see Figure 6) during Nintendo's brief 2014 E3 teaser trailer for the upcoming TLOZ title sparked heated debate among fans of the series. The character shown during the trailer had Link's blonde hair, big blue eyes, and elvish features, but wore blue instead of green, had no hat, was fighting with a bow rather than a sword, appeared to be riding a different horse than usual, had longer hair pulled back into a ponytail, was slimmer, and had what many perceived as distinctly feminine facial features. *Venture Beat's* Mike Minotti (2014) asked TLOZ producer Eiji Aonuma in an interview about the altered appearance of the character; Aonuma cryptically replied by smiling and saying, "No one explicitly said that that was Link" (para. 2). This remark enflamed a widespread discussion among fans, some of whom proceeded to break down the trailer frame by frame to assess whether the character was male or female. There was certainly a virulent backlash against the idea of a female protagonist, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the violently antifeminist GamerGate movement took center stage in the gaming world later that summer (for more on GamerGate and its aftermath, see Chess & Shaw, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2016).



Figure 6. Screenshot of Link in the 2014 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) teaser trailer for *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017).

However, the fact that many commenters seemed to accept or even applaud the move demonstrates that there is both space and a need for more diverse and nuanced representation within gaming culture (Ore, 2016). Indeed, whether this character was actually the titular Princess Zelda finally being allowed to star in her own legend, or a child of Link and Zelda, or even a female incarnation of the legendary hero, many fans seemed supportive of the bold move. As *Kotaku's* Patricia Hernandez (2014) pointed out,

On some level I think the discussions are happening because people would genuinely love to play as a female character. There's a definite tinge of "wouldn't this be cool for Nintendo to do?" that trails most of the discussions I've seen, and it's often followed by a slightly defeatist "naw, Nintendo wouldn't actually do that...right?" (Hernandez, 2014, para. 8)³

Some fans justified their support or acceptance of a female Link by pointing out that nothing in the game's canon or the gameplay experience precludes a female incarnation of the hero:

Jagans: I wouldn't mind. There would be a lot of controversy, but the gender of the Hero has never really mattered in my mind. (cited in Hernandez, 2014)

Plus5defense (2014): I'd be all for it, I mean it's pretty dumb to think that the Hero of Hyrule descendants have all been males. surely there has been a girl in there at some stage. or maybe instead of the Twilight World it's some kind of Gender Bending Universe? who knows, and who cares. I just want to play this game!

TetraGenesis (2014): Why does the Hero of Time have to be male? There's no reason. Other than tradition. Which Aonuma has made explicitly clear he's trying to throw out the window.

Mononoke (2014): Honestly, at this point I don't see why Link couldn't be female. For me, the idea behind Link has always been that the hero always rises in every generation. It's not the same person every time (obviously it can't be). Given how the game has played out using Link over the years, why couldn't one generation be a female?

This openness to a female hero might be because gender-swapping Link is not a new idea: As the organizer of the 2015 Female Link Jam pointed out, "Female Link is something fans have always had floating amongst their collective super-brain" (cited in Hemmann, 2018, p. 226). For example, in 2012, Mike Hoye gained some fame for hacking *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002) to edit the text, swapping all the gendered pronouns in the

game. As reported in an interview with *Ars Technica*, “Hoye was bothered by the fact that even players who change the protagonist’s name to something other than ‘Link’—which the game allows—always get addressed as though they are male” (Johnston, 2012, para. 2). Hoye did this for his young daughter’s playthrough of *Wind Waker*, which begins with Link having to rescue his little sister Aryll, because, as he wrote on his blog, “I’m not having my daughter growing up thinking girls don’t get to be the hero and rescue their little brothers” (Hoye, 2012, para. 4). While Hoye has been criticized by some commenters for “lying to his daughter about Link’s gender” (Joseph_Joestar, 2012) and “changing others’ intellectual property to suit [his] needs” (Rapscaillon, 2012), most websites reporting the story have hailed him as a heroic father. Similarly, Kathryn Hemmann (2018) highlighted several fan-produced comics that retell TLOZ’s stories in order to give more agency to the female characters in the series, thereby subtly critiquing its highly gendered tropes. In other words, at this point, there was clearly room for acceptance and even enthusiasm regarding a female Link; yet Nintendo responded instead with a female imitation of the hero.

LINKLE: THE FAILED ATTEMPT

In 2014, Nintendo released *Hyrule Warriors* (Omega Force & Team Ninja), a hack-and-slash spinoff of the *Zelda* series—basically *Dynasty Warriors* with a *Zelda* overlay—which became the best-selling game for the Wii U console and featured a wide selection of characters for the player to choose from. Amid fan speculation regarding the possibility of a female Link, Aonuma was interviewed by *Kotaku*’s Jason Schreier, who suggested to Aonuma that allowing female players to play as a character of their own gender would be more inclusive. In response, Aonuma stated,

So there are actually many female characters you can play as in *Hyrule Warriors*. We’ve introduced Midna, we’ve introduced Princess Zelda, and Impa as well ... let’s see what happens with *Hyrule Warriors*, if as a result of there being more female protagonists, more women pick up the game, I’m all for it, so I’ve decided to see what happens with this title. (Schreier, 2014, para. 14, italics in original)

Clearly this experiment with female characters was somewhat successful: During their November 2015 Nintendo Direct announcement, the company revealed an “original character” named Linkle for the updated port of the game for the 3DS, called *Hyrule Warriors Legends* (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2016).

In many ways, Linkle is simply a female imitation of Link: Apart from the similar name, Linkle also has blonde hair, pointed ears, an elvish appearance, and wears green (see Figure 7). She is, however, less androgynous, referred to using female pronouns, and wears a short skirt over tight-fitting shorts. She also is presented as a silly character: clumsy, scatterbrained, and unable to follow directions or navigate. More importantly, rather than being a hero of any story, she is marginalized to a ported handheld version of a spinoff game. Unfortunately, playable female characters are often relegated to spinoffs and downloadable content (DLC). As media critic Veve Jaffa (2016) observed, “Isolating marginalized representation to DLC demonstrates the industry’s conditional interest in portraying diversity” (para. 5). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that while gender-swapped Link has been a prominent figure in much fan art and fan fiction,



Figure 7. Screenshot of Linkle from Hyrule Warriors Legends (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2015).

critical reaction to the announcement of Linkle was mixed. Jess Joho (2015), writing for *KillScreen*, articulated her frustration and disappointment at the reveal of Linkle:

Here’s the bottom line that Nintendo refuses to see: when people ask “why can’t Link be a girl,” they’re not asking for the option to maybe play as a girl who looks like Link in a game with a Zelda-related title. They’re not asking for girls to be kept to the side, marginalized to a lesser product ... Instead, they’re asking why—amidst an otherwise very female-centric mythology about three goddesses and a badass princess—must the “Hero” character always be a boy? Why is it okay to ask female players to identify with Link despite their gender differences, but at the same time have it be inconceivable to ask male players to do the same? (Joho, 2015, para. 12)

Thus, Linkle is a poor substitute for Link. Moreover, Joho’s point about Zelda being “a badass princess” highlights the question of why gender-swap a male character when there is already an established female protagonist in the series?

Indeed, for many fans, the most appealing option would be to make Zelda the main character because it is technically her legend. In fact, because of the title of the series, it is common for children to think mistakenly that the main character *is* Zelda. In 1993, Christine Gailey reported that one girl in her study “saw herself sometimes as Link and sometimes as the princess” and that regardless of which character she identified with, she understood that “the object of the game was ‘to get rid of the bad guys and get my kingdom back’” (p. 89). Similarly, in their study of Grade 6 children playing *Wind Waker*, Jenson, de Castell, Bergstrom, and Flynn-Jones (2017) observed that “even after playing for eight weeks, the majority of participants mislabeled the protagonist as ‘Zelda’ on their character identification sheets” (p. 6). Serrels (2014) identified various online commenters admitting to the same misidentification:

Jane (2014): Fun fact; when I was a kid and first played *The Legend of Zelda* on NES, I thought I was playing as Zelda, because I was too young to really understand the text that was on screen (I think I was about four or five), the sprites on screen didn’t do much to suggest gender one way or the other, and it just made sense—it was Zelda’s legend!

Shane (2014) [in response]: When I was a kid, I thought the same, and actually entered the character name as ‘ZELDA’ on the new game setup screen, little realising that doing so unlocked the hard mode NG+.

This long-standing and common confusion suggests that Link's identity—and his maleness—is not vital to the series, and that perhaps it would make sense for Zelda to be the protagonist instead. However, while offering more heroic female representation is a laudable feminist goal, given the notable shortage of positive nonbinary gender representation in mainstream games, it may be more progressive for Nintendo to embrace Link as fully androgynous and gender-neutral.

ANDROGYNOUS HEROES

While many fans insisted that the character in the *Breath of the Wild* trailer must be Zelda, particularly because the character's face was perceived as more feminine than Link's usually is, others pointed out the lack of breasts and hips in their arguments against the character being female (see Figure 6). Attempting to analyze the body of a digitally-rendered character in this way suggests that these fans continue to conceptualize gender in association with specific biological markers and to believe that a character's gender can be uncovered by closely analyzing these physical characteristics. As argued by Michel Foucault (1976/1978), associating gender with physiology, as well as the assumption that the body can be read to uncover its sex or gender, is a function of medical and political discursive power exercised on the body. This assumption also does not recognize the nature of gender performativity—which does not necessarily relate to physical appearance—and the fluidity of gender, as elaborated by scholars such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Jack Halberstam (1998). To some, however, Link's ambiguous or androgynous character design was a positive, potentially empowering development, and fit in with the series' style:

The Cranberry Cap'n (2014): What it says to me is a female character design whose femaleness isn't emphasized. That alone would be refreshing and awesome, regardless of who the character actually is ... It's certainly a more androgynous character, but that wouldn't be Nintendo or the *Zelda* series' first time toeing the gender line.

Indeed *TLOZ* has always been filled with androgynous characters, most notably Link himself. Androgyny in this case can be understood as either a gendered performance tied to what Butler (1990, p. 416) described as the “surface politics of the body,” which includes a mixing of gender signifiers, such as cosmetics, clothing, gestures, speech, and so on, or physicality, such as the lack or mixing of secondary sex characteristics, or a combination of both. In Link's case, his slim body, elvish features, and his appearance in several titles as a cartoonish child all render him androgynous by design. It is important to note that conceptualizations of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny are culturally contextual, and discussing how mostly North American audiences perceived the gendered design of a Japanese game character risks repeating Orientalist ideas of more “feminized” Asian male gender presentation (for more on this, see Atkins, 2005). I therefore turn to the developers' own discussions of their design processes, as well as a look at the context of Japanese androgynous aesthetic traditions, in order to provide a nuanced and critical understanding of Link's design.

Designing Link within a Japanese Cultural Context

TLOZ creator Shigeru Miyamoto stated that Disney's Peter Pan was the inspiration for Link's character design (Audureau, 2012). It is unsurprising, then, that Link is portrayed often as a

cartoonish child, a design choice that adds to his androgyny. It is also interesting to note that in stage productions of *Peter Pan*, the title role traditionally has been played by a female actor (Hanson, 2011). This design choice, combined with Link's silence and minimal backstory, was intended to allow players of any gender to identify with him. As Aonuma stated in an interview with *Time*'s Matt Peckham,

Back during the *Ocarina of Time* days, I wanted Link to be gender neutral. I wanted the player to think "Maybe Link is a boy or a girl." If you saw Link as a guy, he'd have more of a feminine touch. Or vice versa, if you related to Link as a girl, it was with more of a masculine aspect. I really wanted the designer to encompass more of a gender-neutral figure. So I've always thought that for either female or male players, I wanted them to be able to relate to Link. (Peckham, 2016, para. 4, italics in original)

Although designing a gender-neutral character is a potentially inclusive artistic choice, the fact remains that Link is established officially as a male character and is addressed using masculine pronouns in the English translations of every game in the series.⁴ In addition, Link's childish androgyny does not detract from his apparent sexual appeal in the games: As Pugh (2018) noted, despite his "innocent and presexual" portrayal, he is nevertheless the subject of "female characters' libidinous investment ... due to his heroic status" (p. 227). Link's maleness also has been an important plot device in several games, particularly when he must either use stealth or cross-dressing to enter the territory of the all-female Gerudo tribe in both *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) and *Breath of the Wild* (see Figure 8). Link can pass as female when he wears female-coded clothing but is recognizably male when he does not. Therefore, while he is androgynous by design, he is not presented as gender-neutral.

Androgynous men, whose aesthetic I will call "masculine-skewed androgyny" in reference to Adams' (2018) work, have been popular in Japanese culture for centuries, perhaps influenced by the *yarō-kabuki*, or young man kabuki, theatrical traditions. *Kabuki* was a common form of entertainment in the 17th century, although female *kabuki*, called *onna-kabuki*, was banned by the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1629 for being too erotic and because the performers were available for prostitution (Shively, 2002). After this ban, men and adolescent boys took over the female roles. These cross-dressing actors, called *onnagata* or *oyama* (female-role) were chosen for their beauty and higher-pitched voices; they were often presented in an erotic context and available for prostitution as well (Shively, 2002, p. 34–41).



Figure 6. Link wearing female Gerudo clothing in a screenshot from *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017).

Masculine-skewed androgyny continues to be extremely popular in Japanese artwork, comics (*manga*), and animation (*anime*); as well as among Japanese musicians (a movement called visual *kei*, with *kei* meaning style) and models (a trend called genderless *kei*; McLeod, 2013; L. Miller, 2006; Robertson, 1992).

Similarly, masculine-skewed androgynous protagonists are not uncommon in JRPGs: Many male characters exhibit relatively few secondary sex characteristics or fall into the *bishōnen*, or beautiful boy, aesthetic category, with slender bodies, feminine features, and long hair. The popular Final Fantasy series, for example, is known for its androgynous protagonists, especially those drawn by Yoshitaka Amano.⁵ Within the Japanese cultural context, Link's androgynous design is therefore not particularly unusual; however, the series' popularity in the West is notable given that Western video games tend to feature more macho or hypermasculine male characters (Burrill, 2008; Kirkland, 2009). It is important to note that while these video game characters are androgynous by design, they are not gender-neutral; rather, they are almost all unambiguously male, as well as being slim, light-skinned, and able-bodied. Adams (2018) noted that the slim, white, and masculine-skewed androgyny of video game characters like Link reflects Lorenzo-Cioldi's (1996) concept of "transcendent androgyny," which is presented as minimal, ideal, and neutral. Of course, framing slim, masculine whiteness as neutral is really a way of presenting it as ideal, natural, and correct (Adams, 2018). Similarly, the kind of androgyny that these idealized protagonists can embody is highly policed: Androgynous JRPG protagonists are rarely gender variant in that they rarely wear feminine clothing or cosmetics and are never effeminate in their speech or gestures. JRPG villains, on the other hand, are often portrayed as gender variant, suggesting that while masculine-skewed androgyny is considered ideal, gender variance is viewed as excessive and therefore evil (Adams, 2018). Some famous examples of villains designed this way are Flea from Chrono Trigger, Kuja from Final Fantasy IX, and Ghirahim from The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword (Nintendo, 2011).

Other Androgynous Heroes: Zelda as Sheik and Tetra

Even though this article is primarily about Link, it is important to note that Princess Zelda also has appeared as an androgynous hero. The eponymous princess of TLOZ series is portrayed almost always as a damsel-in-distress who needs Link to save her. Her distress always comes from some form of physical disempowerment: She has been kidnapped, imprisoned, put to sleep, cursed, turned to stone, possessed, has become a bodiless spirit, and so on. Zelda sometimes has magical powers and occasionally fights with a bow, although these abilities are only ever used to assist Link in his battle against evil, usually at the very end of the game. In *Breath of the Wild*, Zelda is relegated to a disembodied voice encouraging and guiding Link. She also appears in Link's flashbacks as he gradually regains his memory throughout his adventure; however, obtaining these memories is not required for players to finish the game. Although her character is arguably more fully developed in *Breath of the Wild* than in other games in this series—the player can see her struggle to unlock her own magical abilities and live up to her destiny as an incarnation of the goddess—the fact that she exists only in memories and as a disembodied voice means she functions merely as motivation for Link. This is particularly troublesome given the more empowered versions of Princess Zelda featured in previous installments in the series. While Zelda is generally a damsel-in-distress, two versions of her character have managed to overcome, at least temporarily, her inevitable powerlessness by challenging her assigned gender role: Sheik and Tetra.

Sheik

In *Ocarina of Time*, one of the series' most successful installments, Princess Zelda spends a large portion of the game disguised as Sheik, a seemingly male survivor of the Sheikah tribe, to hide from the villainous Ganondorf. Although this mysterious figure has a partially covered face, Sheik—with red eyes, tanned skin, and a slender-yet-masculine body—is unrecognizable as Zelda (see Figure 9). Sheik aids Link during his quest by giving him advice and teaching him powerful teleportation songs. Late in the game, Sheik is revealed to be Princess Zelda, who then changes back into the familiar blonde-haired, blue-eyed princess, complete with pink dress and golden tiara (see Figure 10). Unsurprisingly, almost as soon as Zelda reveals herself, she is captured by Ganondorf, imprisoned in a crystal, and must be rescued by Link. While in disguise as a man, however, Zelda/Sheik is a capable ninja-like warrior who actually adopts the role of hero by saving Princess Ruto of the Zora tribe.

Almost immediately after the release of *Ocarina of Time*, fan debate heated up regarding Sheik's gender. While in disguise, Sheik has a very masculine appearance, is given male pronouns, and is referred to as a young man by Princess Ruto. Some fans argued that this meant Sheik really is physically male, and the noncanon *manga* adaptation of *Ocarina of Time*, released in 1998, confirmed this. In the *manga*, Zelda actually magically transformed herself into a biological male



Figure 7. Princess Zelda disguised as Sheik in a screenshot from *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998).



Figure 8. Screenshot after Sheik is revealed to be Princess Zelda in *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998).

for the 7 years she was in disguise (Himekawa, 1998/2016). Other fans, however, argued that since it was Zelda in disguise, Sheik must be biologically female. This fan theory suggested that Zelda used magic to disguise her features and bound her breasts, comparing her to historical women who disguised themselves as men to gain agency in a patriarchal society, such as Hua Mulan and Joan of Arc. However, as Chris Lawrence (2018, p. 99) pointed out, the character's gender is purposely left ambiguous as "Sheik never self-identifies with a specific set of pronouns" and is voiced by the same actress who voices Zelda, but with a lower-pitched recording. Although Sheik has appeared in only one TLOZ title, this gender-ambiguous hero has been a playable fighter in the Super Smash Bros.⁶ fighting game series and in *Hyrule Warriors*. However, the character design for Sheik in both of these titles is considerably more feminine than the original character, and in the Super Smash Bros. series, Sheik is described as female. Shortly before *Hyrule Warriors* was released in August of 2014, Bill Trinen, senior product marketing manager at Nintendo of America, attempted to end the debate by stating in an interview that "the definitive answer is that Sheik is a woman—simply Zelda in a different outfit" (Riendeau, 2014, para. 11). Although this is Nintendo's official stance, Bill Trinen did not create the character and so fans still debate the topic, both because of the related *manga* and because some fans prefer to see Sheik/Zelda as a gender fluid character (e.g., see Lawrence, 2018; Meehan, 2014; Watson, 2017).

Tetra

Tetra debuted in *Wind Waker* as a rambunctious, tomboyish pirate captain with tanned skin and blonde hair (see Figure 11). Although a child, she is the fearless leader of a gang of pirates who respect her and obey her orders. She grudgingly assists Link to rescue his sister, albeit for her own reasons, but in doing so, Ganondorf discovers her true identity as Princess Zelda. Tetra and Link flee to the ruins of Hyrule castle, where the king of Hyrule tells Tetra of the fate she was born into and she is physically transformed into Zelda. Her skin gets lighter, her hair gets longer, her pirate clothing becomes a pink dress, and she is wearing make-up and jewelry (see Figure 12). Unsurprisingly, Tetra seems horrified and saddened by her fate, particularly because the power and freedom she enjoyed as Tetra is taken from her. She is forced to remain hidden in the ruins instead of journeying alongside Link because, as the king says to her, "It is far too dangerous for you to



Figure 9. Tetra (left) is a confident, rambunctious pirate leader, shown in a screenshot from *Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002).



Figure 10. In this screenshot from *Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002), Tetra has been transformed into Princess Zelda, who sadly waves goodbye to Link and warns him to “Be careful” because she can no longer adventure alongside him.

join us in this task.” She waves sadly at Link as he goes off to save the day after apologizing to him for being the source of his troubles. The brave and adventurous Tetra is completely gone, replaced by a sad, apologetic, helpless, and distinctly more feminine princess. Zelda is captured later by Ganondorf and rendered unconscious, for which *she* apologizes, saying she “overslept.” During the final battle, Zelda helps Link fight Ganondorf with arrows of light that she shoots from her bow; of course, it is Link who strikes the final blow.

In her more masculine or androgynous forms as Sheik and Tetra, Zelda proves herself capable and brave, but in both cases, when she returns to her “true” form, she is almost instantly incapacitated and in need of rescue. Her personality also seems to change completely: She becomes more dainty, graceful, docile, and apologetic. The key takeaway here is that although TLOZ series primarily features a masculine-skewed androgynous character, it has also provided space for feminine-skewed androgyny and for a female character to “gender-bend” her way into a more active role. In this sense, nonnormative gender roles are fully established in this series, even though Nintendo’s responses regarding the details of these characters’ gender identities remains very conservative.

NINTENDO’S CONSERVATISM

As a company, Nintendo has always preferred to stay away from anything that could be construed as controversial. As Dan Adelman, who headed Nintendo of America’s independent games program for 9 years, revealed,

They’re very traditional, and very focused on hierarchy and group decision making. Unfortunately, that creates a culture where everyone is an advisor and no one is a decision maker, but almost everyone has veto power ... if someone flat out says no, the proposal is as good as dead. So in general, bolder ideas don’t get through the process unless they originate at the top. (cited in Campbell, 2015, para. 13–16)

Bolder ideas are unlikely to originate at the top, however, as according to Adelman Nintendo is run by a network of managers who dislike taking risks. As Adelman stated, “Risk taking is generally not really rewarded. Long-term loyalty is ultimately what gets rewarded, so

the easiest path is simply to stay the course” (cited in Campbell, 2015, para. 24). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that regardless of how enthusiastic many fans were about the idea of a female protagonist, and despite Aonuma’s claims of wanting to “shake up” the traditional conventions of the series (Makuch, 2013), during the official unveiling of *Breath of the Wild* at E3 2016, the main character was definitively established as another male Link. Aonuma attempted to explain why this version of Link appeared to be female:

After *Twilight Princess* I went back to the drawing board and decided Link should be a more gender-neutral character. Hence I created the version of Link that you see in *Breath of the Wild*. As far as gender goes, Link is definitely a male, but I wanted to create a character where anybody would be able to relate to the character ... So that’s why I think the rumor went around that Link could be a female. Because maybe the users were able to relate in that way. (cited in Peckham, 2016, para. 5, italicization in original)

This reveal was met with widespread fan disappointment, especially given Aonuma’s vague hinting 2 years prior (Ore, 2016). In explanation for this, Aonuma claimed that it was intended as a joke and that he “in no way had intention of leading people into believing Link was female” (cited in Totilo, 2016, para. 2).

After the disappointing reveal, Aonuma was asked by many reporters why his team decided not to make Link female. To *Kotaku* he explained that because “the Triforce is made up of Princess Zelda, Ganon and Link,” and since “Princess Zelda is obviously female,” they felt that if they made Link a female, it would “mess with the balance of the Triforce” (cited in Totilo, 2016, para. 3). This explanation is nonsensical, particularly because the Triforce, being three-fold, is already unbalanced, with two men and one woman. The Triforce, which is a sacred relic embodying the power of the three goddesses who created the realm of Hyrule, is made up of Courage (represented by Link), Wisdom (represented by Zelda), and Power (represented by Ganon). By claiming that making Link female would unbalance the Triforce, Aonuma is implying that courage cannot be represented by a woman. Beyond this problematic implication, Aonuma gave a very unsatisfying response to why his team did not choose to have Zelda as the main character in *Breath of the Wild*. In an interview with *GameSpot* during E3, Aonuma explained that his team considered having Princess Zelda as the main character because it would have been “simpler” than making a female Link, but the idea was rejected: “If we have princess Zelda as the main character who fights, then what is Link going to do? Taking into account that, and also the idea of the balance of the Triforce, we thought it best to come back to this [original] makeup” (cited in Brown, 2016, para. 2–3). The idea of letting the Princess rescue Link for once was completely dismissed for fear of leaving Link with nothing to do—or worse, being disempowered or imprisoned as Zelda is in every single game.

CONCLUSIONS

By conducting a close analysis of Link’s gender presentation alongside player and critical discourse, this research has shown that gender representation has become a central, though often heated, topic of conversation within gaming culture. While this conversation inevitably involves a backlash from certain groups within that culture, clearly space and demand for more diverse gender representation exists within mainstream games. In this sense, this research has exposed

how one-sided that hegemonic hold on representation in mainstream games really is: Critics want change, many fans want or accept the possibility of change, but mainstream developers—even if the series already leans towards alternative gender performance—will do almost anything to avoid backlash from the male gamers they continue to perceive as their main demographic. Indeed, while Nintendo’s response is disappointing for fans who were hoping for a female protagonist in the newest installment, it is not overly surprising. TLOZ series was designed for a primarily male audience base. In 1994, Nintendo spokesperson Sally Reavis confirmed that “Boys are the market. Nintendo has always taken their core consumers very seriously” (cited in Pugh, 2018, p. 226). This bias is demonstrated clearly by the marketing campaigns used to promote the games. As Vossen (2018) observed, “Even games that had wide appeal amongst a variety of genders and ages were promoted through highly gendered advertisements” (p. 11). She cited the example of a televised advertisement for *Ocarina of Time* in which the text reads, “Willst thou get the girl? Or play like one?” (Vossen, 2018, p. 11). The idea of “getting the girl” is indeed common to each installment in the series, and critics like Anita Sarkeesian (2013) have pointed out that Link must rescue an incapacitated and victimized Princess Zelda in every game. This is the basic narrative set-up of each game, and the predictable hero-rescues-princess trope is as closely associated with TLOZ series as the iconic protagonist’s green tunic and pointed ears. In addition, this advertisement suggests that playing like a girl means not having the necessary skills to win the game, thereby implying that only male players can succeed.

The debates that heated up over the trailers for the newest installment, *Breath of the Wild*, revealed an awareness among the series’ fans that TLOZ’s producers could have pushed the boundaries and taken some risks regarding gender roles and representation, but chose not to. However, it is important to note that Nintendo is a Japanese company while many of the debates, controversies, and conversations regarding gender diversity and representation have taken place on North American, Australian, and European websites and forums and within Western academia. Although beyond the scope of this article, it would be worthwhile to investigate the fan and critic response to the series and to *Breath of the Wild* in Japan and in other regions of the world. It would also be valuable to examine how Japanese cultural norms and practices impact corporate decision making, especially regarding gender representation in games. While it originates in Japan, TLOZ series is a global cultural icon and one of the most recognizable video game franchises in the medium’s history. This is undoubtedly because the series is full of noteworthy characters, including an androgynous hero, designed to be a gender-neutral blank slate to foster the player’s identification with him. His androgynous design combined with the fact he is simply a reincarnation of the legendary hero has caused many fans to wonder why Link has never been female. However, rather than gender-swapping a male character, perhaps it would be more interesting for Nintendo to embrace Link’s androgyny and make him a truly gender-neutral character.

TLOZ series is remarkable in many ways and is therefore certainly worthy of academic attention. Although it has many problematic character portrayals and has commonly presented villains that embody fears of gender variance and excess, by featuring a young, androgynous protagonist, Nintendo could potentially challenge stereotypical gender roles in video games. However, Nintendo’s decision regarding the protagonist’s gender in *Breath of the Wild* does suggest that they still believe that heroism needs to be tied to masculinity, even if that masculinity is androgynous. Although Nintendo appears to value close dialogue with fans and critics, the company does not seem to be really listening to their demands or is being very selective about which demands they address. This is particularly surprising given Nintendo’s recent boasting regarding their apparently high

number of female developers, especially as compared to Western companies. During a recent Q&A session, Nintendo's Director and Senior Managing Executive Officer Shinya Takahashi claimed, "There are many female developers in the software development departments ... and very high number of females among our designers" (cited in Doolan, 2019). Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of The Legend of Zelda series and one of Nintendo's representative directors, added,

There are also many females actively involved in development ... When I had chances to look at other development companies in Europe and the US, they give the impression that they're overwhelmingly male-dominated. Compared to companies like that, Nintendo has a lot of female developers energetically working. (cited in Doolan, 2019)

While this is certainly a positive step, it does not appear to be resulting in more female representation in Nintendo's games. And because there is no mention at all of developers who identify as gender nonbinary, it does not bode well for fans and critics who are hoping for more diverse gender representation in games.

In addition, although featuring an androgynous protagonist can be viewed as progressive in a Western context, Link's design fits in with Japanese cultural preferences and was therefore not an overly risky choice for Nintendo. Although conservatism still has a hold on the mainstream game industry, fan and critical discourses on this specific design choice reveal a strong desire for more centralized female representation in TLOZ series. While more nuanced and heroic female representation is important, Link's androgyny could also pave the way for the normalization of gender-neutral or nonconforming protagonists in mainstream games. The fact that a video game series as globally renowned, critically acclaimed, and financially successful as TLOZ has successfully provided space for centralized and heroic androgynous representation is already remarkable.

Although Nintendo's rationale for continuing to feature a male protagonist in the series and marginalize other gender identities was rather flimsy and contradictory, it is important to underscore that the company was compelled to explain the choice to fans and critics. This suggests that it is no longer widely assumed (or desired) that mainstream video game protagonists are necessarily going to remain male by default. This can therefore be interpreted as a key moment for future research on game content and gaming culture, especially regarding accessibility and visibility for nonmale gender identities. This is also important for future research on—and interventions into—industry practices, as the reluctance to decentralize maleness in games is undoubtedly a direct result of Nintendo's hierarchical corporate structure, its fixation on tradition, and the assumption that, regardless of the diversity of its player demographic, male protagonists are the "bankable" choice. If Nintendo wants to be at the forefront of innovation, especially amid the reality that mainstream games still exist within a largely conservative and antifeminist sphere, they will need to provide more space for nuanced representations of diverse gender identities in their games.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND APPLICATION

As a contribution to the theoretical aspects of gameplay and games culture, this research demonstrates that traditional stances on who is allowed to be the hero and what a hero can or should look like are open topics for investigation and discussion. Importantly, because culture and gender perspectives are dynamic, such research could be ongoing and should always seek

to consider player and developer discourse. Moreover, research into the corporate cultures of game companies is also a ripe topic for exploration, particularly regarding their processes of engaging fan and critic support. This research provides a launching point for future scholarship on Nintendo's corporate and design practices, future developments in TLOZ series, and gender representation in JRPGs—especially regarding gender deviance and villainy, exaggerated masculinity, and cross-dressing, which are topics only briefly addressed here. In addition, given the continued global popularity of Japanese games, further research seeking to understand these gendered representations within specific cultural contexts of production and reception is vital.

Regarding application, gender-based game scholarship is a vibrant and growing area of research, especially given the continued global demographic shifts as nonmale players become more vocal about their play experiences. As game developers and executives of game companies seek to support their profit and marketing goals, ongoing research into how these companies balance the desires and needs of disparate subgroups of players regarding representation and other issues will become ever more important. This article provides a basis for concrete suggestions to shape policy and practice regarding gender inclusivity in game design and could therefore contribute to the development of new ideas for gameplay that welcomes and engages all players.

ENDNOTES

1. Tomb Raider is a multititle series (1996–2018) developed by Core Design, Crystal Dynamics, Nixxes Software, Ubisoft Milan, and Eidos Montreal.
2. Chrono Trigger is a Japanese RPG developed by Square and released in 1995 and Xenoblade Chronicles X is a 2015 Japanese RPG developed by Monolith Soft.
3. This paper makes extensive use of blog posts and comments, so I will be presenting these texts exactly as the original authors have written them.
4. I specify that Link has masculine pronouns in the English translation here because it should be noted that Japanese does not use pronouns as often as English does and has mixed-gendered and gender-neutral pronouns, which can sometimes leave the gender of the character ambiguous in the text of the games. Often, Link is referred to by his name, as “the player,” or as “you” in the Japanese versions, while his gender is only explicitly revealed at certain points in the games or in the game manuals. However, even if the character is not explicitly gendered as often in the Japanese versions, Nintendo made the decision to use masculine pronouns for Link in the translations to other languages.
5. Final Fantasy is a multititle series of Japanese RPGs produced by Square-Enix and released between the years of 1987–2018
6. Super Smash Bros. is a multititle series (2001–2018) of fighting games developed by HAL Laboratory, Game Arts, Sora Ltd., and Bandai Namco Studios.

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