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Morality and Intended Play in Interactive Worlds: How Neocolonialist Ideology is  
Constructed in *Breath of the Wild*

In his seminal critical essay, “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes argued against traditional forms of literary analysis that worked from stated or supposed intention of the author to ascertain a work’s “ultimate meaning,” instead proposing that no true meaning of any form of literature exists, and that it is the task of the individual reader to construct the meaning of any given work for themselves.

This rationale reveals unprecedented complexities when applied to the burgeoning medium of video games given their inherent flexibility. As all video games typically require some form of player input and must accommodate for potential variance in that input, the experience of most titles is plastic by nature. This does not mean, however, that all video games are open to all interpretations. How receptive the game is to a player’s actions can reveal the “hand of the author,” so to speak, and influence how the player perceives meaning within the digital space.

For a game such as 2017’s *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, that dichotomy introduces an entirely new dimension of analysis. Unlike most other games of its ilk, *Breath of the Wild* offers its players an unprecedented amount of freedom. Within the game, the player assumes control of Link, a young man awoken after a one-hundred year long slumber in a

destroyed, post-apocalyptic world of Hyrule. After its loose tutorial section, the game reveals that Link is the chosen hero, called upon to save Princess Zelda and defeat Calamity Ganon in order to save the world from evil. It is at this point that the game unleashes the player onto a world that encourages them to guide their own adventure, interacting with as much or as little of the game world as they desire on their quest to craft an experience all their own. This has opened the door for video game scholars such as Rachel Hutchinson, who in her 2021 essay, “Observant Play: Colonial Ideology in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*,” seems to echo much of the same sentiment as Barthes. Even in making an explicit attempt at following the game’s direct instructions and interpreting environmental cues through a narrative context, an individualist interpretation of the game reveals itself to be all but inevitable, as she argues that her personal pacifistic, anti-colonialist reading holds just as much validity in the space as any other interpretation. However, though I will not claim to disprove, or even actively disavow the work of Hutchinson and her interpretation of such, I hold an alternative perspective on the matter. While I profess that *Breath of the Wild* offers its players a bevy of options in how they may interact with the game world, those interactions are still framed in a way that guides the player towards specific interpretations. Though *Breath of the Wild* encourages its players to exercise freedom within its expansive sandbox, I argue that it nonetheless presents its narrative and gameplay elements within explicit and implicit systems of hierarchy and morality that encourage a colonialist ideology.

A distinction that Hutchinson is quick to make in her assessment of inter-factional relationships within the world of *Breath of the Wild* is between what she defines as “civilized” and “uncivilized” others, the civilized others being the many distinct, non-Hylian races that

populate the region, with the game's enemy monsters cast as the uncivilized others. Focusing on the civilized other, Hutchinson makes the claim that while these races are differentiated from each other in terms of culture, architecture, and forms of governance, "they all worship the same Goddess Hylia in a common religion," and are presented as "highly developed societ[ies]"(Hutchinson). While an apt distinction to make when comparing the presentation of factions that the game frames as hostile and those it frames as friendly, Hutchinson overlooks the fact that the "civilized other," does not necessarily equate to the equal other. This is a discrepancy that can be best observed in the game's Gerudo Tribe, specifically in regards to religious and cultural power. Counter to Hutchinson's claims of religious uniformity, in her own dissection of the subject Herfs identifies the fact that "the Gerudo are still construed as religiously deviant, which is emphasized through the crumbled goddess statue found in the back alley"(Herfs). This idea is furthered within the game itself, which includes a questline about the "Seven Heroines," which are stated to be "divine protectors of the Gerudo people," whose statues loom over the entry to the Gerudo Desert. Once identified, this religious disparity opens the opportunity for one to examine the differences in how the game frames either religion, and how that may inform the implicit power dynamics between these two cultures, and it is through this comparison that the game's subtextual hierarchy is placed into sharp relief.

*As Breath of the Wild* presents Hylian religious epistemology, the game frames its legitimacy in such uncertain terms that its presence becomes normalized. The manner in which players upgrade health and stamina, for instance, is achieved through praying to the goddess Hylia, who will answer their prayers and bless them with upgrades in exchange for an offering of four spirit orbs. In the many memories scattered throughout the gameworld, the player witnesses

the story of Zelda as she attempts to harness her goddess-granted birthright, whom she is seen praying to in the aforementioned springs in a religious ritual evocative of a baptism. In all of these instances involving religious offerings and rituals, however, the constant presence of the goddess herself is hardly questioned. The very act of directly communicating with the goddess is treated as an ancillary detail, a way in which the game contextualizes a core fixture of its gameplay loop. Even Zelda's story is not *about* her relationship to the goddess, rather her journey is that of self-acceptance and inner strength. The fact that her struggles are tied to religious devotion is left largely unobserved. This uncritical approach to framing Hylian religious truthfulness also extends to religious authority and the language of power. From a gameplay perspective, that power is literal. Devotion to the goddess makes the vast open world marginally easier to navigate, granting the player the ability to more confidently traverse the game world and overcome greater challenges. From a narrative perspective, this idea echoes the 16th Century monarchical justification of the divine right of kings, which claimed that a king's right to rule was ordained from God himself. Zelda, and presumably all other previous members of her bloodline, are granted the right to rule due to their possession of goddess-given powers. Only they are "ordained" by the goddess with the ability to dispel evil from the land, so only they are granted the authority to rule it. Just as the player is conditioned by the game not to question the integrity of Hylian epistemology, so too does that mindset extend to ideas of power within the space. Religion and power are equated, and no attempt is made to challenge that power. It is treated as a core tenant of the game world, a common, ubiquitous truth that is not to be subverted.

While placed within a prominent space in the region and created with the intention of drawing attention, the statues of the Seven Heroines are not interactable as are the statues of Hylia. Instead, to learn anything of the Seven Heroines the player must consult a Gerudo scholar in Gerudo Town, wherein reference is made to the idea that "people once came from around the world in search of the heroines' blessing." This implies a broader cultural knowledge of this "Gerudo legend" that is further supported by the Hylian NPC outside of the town, Bozai, who states that "Everyone's heard the legend in the Gerudo region about the seven heroines." However, unlike Hylian religion, there is no evidence of the heroines exhibiting any broader cultural reach outside of the Gerudo. No visual or narrative references are made to them outside of the region, and even amongst visitors to the region, none cite visiting the heroines either as figures of worship or even in a touristic context. This specific connection between the Heroines and the Gerudo serves as another way to "other" their culture in the eyes of the player. As is implied to be the extent of their in-universe influence, the heroines are only notable within the context of their connection to Gerudo culture, working as a detail to further exoticize the Gerudo and diminish their cultural power. Their religion grants them no cultural influence, nor does it command a material right to power, and as such it is not deemed significant within the game world. They are not simply "other," they are also lesser.

In keeping with this hierarchical relationship between Gerudo and Hylians, the way in which the game frames the Gerudo in relation to our Hylian protagonist itself furthers this notion of superiority. The Gerudo Culture, as defined by the textual and visual language of the game, principally projects an image of power. The Gerudo themselves are generally tall and muscular, with markedly deeper voices than the women of other races. Many Gerudo NPCs' dialogue also

reflects an aggressive, domineering demeanor, which is perhaps best exemplified should the player choose to sit in on a “Voe and You,” class session in Gerudo Town, in which Gerudo are educated on how best to approach a prospective voe (the Gerudo word for “male”). In one such scene, upon being asked how best to engage with a “handsome voe,” walking down the street, the three students in attendance answer with various degrees of combative answers. One suggests approaching them with “clearly empty,” hands so as to not provoke them into attacking, the next suggests caution “just in case he’s a distraction for a bandit ambush,” while the last one proposes “striking a fierce blow when he least suspected it!” This combative culture is further compounded by the presence of a formal military. While they are not alone in possessing a military presence, as the Zora also have guards situated at key points in their own region, there is far more emphasis placed on the Gerudo Military, with far greater numbers of NPC soldiers and a key location within Gerudo Town being a military training yard. However, this association with power and domination is only framed as such so as to give the player a feeling of satisfaction through surpassing it.

While the Gerudo have elements of culture wherein they exercise a degree of power, those cultural elements are merely barriers to facilitate the player’s own ascendancy in the space. Their law that forbids male entry into their town, for instance, is put in place only to be circumvented through the player’s own clever trickery, as they don female clothing to enter uninhibited. Likewise, along the main Gerudo quest line the player is tasked with retrieving an heirloom stolen by the villainous Yiga Clan by infiltrating their base of operations, rescuing a captured soldier from a failed attempt to steal it back in the process. This idea of overcoming obstacles previously established to be insurmountable by the military is echoed should the player

face the Molduking enemy in the Champion's Ballad DLC. The design of the creature notably features Gerudo weaponry stuck in its hide, suggesting that they are remnants from previous failed attempts to bring down the beast by Gerudo warriors. The relationship that this fosters between the player and their culture shares similarities with the white savior trope. Derived from Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, "The White Man's Burden," the white savior trope largely describes conflicts in media that depict an indigenous minority culture being saved through the actions of a heroic white character. The specific way in which this trope manifests within *Breath of the Wild* shares similarities with how professors Paul Ketchum, David Embrick, and Mitch Peck identified its appearance in James Cameron's 2009 film, *Avatar*. As they described, "As in other films featuring a white savior, *Avatar*'s white savior, Jake Sully, comes to the minority group culture with no experience or understanding, yet manages to master all things Na'vi, not only in a very short time, but to a degree better than any Na'vi. The Irving Berlinesque lesson learned here is that, as whites, we can do anything you can do, only better"(Ketchum, Embrick, Peck). Extending this same interpretation to the relationship between player and the Gerudo, the same fundamental message lies at its core. Whereas fictionalized minority groups such as the Na'vi and Gerudo are limited in their ability to exercise cultural dominance within their own space, Hylians and other Western-coded protagonists possess the limitless potential to assert power no matter the culture or environment. Despite the Gerudo projecting an image synonymous with power, that power exists only to be usurped by the player, maintaining the colonialist fantasy of western superiority in the cultural hierarchy.

Implicit cultural hierarchies are not the only means by which *Breath of the Wild* produces systems that run in parallel with colonialist ideology. In its construction of moral systems, the

game further pushes players towards practicing colonial domination over the land. This is another subject in which my interpretation deviates from that of Hutchinson.

While Hutchinson herself recognized the presence of a potential colonial reading through *Breath of the Wild*'s central gameplay mechanics, stating that "In the context of the open-world environment, the sheer thrill of exploring the map and defending oneself against hordes of threatening monsters add to the colonial feel." However, she then went on to interrogate this intention by questioning whether the "vastness of the player's experience," could obscure or perhaps even overpower its colonial rhetoric, its moralistic systems lost in simply experiencing the game world. This claim is explored through her own playthrough, in which her adherence to the game's instructions ultimately lead her towards the assessment of culture within monster populations, and the commencement of a "pacifist run," in which she refuses harm to Monsters and other living creatures in the game world. While I find myself intrigued by the relationship between mechanical flexibility and freedom of self-expression, I do not interpret this as indicative of the game world's own ideological bases. Rather, while the player is allowed the freedom to exercise their own ethical inclinations within the game, it still possesses moral values of its own. As such, I believe that in order to make an assessment of the ideological bases of the work one must observe it in regards to intended play and both imposed and supposed systems of morality.

One such way in which the game imposes morality onto the player can be observed through the relationship between the player and their avatar, Link. Unlike many other video game protagonists of the modern era, Link is what is known to the gaming world as a "silent protagonist," in that he does not have any voiced lines of dialogue, and most aspects of their



personality and backstory are either a mystery or left markedly vague. While this design choice has many functions both in narrative and gameplay, one such way the player is impacted by their avatar's silence is that they are more readily able to project their own sense of identity onto him. As identified in Kathryn Hemmann's exploration of fanworks based on the game, "Multilingual fan networks have embraced the perception of Link as neurodiverse... and also portray Link's gender and sexuality as queer, thus transferring the positive affect of his imagined romantic relationships to other non-normative aspects of his identity." (Hemmann 125) While Hemmann herself claims that these fanworks effectively serve to "queer the ableist and heteronormative ideologies that inform the narrative of *Breath of the Wild*," it is my belief that the ability to twist Link's gendered and neurotypical identity is an intended aspect of play. As stated by series producer, Eiji Aonuma, in an interview with *TIME Magazine*, "...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." With this in mind, Link's purposefully undeveloped identity serves as a means to allow players to project an identity and opinions onto him. For instance, while quite a few female characters, both major and minor, express romantic interest in Link, it is ultimately left to the player to interpret who, if any of them, Link has feelings for. Similarly, when donning women's clothing to sneak into Gerudo Town uncontested, the player is left to project ideas of gender identity onto Link, and are thus able to feel more connected to him as their player avatar.

However, the same room for interpretation is not extended towards the game's moral systems. While the game does not assign the player an identity, they are assigned a role,

specifically that of a chosen hero destined to vanquish evil. As such, the rules that inform interaction with the game world and the people within it must fall in line with that assumed role, and in doing so reveal the underlying morality of intended play. To distinguish these limitations of interaction, I loaded into the early game town of Kakariko Village and spent one in-game day attempting to "break character," so to speak, and commit immoral actions so as to resist the role handed to me by the game. In doing so, I became privy to many of the game's internal rules. NPCs cannot be actively harmed, as use of weapons near them will simply startle them. The player is not allowed to spend the night in any bed that they have not either been given permission to sleep in or have purchased with in-game currency. Wooden houses are immune to the systems of interaction (such as burning or chopping) that govern other wooden objects elsewhere in the game world. While wild animals are able to be hunted for meat, domesticated animals such as chickens or dogs are unable to be killed (and in the chickens' case, the player is humorously attacked for their attempt to do so). The one immoral action that I found myself able to indulge in was the ability to destroy an old woman's prized plum trees through continued use of bombs, which the game then guilt's the player over having done. In contrast to the freedoms offered to the player in interpreting how their player avatar identifies, the game's mechanics directly define how the player is allowed to, or in other words, supposed to interact with the game world. As Siccart defines in his own essay on morality in computer games, "Gameplay, then, limits performance based on the rules of the game and the goals it proposes" (Siccart). Though the game allows the player to construct an identity for their avatar, it does not allow them to construct an individualized morality for themselves. Instead, that which the game decides is immoral is imposed onto the player. Though the ways in which the player is able to

perceive their avatar and contextualize their interactions within the world are flexible, how the game perceives the player and interprets those interactions remains fixed. That which the game conceives as characteristic of its heroic protagonist remains unchanged, constructing a moral character that exists independent of the player's actions.

To further explore this idea of assigned roles, one must also consider the game's implicit moral ideology, specifically in regards to monsters and how the game frames their presence. To do this, I explore Hutchinson's own rules along her pacifist run. Within Hutchinson's pacifist run, she acknowledged three major instances in which the player is gated from progression in a main story mission behind the eradication of "evil" enemies in their path. While one such instance involving monsters was promptly ignored by Hutchinson, it is the other two instances that I feel should be interrogated. In both cases, Hutchinson justifies the killing of "Blights," infesting ancient weaponry and the final boss, Calamity Ganon, under the rationalization that they are "not alive in the same way that animals and monsters are alive," and that their deaths ultimately do "not affect the other living creatures of the game world." However, if this is to be taken as the rationalization for why eradicating these creatures of malice is not immoral, then one must also consider the game's attempts to unite the evil of Calamity Ganon and the world's roving monsters together as a singular villainous force. In the game's many flashbacks, mention is made of the correlation between rising numbers of monsters as an "omen" portending Ganon's impending resurrection. This correlation is further expounded upon via the Blood Moon, a gameplay mechanic that sees perishable items within the world intermittently reset in order to prevent a total drainage of resources. However, in a strictly narrative sense, this event sees defeated monsters resurrected via Ganon's power, which the game realizes visually through monsters

congealing into corporeal form out of the same red and black miasma that comprises Calamity Ganon and the Blights. As such, it can be easy to conclude that the game encourages a reading that blurs the lines between the two forces. Reading the game in this manner throws much of Hutchinson's pacifist run into question. If monsters hold a semblance of culture and are thereby implied to be capable of higher thinking, then what does this mean for Calamity Ganon, which the game implies to have spawned the creatures? What separates the morality of eradicating Calamity Ganon from the immorality of monster slaying if they are born of the same evil influence? In that case, is the primary separation between Calamity Ganon and the monsters purely a question of higher cultural sophistication, the very same logic that drives the game's justification for violence against them as compared to other NPC factions?

Despite my somewhat pedantic misgivings about the logic driving it, I will maintain that this does not mean that I believe Hutchinson's pacifist run to be a fool's errand. Beyond what it implies from a pure game design standpoint, the exercise continues to hold value in examining how moral systems in games can be resisted and usurped to explore alternative avenues of conflict resolution in a medium that seems to revel in violence as a primary form of interaction. Even so, I personally interpret the conclusions to be drawn from Hutchinson's pacifist run in a similar way to how Michelle Westerlaken interpreted her own "vegan run" of the game. As she describes her own work, "...rather than a small-scale simulation of real life, the gameplay offered me an extra imaginary space that shapes my relation to power in real life. A space where a vegan utopia or a firm political response towards certain vegan ideologies can be imagined, materialized, strategized, and played out. A space where a marginalized voice can embody a protagonist"(Westerlaken). Ultimately, while an exercise that reflects upon the player's own

values in relation to broader power structures, I do not believe it to reflect upon the morality of those power structures in and of themselves. While the game offers room for self-expression and individualized interpretation within its world, it is not a blank canvas for values to be projected onto. It exists with its own morality already predefined. Any actions taken by the player that run in opposition to that morality are either not allowed or dissuaded by the game and its many systems. What we are left with, then, is a space in which systems of control may be usurped to help navigate one's own individual identity, removed from the trepidation of reality.

The means by which one negotiates the ideology of a work can pose a confounding, contradictory conundrum that often hinges itself as much on the medium the work is contained in as it does the contents of the work itself. While Roland Barthes did not live to see the maturation of video games into a narrative medium, the school of critical thought that he pioneered ended up being especially applicable in assessing its work. While I have argued in favor of using preexisting morality within *Breath of the Wild* to gain a clearer understanding of the game's "ultimate meaning," I do not necessarily agree with that interpretation on the basis of separation between a work's contents and its meaning. What I have tried to argue in favor of during this essay is the presence of specific moralistic ideas contained within the game. While those contents may aid in one's assessment of a work's "meaning," I believe that that is still a construct of the individual. Like most all things in video games, meaning itself is plastic, and subject to change under the player's own influence. Even locked within directed worlds, both of the physical and digital realm, the inner worlds we construct for ourselves and slip in between the cracks of contained reality remain ours to indulge in.

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