The Legend of Zelda: A Religious Record

This is but one of the legends of which the people speak . . .

- Legend of Zelda: The Wind Walker

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Abstract

This essay evaluates the religious allusion and construction found within Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda *video game series by utilizing several religious studies theories in an effort to examine the meaning-making phenomena the series creates for players. The series' 3D entries are analyzed using Forbes and Mahan's framework from* Religion and Popular Culture *(for describing relationships between religion and popular culture) to examine religious imagery and iconography within the Zelda series, and how such representation has changed over time. The series' gameplay elements are evaluated using Rachel Wagner's arguments from her book* Godwired *which explores the ritual nature of video games as a way of explaining the persisting religious nature and meaning-making systems present in the series. Finally, the narrative direction and storytelling are examined using Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" in an effort to understand the series' underlying spirituality and lasting appeal. This is all in an effort to examine the* Zelda *series' relationship with religion, the narratives and experiences it creates under such a relationship, and the conversations about religious narratives and ritual storytelling that* Zelda *creates space for in the intersection of religion and popular culture, ritual and play.*

Legend of Zelda series is a Nintendo video game franchise that follows the high fantasy adventures of a young warrior named Link on his quest to save his kingdom and Princess Zelda from ruin. At first glance, the game's story may read as a common medieval adventure game, but the series' lore runs deep and spins webs of religious allusion, cultural homage, and narrative invention. Zelda's relationship with religion has a complicated history, and an even more complicated future. It is productive to evaluate the instances of direct religious allusion within the series' story and game design as well as the evolution of the series' in-game religion in the 3D entries or "Hylianism." My work also interrogates Joseph Campbell's familiar narrative structures and how they become a productive way of engaging with the *Zelda* universe. This essay will closely examine 3D games (open-world entries that allow players to move in 3-dimensional space) as those entries have had the most influence in shaping *The Legend of Zelda's* religious structure.

The *Zelda* series chronicles an evolution of religious narrative that reveals an underlying struggle between criticism and commentary on existing belief systems and reverence for those same systems when they served as inspiration. Both in-game and in real life, the series has a complicated history with religious depiction. What starts as mere background detail invoking Christian symbolism evolves into a polytheistic holy war documented across reincarnated players and a confounding timeline of events. The dialogue between religion and *Legend of Zelda* has produced a plethora of narratives that demand examination. I employ Bruce David Forbes' relationship model (2017) to evaluate the series, examining where religion appears in *Legend of Zelda*, *Legend of Zelda* in religion, and how *Legend of Zelda* and religion have been in dialogue with one another. However, in order to grasp these concepts, it is important to understand the narratological context focusing my work.

Religious Allusion within *Zelda*

Every *Zelda* game follows a similar structure: players inhabit the role of a heroic young elven boy who wakes up to find the world is ending. Sometimes it is the moon barreling towards the earth, sometimes it is a wind mage trying to seize power, and sometimes it is a giant sea monster corrupting the world. Most of the time, participants are pitted against a reincarnation of the demon king, Ganondorf, who is after the ultimate power of your world; the Triforce. Most players cannot beat him right off the bat; the hero must grow into their power first. That means crawling through several dungeons, collecting magical items, and breaking a few curses. When players have evolved, they make their way to the Final Boss Battle and slay the evil plaguing the kingdom. It is an apocalyptic hero's journey narrative, but each step holds religious significance. Depending on the entry, that significance is either to the game-world or to the corporeal world.

The *Legend of Zelda*, the first game in the series, was released in February of 1986 on the Famicon Disk System (Aonuma 2011). Since then, the series has grown to include eighteen titles on over ten different consoles, with the most recent release being the critically acclaimed *Breath of the Wild* on the WiiU and Nintendo Switch. In the series' early days, religion was merely alluded to through in-game details: a cross on Link's shield

and graveyard headstones, locations of a church, and obtainable items including a crucifix and a Bible (Aonuma 2013). *A Link to the Past* was originally released as *The Triforce of the Gods* and heavily alluded to Christian imagery, but the title and some of the design elements were altered to meet with American censorship regulations. Since its early days, the series was designed to align Link, and therefore, the "good guys" with western perceptions of religion, specifically Christianity. This alignment that sides heroes with Christianity inadvertently brought the baggage of colonialism and western bias into the series. To combat the issue, Zelda would eventually turn from religious allusion to religious construction.

Nintendo's problematic use of religious allusion became most apparent in the 1998 release of *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, one of the first ever 3D console games. The antagonist of that game, Ganondorf, comes from a tribe of desert-dwelling thieves, whose symbol originally very closely mirrored the Islamic moon and star. Additionally, Nintendo combined a Muslim prayer and examples of cultural music found in Muslim societies as one thematic aspect of the game's Fire Temple. The prayer used is not meant to be paired with music; by doing so, Nintendo not only appropriates but insults the Islamic faith. Due to implications surrounding Islamic-coded antagonists against Christian-coded protagonists, and the misuse of symbolism and music, the game was re-released with these offenses removed. In being direct with its allusion and apparent in its bias, the *Zelda* series alienated and offended many players. Being so direct proved challenging for a game series wishing to appeal to a world-wide audience.

Nintendo tried religious allusion again in the 2010 entry, *Skyward Sword*, by only drawing design inspiration and referencing religion in its visuals. Most notable are an angel-like depiction of the Goddess Hylia, the exemplary figure for the Hylian people, and a dungeon that reflected Buddhist and Hindu theology and imagery. While the angelic figures of relative modernity are traditionally thought of as a Christian staple, the imagery and idea of heavenly beings has since expanded into mainstream imagery. The reference drew more from cultural and artistic interpretations, such as Renaissance painting and sculpture, than from religion itself.

A dungeon featured in the game was referred to as the "Ancient Cistern," and featured two layers: an upper, heavenly layer in warm colors and water features, and a hellish lower layer in cool colors and jagged rocky features. The centerpiece of this dungeon is a giant statue that resembles a buddha. The big boss at the top of the dungeon is a six-limbed automaton reminiscent of the many-armed Hindu god Shiva. One section has Link climb up from the lower chambers on a slim rope, in an obvious nod to the Buddhist short story *The Spider's Thread*, by Japanese writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. In this story, the Buddha is looking through the clear waters of a pool into hell, and he sees a sinner who once spared a spider. The Buddha pities him and lowers a spider's thread to allow the sinner to climb up to paradise. In *Skywards Sword's* version, Link must climb up a lone rope before a small army of zombie monsters overtakes him. The journey to hell and back works thematically and mechanically in the dungeon's design. Through these faithful

design choices, *Skyward Sword* corrected the mistakes of *Ocarina*; the allusions pay respect to the narrative and visual inspirations without twisting or misusing the source material. This entry also marks the series' decisive switch from incorporating real-world religion to creating its own.

In addition to these more direct religious references, *Zelda* also codes its language and narrative elements to evoke religion. These elements play a role in more than just laying the foundations for *Zelda* to build its own theology; they also create a religiously charged experience for players. The dungeons which, in the gaming mechanics context are contained areas involving puzzle-solving, boss fights, and item looting, are often referred to as "Temples." Some of these are recurring; the Temple of Time has appeared in four games so far. Link is often aided on his journey by "holy" beings, such as the Sages (who in different regional releases of the games have been referred to as priests), the Sheikah (a tribe whose sole purpose is protecting the royal bloodline of the Goddess Hylia) and all manner of mystical spirits, fairies and monks. The central conflict of the series draws heavily on Judeo-Christian themes of apocalyptic narratives, detailing an eternal war between demonic and heavenly beings. The visual depiction of Hylia bears an angelic design. Her people, referred to as Hylians, have pointed ears that allow them to "hear the whispers of the gods," which is also reminiscent of "chosen people" narratives. Even the game mechanics arrange themselves into blatant ritual. *Ocarina of Time* tasks Link with purifying the sage temples that Ganondorf poisoned with dark power (Aonuma 1998). *Twilight Princess* hosts several scavenger hunts that result in Link restoring Light Spirits to their former glory (Aonuma 2006). Several items in Link's inventory are received through or used in ritual; for example, drawing from Links blade named the "Master Sword" requires the player to have completed a certain portion of the game. It is used narratively as a sealing device or a key.

Link's varied musical instruments contain ritual power and enact certain effects on the environment to Link's advantage. *Breath of the Wild* conducts any life gauge or stamina gauge upgrades through prayer and veneration of Hylia statues found through the world and follows Princess Zelda's journey of Hylia veneration and physical purification by baptism as she embarks to different Goddess Springs (Hidemaro 2017). The series features countless instances where religious language and allusion have dictated game design. Yet the series does not simply stop at allusion; in addition to implementing religion into the structure of the games themselves, the series also developed its own in-game religion, Hylianism.

The Religion of Hylianism

In response to both the criticism of past religious allusion and the pre-existing foundation of religiously coded game design, *Zelda* began to formulate an in-game religion. Within this fictitious belief system, Nintendo has the freedom to explore religious narratives and themes without risking offense. The game-related religion Hylianism has roots in Christianity but has since drawn elements from other major world religions, including Judaism, Greek Mythology, Egyptian Mythology, and Hinduism. It is poly-

theistic, cyclical, and ritual-driven. According to the creation story recounted in *Ocarina of Time*, the land of Hyrule was created by three golden goddesses: Din, Goddess of Power; Nayru, Goddess of Wisdom; and Farore, Goddess of Courage (Aonuma, 1998). Like Judeo-Christian creation stories, these divine beings came to a space of nothing and brought light. They formed the world, then left it to the care of Goddess Hylia, who would become the patron deity of the Hylian people. The physical point where the three goddesses returned to the heavens became an artifact of immense divine power, the Triforce.

The Triforce is an unmediated, morally neutral object that grants the wish of whomever possesses it, so long as that person's heart has a balance of Power, Wisdom and Courage. In *Ocarina of Time¸* the main players of this recurring narrative are established: Link, a boy from the forest who grows into a savior figure and serves as the avatar the player controls; Zelda, a divine princess blessed with omniscient powers and prophetic abilities, who is tasked with protecting her kingdom and the Triforce; and Ganondorf, a desert king of thieves whose ambition and greed cause him to pursue the Triforce, destroying anything that impedes him. The three attributes of the Triforce7—power, wisdom, and courage—are best embodied by Ganondorf, Zelda, and Link, respectively. There are instances in-game of various people worshipping one goddess more than the other two, and it is widely accepted that each goddess serves as a patron deity to the mortal who wields her piece of the Triforce. Aiding Link and Zelda are the Sheikah tribe, who serve as attendants to the royal family, and any number of sages, who operate in the same capacity as priests or shamans. This game is also the first to feature a few of the recurring religious locations, including the cathedral-inspired Temple of Time and the Sacred Grove. *Ocarina of Time* provided the foundations of Hylianism with an established divinity, a rather over-powered divine artifact, religious structure and hierarchy, and exemplary figures that take part in pre-existing narratives. In all entries after *Ocarina of Time*, the lore of this "religion" is expanded and refined.

In the 2006 release of *Twilight Princess*, the royal family's history appears connected to the Crusades; because of them, an entire tribe of magic users has been banished. A cutscene reveals that the tribe of magic users or "interlopers" sought to create a power to rival that of the Triforce: however, this was interpreted as sacrilegious and the Light Spirits banished this tribe to a netherworld to rot (Aonuma, 2006). Both the game's antagonist and Link's companion and guide originate from this tribe, who are known as the Twili. Design notes from *Hyrule Historia* denote the Twili as being inspired by Middle Eastern peoples, harkening back to the subtly coded language of the games' religious allusions (Aonuma 2013). The lore of *Zelda* expanded to include notions of nationalism and cultural erasure. The Twili in this context can be interpreted as a stand-in for any displaced peoples slaughtered during the Crusades. In substituting Europe with Hyrule, Twilight Princess ascribed colonialism (and its baggage) to the Hylian royal family. No longer is the series a simple story of heroes against villains; with *Twilight Princess* the series begins to move away from the binary of good and evil, sacred and profane, and moves

more towards a complicated, realistic tangle of history and competing perspectives.

The narrative is further complicated by the 2011 entry, *Skyward Sword*. This game canonically takes place first in the official Zelda Timeline and fills in key information surrounding the gods and the cyclical nature of the games. The main addition is the goddess Hylia, who was created to protect the Triforce and the people of Hyrule. Over the course of the game she abandons her divine form and is reborn as the first Zelda, which provides explanation for the matrilineal tradition of the Royal family and Zelda's power: she and her descendants bear divine blood. The kingdom of Hyrule then follows an Egyptian-style government system, where a "pharaoh" or holy being holds divine sovereignty over the land and this divine right passes down a family line. The opening prologue of *Skyward Sword* also establishes the overarching conflict behind the series in more specific terms, telling the tale of "malevolent forces" that "rushed forth from a fissure," using their destructive forces to harm and terrorize humanity as well as the earth itself. This mayhem is perpetrated with the intention of commandeering "the ultimate power protected by Her Grace, the goddess. The power she guarded was without equal…Such was the might of the ultimate power that the old ones placed it in the care of the goddess." Finally, the goddess rescues surviving humans and sends them "skyward, beyond the reach of the demonic hordes." The goddess then returns to her land to fight evil forces, which are eventually vanquished. This is the entry point for players who are told, rather ominously, that a "new legend bound to this great story stands ready to be revealed."

The evil antagonist in *Skyrule* is Demise, the King of Daemons; he is described as hatred and malice incarnate. At the end of the game, after Link has defeated him, Demise curses Link and Zelda. He claims that his hatred will endure for ages to come and, indeed, he comes back as as the evil Ganondorf. It is rigorously theorized by fandom that this caused the cyclical nature of the Zelda games; Link and Zelda are reincarnated whenever the hatred born of Demise returns, and the apocalyptic narrative begins anew (Hidemaro, 2011).

With the introduction of Hylia in *Skyward Sword*, veneration of the goddess became a major design feature. Unlike her three sister goddesses Hylia has statues, monuments, ceremonies, and a crest that would eventually become the crest of the Royal Family. It is also canonized that Link's blade, the Master Sword, houses a robot-like spirit named Fi, which re-wrote the spiritual implications of all instances of that item; it, too, is a holy artifact with a set purpose. Certain materials and objects house power, and these phenomena is explicated more thoroughly by two important story mechanics: the forging of the Master Sword and the introduction of materials such as the time-shift stones and the goddess cubes (both from *Skyward Sword*). To "power up" his blade throughout the game, Link must pass three trials, perform three musical pieces on a holy instrument, and participate in rituals at preordained locations, all of which are overtly ceremonial and reverent to Hylia.

The time-shift stones and goddess cubes exemplify the ability of certain materials to house power that can only be accessed by specific items or people (Hidemaro, 2011). It

also demonstrates how certain items can affect time and space, drawing from the established concept of reality-shaping power established in the Triforce. *Skyward Sword* refined the foundations of Hylianism and gave the Hylians a deity to worship while informing some of the ritual practices, government structures, and artifact rules of the series. Through these developments and refinements, *Zelda* transitioned further away from religious appropriation and allusion by cementing the framework of its own original religion.

The 2003 entry, *The Wind Waker,* adds yet another layer of complications and parallels. This game plays with an alternative ending to the biblical story of Noah's Ark; the premise of *Wind Waker* states that the gods flooded Hyrule to prevent evil from razing the land. The result is a literal ocean of an overworld, with the Kingdom of Hyrule and the old legends nothing but distant memory. Throughout the game, Link encounters remnants of the old world, sinking below the waves to visit the grave that is Hyrule. The final battle takes Link beneath the waves, out of Hyrule Castle and up the way to Ganondorf's tower, echoing locations from *Ocarina of Time*. Just before Link faces off against Ganondorf in *Ocarina*, the villain makes these states that the Kings and citizens of Hyrule have been naïve in the faith that one day "the left behind people . . . would awaken Hyrule." Ganondorf's justification of his malevolent actions, both in *Wind Waker* and *Ocarina of Time*, by explaining an inherent jealousy for the comforts the people in Hyrule enjoyed compared to the environmental dearth of his homeland, stating further that,

> My country lay within a vast desert. When the sun rose into the sky, a burning wind punished my lands, searing the world. And when the moon climbed into the dark of night, a frigid gale pierced our homes. No matter when it came, the wind carried the same thing . . . Death. But the winds that blew across the green fields of Hyrule brought something other than suffering and ruin. I coveted that wind, I suppose (Wind Waker, 2003).

This introduces the modern ideation of apathetic gods and the question of who is favored and allowed providence, as well as adding a member to the modern troupe of sympathetic evildoers. *Wind Waker's* Ganondorf presents himself as more of a tragic hero than a pure villain and seems to have been consumed by greed in his pursuit of a better life for his people (Aonuma 2003). His monologue also points out the imbalance of favor that employing the Triforce creates. Indeed, it is clear that while Hyrule thrives, other countries suffer. Ganondorf's intentions may stem from a sense of justice, but his actions ultimately bring ruin on all involved parties. Hyrule remains in its underwater grave at the end of the game.

By questioning the intention of the gods, *Wind Waker* sets up the problem of authority in Hylianism. For narrative reasons, it is understood that Zelda's bloodline will serve as royalty, but Hyrule is the kingdom, not the world. The *Zelda* series has a rich tapestry of races and cultures woven into the world-building, yet the land appears prosperous only when the Hylians hold control over ritual power (namely the Triforce). Whether this is a

plot choice to clear the divide between friend and foe, or a by-product of Hylian ancestral efforts, *The Legend of Zelda's* in-game religious history now boasts ambiguous authority figures and questions of whom has a right to power and prosperity. In going beyond simple allusion and appropriation, the *Zelda* series created a rich and complex religion that fits naturally into its existing lore, while keeping the player grounded in the mythos of the real world. Therefore, Hylianism resulted from a shift away from religious allusion to religious construction, but in that construction remains the veins of socio-cultural commentary. The shift also allowed for Nintendo and the player to generate more meaningful and personal interaction with religious narratives.

The Ritual Nature of Video Games

Rachel Wagner, author of *Godwired*, examines the relationship between video games and interactive ritual by evaluating narratives, interactive structures, and other performance or 'play' phenomena within a closed system, what she dubs the "magic circle." In her words, "the magic circle . . . can apply to any bounded system characterized by rules and some fixed mode of performance" (p. 86). In the context of *Zelda,* the magic circle is the game world as one sees it through their console screen: from Link's perspective. One of Wagner's main arguments finds a strong similarity between ritual and game-play, in that both set aside time and space, create a closed system of rules and follows a set narrative. The one difference is that religious ritual aims to reinforce theological ideas and social constructs, adhering the performance more to fate and predetermined endings; video games allow participants more freedom in dictating the narrative they are enacting. For the *Zelda* series, Wagner's studies on apocalypse narratives and customizable identities provide insight into the allure of playing the hero and saving the world.

Wagner (2011) argues that video games often follow the apocalypse narrative structure; that is, a time sensitive, worlding-ending framework wherein a chosen savior manages to fend off ultimate destruction. The two major components of this structure are time-sensitive countdowns and divine intervention. *Zelda* does often fit apocalypse structure, with most of the games in the series having been designed to guide players down a linear sequence of events in which Link is trying to prevent the destruction of Hyrule. One of Wagner's arguments illuminates another complicated aspect of the *Zelda* series, noting that in the Judeo-Christian traditions, "one very obvious difference between these genres is in the representation of violent agency in bringing about humanity's salvation. In traditional apocalypses, visionaries look forward to rewards for the faithful and punishment for the wicked as enacted by God" (Wagner, 2011, p. 201). This is a comment on the distribution of "smiting power" between religious traditions and video games: the latter grants it to mortals while the former reserves that kind of power for the divine. *Zelda* does both, and this causes the Triforce to stand alone as fascinating creation, both in lore and as an artifact: it is this holy power that often decides the ending of the *Zelda* narratives and this holy power is born directly of the highest gods in the game's religion. As Zelda relays to Link in a *Skyward Sword* cutscene, "For while the supreme power of the Triforce was created by gods, all of its power can never be wielded by one. Knowing this power was

her last and only hope, the goddess gave up her divine powers and her immortal form" (Hidemaro, 2011). It is widely speculated that the gods did this to give hope to their mortal creations. Most apocalypse structures reserve such power for the gods alone. For Zelda to grant that power to its players reflects the trend noted by Wagner; video games grant agency to players within narrative structures that religiously they may not have held. Fate seems less imposing, and by performing the role of savior, the player takes a more personal investment in restoring the world and defeating the evil.

Video games also allow for more possibility in how one saves the world. The direct sequel to *Ocarina of Time* breaks away from the traditionally linear narrative structure and instead modified the apocalypse narrative into a time loop. In this game entitled *Majora's Mask*, Link has three days to defeat a demonic mask before it can summon a moon to crush the world. He is granted the ability to reset the in-game timeframe at will by playing the "Song of Time" on his ocarina (Aonuma, 2000). This manipulation sets *Mask* apart in the series: on the one hand, one has all the time in the world to complete player objectives; on the other, the limited time-frame of each cycle demands that participants be strategic in what they strive to accomplish. *Majora's Mask* also boasts a more direct threat to the game world. Should a player fail to reset time before the ever-present on-screen timer reaches 00:00:00, they are treated to a horrendous cutscene where the moon succeeds in barreling into the earth, sending the entire overworld up in flames. Countdowns, both in apocalypse narratives and game-play, serve to provide users with a sense of urgency and a continual push forward in the story. Wagner notes that while video games follow a trend of granting players more agency and freedom within that magic circle, that freedom is recognized by the players themselves. The game world and the ritual world both follow their own established rules, and *Majora's Mask* demonstrates this idea perfectly. Players can reset, slow down, and speed up time within the mechanics of gameplay, but are still limited by the game's code that restricts them to a three-day period. They can only manipulate time within the defined bounds of the magic circle.

For Wagner, this reflects a humanistic trend of seeking structure and order. She argues that "the appeal has something to do with the sense of accomplishment and territorial control; by visiting other imagined worlds, we enter into spaces that are structured, ordered, programed and predictable . . . we know before we even play that [games] are winnable" (p. 198). Video games allow players to be the agent of change themselves. Within the *Zelda* series, Link is designed to allow players full, uninhibited immersion into the game world.

Another of Wagner's arguments centers on customizable identity. In the chapter, *Me, Myself and Ipod*, she explores the theory of "hyperidentity" or "the selves we create in various online environments" (p. 108), outlining the impact alternative modes of self-expression have had. Wagner concludes that this resulted in a technological revolution as it pertains to religious engagement; this includes the substantial influence of video games.

Hyperidenties and imagined selves are a natural result of game design and online interaction; the very concept of an avatar follows this idea. Players take on a role that is

not themselves and use that avatar as a medium from their world to the virtual. Link is a blatant example of an avatar who performs in this capacity. *Zelda* series creators claim that Link's name comes from his role as the 'link' between the past and the future, between player and the game. Link's personality is intentionally left blank; he has no overt interpersonal characteristics, having almost no in-game dialogue outside of his trademark "Hiyaah!" and "het! HAAAh!" Up until *Breath of the Wild*, players could even customize Link's name to their liking. He embodies the idea of an immersed, personal gameplay experience (Aonuma, 2013) and the series creators wanted their controlled avatar to be someone players could step into. The 'play' of *Zelda* means quite literally taking on different roles, such as a messianic savior, or as a child navigating the transition to adulthood or the adventurer navigating danger.

Wagner (2011) argues that online virtual identities are inherently fluid and shifting, as they reflect one's ongoing dialogue with their own identity within a closed system free of the social restraints and expectations of the real world. Virtual identities serve as playgrounds for the mind and the ego, as they hold no real-world consequence for experimentation. Within the *Zelda* series, this plays out in how people name Link, move him through the story, and choose his path forward. As with every game in the *Zelda* series, not all playthroughs will go in the same order or even have the same number of cycles. How players react to the structures in place and how they in turn control Link's reaction reveals player priorities and actions. In essence, by having no personality, Link has been given every personality.

In this way, Link's identity is personalized to the player. This gives the player freedom to wrestle with apocalypses, make and lose friends, fight demons, slay dragons, solve puzzles and grow in power and inventory. As Wagner describes it, imagined identities are a way for people to collect and understand themselves, and are inherently meaning-making in their practice. By her logic this process is a religious act (p. 125). In playing through the 'legends' of the *Zelda* series, we embark on our own spiritual journey, traversing this religious-laden mythos in search of our own heroic identity.

The Hero's Journey and Spirituality

Spiritual exploration has always been a major component of the *Zelda* games. Coded language in-game aside, the mythic elements of *Zelda* resonate with medieval knights, ancient warriors, and monster-slayers. Creators have combined tropes with the personal growth of a single heroic protagonist. For example, whenever Link defeats a dungeon boss, he receives a heart container; this grants him additional lives. Joseph Campbell's documentary *The Power of Myth* (1998) explores the familiar "Hero's Journey" and describes this journey as being one of fundamental growth. "It's a cycle – it's a going and return that the hero cycle represents. But then this can be seen also in a simple initiation ritual, where a child has to give up his childhood and become an adult" (Campbell 1998). *Ocarina of Time* takes that idea quite literally; Link is a child at the beginning, but must wield the master sword to beat Ganondorf because drawing out the sword requires a certain amount of power. Nintendo's solution is to seal Link in a "holy" void space until

he reaches adulthood. The player is then allowed gameplay as either child or adult version of Link. Inventory and the accessibility of the in-game world is limited based on the age players select for their avatar. The series draws upon Campbell's framework and explores what it means to journey into adulthood while simultaneously allowing for the liminality that most young people experience between childhood and adulthood.

Campbell argues that stories following the Hero's Journey are primarily self-reflective and resonate with audiences because they pry at the deeper mysteries of identity and self-realization. In his words, "myths bring us to a level of consciousness that is spiritual" (Campbell, 1998). In a game series where creators designed their avatar to be a blank slate onto which players could easily project themselves, the ability to soul-search and internalize Link's struggles and victories naturally becomes second nature. Campbell describes the Hero's Journey as a "transformation of consciousness," wherein the mythic content reflects deeper battles of the conscious and the subconscious. He uses different analogies to describe recurring tropes in heroic narratives, which *Zelda* literally applies to its world-building. For example, there is always a dragon to slay; the dragon representing the ego, or what binds one to their ego. In *Ocarina of Time* the ego appears as Ganondorf. In a story of growing up, fears about adulthood, greed, pride and power abide, coming to life in utter unbalance with the villain. Defeating Ganondorf requires Link to prove his own growth.

Campbell also explores the belly of the fish story, which he illuminates as being representative of the subconscious, as water often is. *Ocarina of Time's* third dungeon is aptly named "Inside Jabu Jabu's Belly," as it takes place within the belly of a giant fish god. The purpose of that dungeon is to retrieve the "Spiritual Stone of Water" (Aonuma 1998). A bit obvious but effective, nonetheless. One cannot help but see the influence of mythology in the series, and Campbell's theory reveals why such encounters have persevered over time. In utilizing these narratives and structure, the *Zelda* series—particularly *Ocarina of Time*—creates space for spiritual exploration and personal enlightenment. Campbell makes the case that all Hero's Journeys are concerned with death. An individual must die to themselves to grow into a new person, one must slay metaphorical monsters, and one must experience loss and sacrifice. In fictional works like film, books, or television, these deaths can only be witnessed, not necessarily experienced. With video games, particularly role-playing games, this journey can be taken as the Hero, from their perspective. As I've mentioned earlier, Link was designed to allow players their own personal adventure. The trials and triumphs Link experiences in-game are theirs as well. Many gamers are capable of relating to the sense of loss one feels when they see the game-over screen. Mechanically, the presence of death is measured by Link's heart container count; likewise, in scripted events such as the death of the Great Deku Tree. Campbell would likely claim that death comes in the guise of Link abandoning his home and childhood. Demise of his innocence occurs as he explores more of the world and the darkness within it. Players share in Link's sorrow and triumph and make it their own. The more Link grows and dies to his old self, the more players are called to do the same. It is this narrative of death and resurrection

that best describes Campbell's hero's journey, for the Hero's Journey is ultimately one of growth. It is why such stories pervade our culture and religion: they pull at a deeper question of what spirituality is. The *Zelda* series lets players take direct control of experiencing the hero's journey for themselves.

Conclusion

Nintendo seemingly surmised a successful formula for working with their cultural inspirations and problems without generating overt controversy. By having created their own in-house religion, they allowed themselves the freedom to create bold statements and scenarios under the guise of fantasy. Most importantly, the *Zelda* series creates the space for dialogue between religion and pop culture to take full form. *Zelda* takes on religious inspiration, controversy over representation, generated socio-cultural commentary, and reflection through in-game establishment of a new religion. How people divine meaning is explored in the various narratives and motivations presented to Link at the beginning of each game; the cyclical nature allows the same story to play out in different scenarios and conditions, fully exploring the problem of who deserves and wields power. The story structure holds up against different theories surrounding meaning-making, particularly in the religious and spiritual sense. Fans have theorized and created full studies on the philosophy, theology, and history that is part of the *Zelda* universe. This series generates all manner of conversation with the scenarios it has devised, and the religious study of this series builds upon this rich framework by illuminating the epistemological power at the core of the many meaning-making opportunities *Zelda* offers its players to explore.

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