

# **Dreams of the Japanese**

**The visual politics of space, race and gender in  
*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild***

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Research Master Arts & Culture

Academic year: 2019-2020

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## Foreword

Videogames provide comfort to many who may want to leave the 'real' world for a while - which is of course the biggest misconception about games there is. We cannot ever really leave the 'real', we just enter a space where the same processes that complicate our lives are presented a little more shiny, or maybe they breath fire. While we are there, those spaces tell us stories about ourselves and others, about who gets to belong and wield the sword, and who does not. Those stories are no less 'real' than any form of in- and exclusion in the material world. When we return, we may take with us some parts of the arguments the games have made about the way they, and their creators, believe the world ticks. As I write this brief foreword in June of 2020 and the Black Lives Matter protests highlight the systemic racism and white supremacy in our systems, the need to remain critical of media's role in shaping our perceptions becomes ever stronger. I hope these pages do their small part in furthering the understanding of the political power that images hold.

The creation of this piece of writing took a lot longer than it should have. While an MA thesis is usually written over the course of a semester, it took me more than two years. Being able to return here has been a comfort, as has *Breath of the Wild* itself, the game I have been able to dissect into minute detail so I could happily poke at its pieces with my theories. While I am critical of the game's agenda, it is only because I am keenly aware just how much of its persuasive imagery I have lovingly absorbed. In the time of writing this document, I was fortunate enough to spend a month in Japan twice. My love for that country was no doubt reconfirmed and further enhanced by the politics of the game, which will become clear throughout this document.

A sincere thank you to my supervisors Yasco and Isabel, who were always patient with me and knew exactly when to encourage and challenge me. Thank you for your advice, both on the academic and the personal. Heartfelt gratitude also to my parents and friends. The cliché remains true - it really does take a village, and I am lucky to have mine.

## A note on Japanese names

This document follows the Chicago author-date style of reference. In order to stay consistent with its stylistic system, Japanese names are represented via the Western convention as *first name – last name* when referenced within the text, and *last name – first name* when referenced in visual or textual sources.

# I. Introduction

Japanese videogames are frequently portrayed as somehow unique in relation to games produced in other parts of the world. This is clearly visible from the way games are categorized into genre: while RPGs<sup>1</sup> produced all over the world receive the same label, an RPG produced in Japan is classified as a 'J-RPG'. The singular letter holds, and reinforces, all sorts of assumptions about essential difference. Japanese videogames, also referred to as *geemu* (Picard 2013, n.p.), arise in a symbiotic fashion from a particular 'Japanese media convergence' (Steinberg 2012, viii) or media mix<sup>2</sup>, with its own set of representational principles: the aesthetics of *manga* and *anime*, known for their exaggerated anatomies, larger-than-life expressions and flat cel-shade rendering.<sup>3</sup> This has been seen as a unique quality *vis-à-vis* the 'Western' videogame aesthetic, whose industry has sometimes been painted as not unlike the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, the ancient Greeks who were bitterly embroiled in the race for the most convincingly realistic image (Consalvo 2016, 267).<sup>45</sup>

When the Japanese mega-franchise *The Legend of Zelda* launched its new game *Breath of the Wild* (hereafter *BotW*) in 2017, its creators publicly evoked this aesthetic binary and extended it back into art history. At the *Game Developers' Conference* that year, *BotW's* art director Satoshi Takizawa claimed:

“what supported our belief that we [the Japanese] are good at this type of art creation is the difference in the evolution of painting between the West and Japan”<sup>6</sup>

(Takizawa 2017)

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<sup>1</sup> RPG stands for Role Playing Game, which is a videogame genre in which the player controls the actions of one more character and often takes them on a quest within a complex and well-defined world.

<sup>2</sup> The Japanese media mix refers to the numerous media created around popular series, ranging from *anime*, *manga* and *geemu* to light novels, live-action films, magazine specials and other narrative forms, as well as merchandising forms like figurines, plushies, clothing and numerous other objects for fans to surround themselves with. For more on the media mix in contemporary Japanese culture, see: Steinberg (2012)

<sup>3</sup> 'Cel shade' is the shorthand terminology for the artistic technique of rendering the mass of an object in one flat tone, with a darker tone to suggest shadow and a lighter highlighting tone. It is a technique applied in animation, where sheets ('cels') of animation paper are stacked over one another with the individual colors.

<sup>4</sup> In chapter 36 of the *Naturalis Historia* (AD 77-79), Pliny the Elder notes down the story of the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius, who held a contest to determine who was the best among them. When Zeuxis unveiled his painting of grapes, they appeared so real that birds flew down to peck at them. But when Parrhasius, whose painting was concealed behind a curtain, asked Zeuxis to pull aside that curtain, the curtain itself turned out to be a painted illusion. Parrhasius won, and Zeuxis spoke: "I may have deceived the birds, but Parrhasius deceived me".

<sup>5</sup> Not all videogames from Japan follow the *anime* aesthetic, a notable exception being *Dark Souls* (Bandai Namco, 2011). Reversely, there are non-Japanese produced games that draw on the anime aesthetic, like *Child of Light* (Ubisoft, 2014). While the former is not categorized as J-RPG, the latter usually is. This implies that the aesthetic is not necessarily tied to the geo-local notion of 'Japan', but rather to a particular cultural one.

<sup>6</sup> See (1:10:45): <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1024562/Change-and-Constant-Breaking-Conventions>

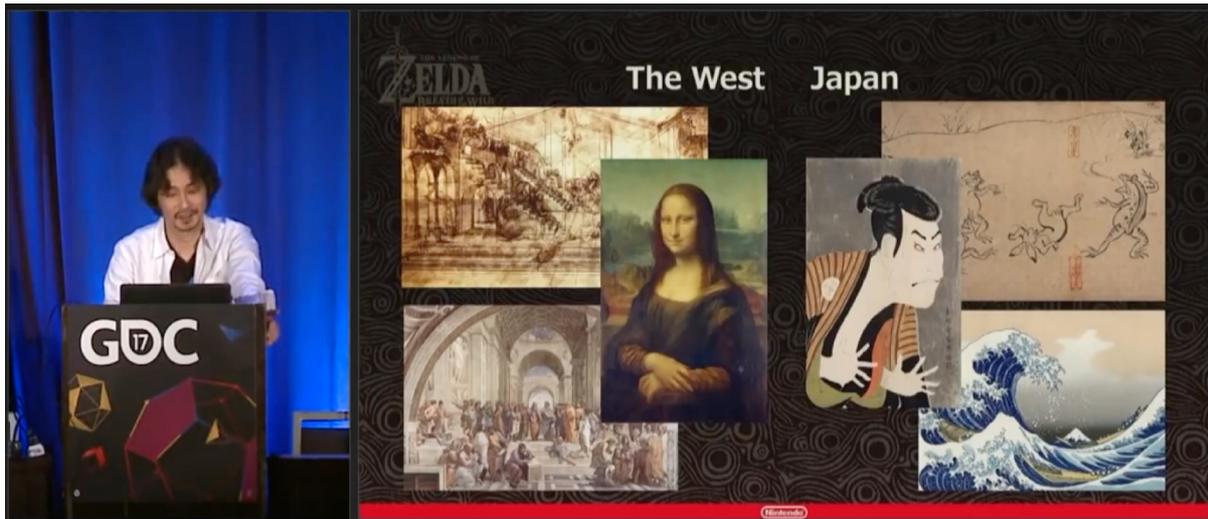


Figure 2.1 Art director Satoru Takizawa at the 2017 GDC.

F.l.t.r: Da Vinci, Leonardo. c. 1481. *Perspectival study of the Adoration of the Magi*. Pen and ink on paper. Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi; ibid. 1503-1506. *Mona Lisa*. Oil on poplar wood. Paris: the Louvre; Sanzio di Urbino, Raffaello. 1511. *School of Athens*. Fresco. Vatican City; Vatican Museums; Unknown. 12-13<sup>th</sup> century. *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga emakimono*. Ink on paper. Tokyo, Tokyo National Museum; Sharaku. 1794. *Kabuki Actor Ōtani Oniji III as Yakko Edobei in the Play The Colored Reins of a Loving Wife*. Polychrome woodblock print. New York: the Metropolitan Museum; Hokusai, Katsushika. 1830. *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Polychrome woodblock print. Numerous locations.

Behind him, a PowerPoint slide illustrated the art histories he evoked: *ukiyo-e* imagery for Japan, Italian Renaissance art for the West (fig. 1). The comment is surprising, as Takizawa here suggests the existence of binary art historical lineages while simultaneously claiming *BotW* as its outcome. On one level, it is true that Renaissance paintings and Japanese woodblock differ: *anime* aesthetics render volume through flat shapes and line similar to *ukiyo-e*, while CGI<sup>7</sup> applies textures and shaders to suggest mass without outline like in Renaissance chiaroscuro. However, Takizawa's comment goes further than to point out technical artistic difference. Rather, he reinforces a sweeping notion of native artistic traditions which he ties to particular cultures and nations. As many (art) historians will assert, the notion of untouched art histories is naïve: Japanese and Western artists have influenced each other's formal language, colors and perspective since the Dutch first established trade on Dejima in 1641.<sup>8</sup> The idea that the Japanese *geemu* aesthetic arises from a lineage retraceable to Japanese art history is similarly questionable, as the visual particularities of the *anime* media mix derive from *manga-kā* like Osamu Tezuka, whose artistic influence by Disney animation and cartoonists like Milt Gross has been self-professed and well-recorded (Patten 2004, 144) (Greenberg 2014, 89).

Rather than painting Takizawa a bad art historian however, this comment ought to be understood as part of an intentional branding effort on the part of Nintendo's representatives. The branding of *BotW*'s aesthetic as distinctly 'Japanese' grounds the game in a space of particularity,

<sup>7</sup> Computer generated imagery.

<sup>8</sup> On the impact of Japan on the West, see Impey (1977), and conversely on Western influence on Japan, Screech (2018).

much like the addition of 'J' to the genre promises an experience not quite like anything else. Narratives surrounding Japan's supposed uniqueness have a long history of being produced both by the Oriental gaze as well as through Japan's self-representation. In its most recent form, as Iwabuchi (2015) points out, Japan's government has looked towards its cultural industries to promote the sense of Japan's 'inherent' and 'unique coolness' (422). Since the mid-2000s, The Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) publishes Annual Intellectual Property Strategic Programs, outlining tactics for conveying Japan's attractiveness under the name of 'Cool Japan'. Art director Takizawa's rhetoric can be traced back directly to such a strategy:

“by the end of FY2005, the GOJ<sup>9</sup> will arrange public-private discussion on the ideal form of a new Japan brand, which will be applied to designs, functions, contents created based on *Japanese traditional culture and adjusted to the contemporary lifestyle*, e.g. Neo-Japanesque”

(my emphasis, METI 2006, 38)

Beyond branding his game as aesthetically unique, a remark like Takizawa's is therefore also wrapped up in global economic- and political interest. The Cool Japan rhetoric he applies to his game collapses past and present while reinforcing cultural difference via clearly demarcated notions of Self and Other, and as such raises the question how *BotW* itself is engaging with these discourses.

The 'Cool Japan' policies constitutes a form of nation branding in the service of 'soft power' accumulation, that is, power that is not achieved through traditional 'hard' forces like military or economic strength but rather through the nation's culture and values being admired and attractive (Nye 2004).<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon of nation branding is certainly not unique to Japan, and has become an international booming business throughout the late 1990s and 2000s (Subramanian 2017, 19).<sup>11</sup> Central to nation branding discourse is the idea that attractive national character and identity have become key to a nation's competitiveness, diplomacy and economic profit (van Ham 2001, Kaneva 2011, Aronczyk 2013).<sup>12</sup> While extensive literature already exists about the historical construction of the Japanese nation and its identity via its output in the literary (Morris-Suzuki 1998, Clammer 2001, Befu 2001, Oguma 2002, Iwabuchi 2002b), theatrical and visual arts (Kano 2001, Croissant et al. 2008 Johnson & Jaffe 2008), on the contemporary discursive construction via videogames these understandings are still scarce.

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<sup>9</sup> Government of Japan

<sup>10</sup> Nye argues that nations cultivate national prestige through hard power sources like military coercion or economic incentive, but they can also accumulate soft power, which is power constituted through its culture and values being admired and attractive (Nye 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Van Ham (2001) points out that during late 1990s, Great Britain for example began recasting itself as 'Cool Britannia' as well.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, the creation of 'nation-ness' as a type of artefact, that is, the conscious efforts to invent and imagine its meanings and boundaries through texts and media in order to influence the external image of said nation, long-predate this period (Anderson 1983).

This may be because *geemu* have long been considered to adhere to a *mukokuseki* ('stateless') design philosophy in which all cultural 'odors' are neutralized in order to assimilate to other markets (Iwabuchi 1998, 167) (Pelletier-Gagnon 2011, 100). As a result, games have been approached as international export products rather than cultural artefacts (Hutchinson 2019, 13). This may well be part of Japanese strategy, as Iwabuchi maintains that Japan's economic success lays in its *mukokuseki* design. Pointing to Nintendo's Italian plumber Mario and the caucasian princess named after the American novelist Zelda Fitzgerald, he argues that such 'neutral' design is in fact a form active self-erasure and cultural mimicry in the form of Westernization (2002a, 94).

However, as emerges from Takizawa's commentary, it seems that in the wake of the nationalizing Cool Japan discourses, 'Japaneseness' has gone from being an odor to becoming a soft-powered flavour and that contemporary *geemu*, as cultural artefacts, may well be engaging with- and producing notions of 'Japaneseness' whilst simultaneously still being produced for the global markets. In other words, while they might still be adhering to forms of mimicry – say, through a story about a white-coded, sword-wielding hero who goes to save the blonde, blue-eyed princess -, forms of counter-play and nation branding could well be present as well. As Takizawa locates prideful 'Japaneseness' specifically within the game's visuality, the question thus becomes what the visual politics of *BotW* itself are expressing and what relationship they hold to 'Cool Japan' as a soft power ideology.

In Soraya Murray's *On Videogames: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (2018), she argues that videogames, like any representational medium, engage in particular politics and naturalization practices which reflect- and produce cultural ideology. She approaches videogames not only as cultural artefacts, but specifically as an image-producing medium with particular visual politics. While these visuals may look 'neutral', she writes, "it should be understood that the perceived neutrality of games, even those that do not purport to deal with issues of identity, traffic in the assumption of a perceived 'universalism' or 'neutrality' that is fictive" (59). In order to deconstruct a game's visual politics, Murray offers a methodological framework that applies cultural discourse analysis of the image via three focal points: the representation space, of race and of gender. These representations present a 'benign screen of realism' (Shinkle 2007, n.p.), behind which lay organizing principles that naturalize particular power relations.

Building on the Murray's concept of visual politics, this thesis asks: What cultural ideologies are discursively conveyed as visual politics in the representation of space, race and gender in the Japanese videogame *The Legend of Zelda: BotW*? In order to answer that question, this thesis draws on an interdisciplinary and intersectional methodological framework via tools from visual studies and cultural studies, fields that are rooted in the study of power and the boundaries that determine in-

from out, as well as the positions and localities from which that power is exercised. The tools from visual- and cultural studies will be applied to *BotW* as playable representation, alongside Japan-specific theory on its historical identity construction and contemporary nation branding efforts. This interdisciplinary approach is delineated in *Chapter 2*. In order to ground the videogame within its cultural, historical and economic context, *Chapter 3* then offers an intertwined discussion of Japanese academia on the construction of 'Japaneseness' via Japanese images of Self and Other, combined with the history of the Japanese videogame industry and the *Zelda* franchise. *BotW*'s visual politics will be analyzed in the following chapters via the three foci of space, race and gender. In *Chapter 4*, Hyrule's representation of space is analyzed by tracing the conventions of landscape representation it deploys. While on the one hand, romantic landscape tropes suggest a particular power fantasy that holds affinities with a discourse of empire, a surprising counter-imperial discourse might also be found by following which parts of the landscape cannot be subjected to it. Drawing on Hutcheon's postmodern understanding of representation as a 'complicitous critique', the question arises whether the game is simply recycling an American New World myth, or takes a postmodern self-conscious approach. Moving into *Chapter 5*, it will be observed that the races of Hyrule are shaped in a particular construct of Self and Other. On surface, the game's aesthetics suggest an imperial Occidental hegemony, but this is significantly complicated by the addition of a race that reads as 'Japanese', whose relationship to the other races echoes the complexities of the historical Japanese subject formation. Finally, *Chapter 6* analyses the representation of gender and looks into how Link's heroic masculinity and the empowerment of the princesses are both significantly complicated through tense parodic figures that signal gender panic. It will be argued that, taken together and viewed intersectionally, these findings on space, race and gender reflect particular cultural anxieties and that, through subversion, parody and complicitous critique, a distinct Japanese cultural dreamwork is being produced and disseminated to its global audience of millions.

## II. Theoretical framework

Stuart Hall, one of the founders of cultural studies, was once asked at a lecture what analyzing popular media like the show *Miami Vice* (NBC) might offer. He replied:

“Every time I watch a popular television narrative [like that], I have to pinch myself and remind myself that these narratives are not a somewhat distorted reflection of the real state of race relations in American cities. They are functioning much more as Levi-Strauss tells us myths do. They are myths, which represent in narrative form the resolution of things, which can’t be resolved in real life. What they tell us about is about the ‘dream life’ of a culture.”

(Hall, 1989)

Hall argued that mass culture and the popular are worthy of study because they offer insight into the dreams and fears of a given culture, which through its media forms particular myths about itself. In the example of the American show *Miami Vice*, what is produced is a myth of the American West in the mid 1980s in which the police fights crimes in the search for law and order. What constitutes the mythology is in how the show chooses to depict what its heroes and the villains look like: their gender and the color of their skin, who gets to dominate who, who gets to look at who, what the spaces they occupy look like. From these complex images emerges an affect on the collective thinking about what the bodies and worlds of those who respectively support- and oppose ‘justice’ look like (Inciardi and Dee 1987, 84). Anxieties surrounding marginalized groups as well as dreams about American ‘heroes’, can herein find narrative resolution in a way that, as Hall points out, can never be satisfyingly achieved in the open-ended chaos of everyday lived reality. Culture studies thus theorizes cultural products as the site of political struggle, “through which forms of domination and subordination, inclusion and marginalization, and hierarchical relations are organized and ordered” (Clarke 2014, 1). Cultural discourses, the fears and anxieties of a given culture, are disseminated via their media’s myths, which, when absorbed into the collective imaginary of a people, forms their perceptions of Self and Other, who ‘they’ are and where they and others belong in the world - with all the lived ramifications of those discourses then played out in the big- and small scales of society.

Building on Stuart Hall, Soraya Murray addresses games as a kind of ‘dream life’ of a culture, but one that is dreamt visually and through image-production (2018, 45). The complex representations of videogames are addressed as visual discourses that are political and doing ideological work in the matrix of power and identity. As she writes, “representation is in fact a frontline of power relations and domination, within particular spheres of influence, and this is no

less true of games than other forms of mass culture and their attendant industries” (ibid). This thesis grounds itself in Murray’s framework of visual discourse methodology and follows her structure via the foci of space, race and gender.

However, where Murray builds upon the legacy of the symbiosis of visual studies and cultural studies, this thesis proposes to apply one of the tools from the methodology of classic art history, that is, a postmodern take on the use of iconography. Iconography is the study of the meaning-making of images through that which they refer to.<sup>13</sup> It can be understood as a visual mode related to intertextuality, in which it is understood that no text and no image ever exists in a vacuum. Rather, they are bound to chains of preceding texts and images, conventions of representation with particular meanings and connected to particular discourses, which they can refer to, evoke, play with, satirize and subvert. The art historian Erwin Panofsky (1972) proposed a tripart methodology in which an image was first described literally, on the level of the formal representation. Then, it would be analyzed through what these formal qualities referred to, on the level of the iconography. Finally, through linking the codes in the work to larger understandings of the world that the creator themselves was perhaps not consciously thinking of, on the level of the iconological it could be revealed what, “underlying “basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, or a religious or philosophical persuasion” (7) are being expressed.

While Murray analyses the representation of particular videogame bodies and spaces, she engages with them predominantly through a lens of cultural theory, understanding, for example, the construction of *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation* (Bethesda 2012) in relation to writings of Said (1978) and Šisler (2006). This thesis differs in so far as it places between the primary reading of the object and the tertiary cultural analysis of the image Panofsky’s secondary level of iconography: it first traces the referenced images back to its dialogue with visual histories. In the case of the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise, it would for example note that the franchise’s art directors have stated they reference work by British orientalist painter David Roberts (IAMAG 2017, Martin 2017), and place these images side by side. By placing emphasis on how games exist in relation to histories of specifically *visual* culture, this opens a space to understand that these citations of conventions are *conscious* rather than a given.

What is meant by this is that, in the words of Pratt, “conventions of representation are not static, their very existence creates the potential for their being contradicted and eroded” (2008, 15-16). The formalist art historical tool of iconography will be used via a postmodern understanding of meaning as never stable or fixed, but rather as always mediated and constructed, ideological,

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<sup>13</sup> In its classic use, iconography pertains to the fixed meanings that lay in symbols like human skulls, clocks and jewels in Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century art (Bergström 1956, 154).

conscious and open-ended in nature. In the postmodern understanding, present representations always come from past ones, and ideological consequence derives from both continuity and difference (Hutcheon 2002, 93). Hutcheon observes that a representation might even both “install and ironize” a parody at the same time; on first glance simply repeating a particular representation, complicitous in its convention and discourses, whilst simultaneously using it with an awareness of its ideological forcework in an effort to parody, resist or subvert the power (102-106). This is particularly relevant for studying a cultural artefact created under the flows of Western cultural hegemony and which emerges from an industry that has recently started to criticize its own participation in such mimicry.

Studying videogames a form of visual culture runs the risk of criticism about incompatibility between media. While images are static, games are dynamic - how can they be compared? This view is expressed by Galloway (2006): “because games are not merely watched but played, they supplement [representation] with the phenomenon of action. It is no longer sufficient to talk about the visual or textual representation of meaning. Instead the game theorist must talk about actions, and the physical or game worlds in which they transpire” (71-2). This argument is part of an oft-cited and ill-remembered ‘feud’ between the so-called narratologists and ludologists in the early years of Game Studies.<sup>14</sup> After some back and forth, a symbiosis was found in the argument that videogames are both story- and play-rendering machines which express their persuasive ideological meaning-making through their visual interface as well as coded limitations (Bogost 2007). However, Murray observes that favor has fallen to, “a phenomenological approach that highlights dynamic conditions and flux, as opposed to a consideration of game meaning through images as fixed, or predetermined” (33). In other words, while story and play have found a productive symbiosis, the understanding of videogame representations as *also* an amalgamation of pre-existing and inherited bodies of imagery with attending cultural and sociopolitical discourses has been driven somewhat to the background.

Shaw points out: “the focus on games as highly interactive and audience-dependent texts can lead us to ignore that they are in fact encoded with ideological positions just as any other medium. That is not to say we should ignore the activity of the audience but that we should also look at the dominant meanings encoded in the texts they are playing” (2010, 413). Shaw’s approach is useful, because it highlights that in analyzing the text, the ludic is by no means excluded. In practice, this means that when the aesthetics of *BotW*’s landscapes are considered, the videogame itself is not approached as a painting. Rather, the dynamic elements of play, like camera angles and

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<sup>14</sup> The academic field of game studies has often been said to have risen from a binary war between the so-called fields of narratology and ludology, battled out in the first half of the 2000s, with theorists pulling on the expanding capacities of videogames as either defined by their capacity to provide play – as defined by rules and formalist structures -, or story – as defined by their belonging to a larger spectrum of cultural expression For key texts defining this early academic discussion, see: Aarseth (2001, 2004), Eskelinen (2001, 2004), Frasca (1999, 2003), Juul (2001, 2003), Jenkins (2004), Murray (2005).

playable objects like towers are analyzed for how they evoke conventions that stem from painterly and other visual traditions. When analyzing the feminist discourse of *Zelda's* design, it is complicated by the lack of actual gameplay she is afforded. Vice versa, the Orientalist design of the Gerudo is exacerbated by gameplay elements, like the Gerudo side quests that focus on finding mysterious hidden swords, shops and goddess statues.

Aside from its usage of art historical and game studies tools, this thesis is also embedded in the academic legacy of great thinkers on the topic of the dissemination and perpetuation of power in the fields of social- and cultural theory, and applies some of their terminology, which is briefly delineated below. In my approach, the 'aesthetics' I will engage with refers predominantly, though not exclusively, to the visual interface of the game: the shapes, colors, anatomies, styles and dynamic compositions that the videogame renders, and the pre-existing bodies of imagery they are based upon. It may also pertain to aspects of dialogue, narrative, music, camera and animation, as well as representational game mechanics such as which NPC characters are designed to appear where, how frequently, and with what types of interactive options available to them. These will all be taken as 'discourse', acts of expressive communication about the world, story and peoples of *BotW*. These discourses are assumed to express and reproduce particular ideologies, that is, sets of shared cultural beliefs, ideas, values and norms. Ideologies are here understood neither in its original Marxist notion surrounding dominant ideas reflective only of the ruling class, nor as only a pejorative term connected to oppressive bodies of thought like racism, classicism, neoliberalism or sexism. Rather, ideologies are understood to be inherent and plural to any society, connected equally to resistant bodies of thought within feminism, socialism, pluralism and environmentalism. Cultural ideologies are reproduced through discourse, expressed by- and encoded within the culture's media and institutions, particularly those tasked with representation. Hall (1983) defines ideologies in media as meaning, "those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence" (131). Videogames are one such form of image-producing media. That is not to say, however, that ideologies are driven by individual intention or are isolated concepts. Rather, they shift as parts of a collective process and are connected by chains of meaning and networks of power. Put more bluntly, game aesthetics are not propaganda, nor do they need to be for them to be political. King and Krzywinska write, "In most cases, the social-cultural or political-ideological dimensions of games are implicit rather than the outcome of conscious or deliberate design" (169). As such, this thesis understands ideology as working predominantly on the level of dreamwork, expressing unconscious dreams and anxieties connected to that which is assumed to be normal and deviant, and so it does not seek moral judgement of individual people.

Finally, this thesis deals explicitly with social constructs surrounding imagined concepts such as 'race', 'Japaneseness' and 'Western-ness'. Where it deems it necessary to emphasize the socially constructed rather than essentialized and reified nature of these concepts produced via actors and discourses, it applies quotation marks.

# III. Historical context

In order to understand the cultural discourses that *BotW* emerges from and inherits, this chapter sets off with a discussion of the Zelda franchise in relation to developments in the Japanese videogame industry over the last 15 years. The nationalistic undertone in art director Takizawa's comment is a remarkable deviation from Nintendo's usual marketing strategy. In order to demonstrate its larger cultural significance, the chapter will situate the developments in the Japanese game industry within the larger context of Japan's identity construction and its current nation branding efforts.

## The *Mukokuseki* history of Zelda

In 2001, Nintendo showed off the technical capacities of their newly released GameCube console by debuting a Zelda demo with realistic graphics. Mia Consalvo recounts that the new style was enthusiastically received by overseas fans, yet subsequently these same fans were dismayed when Nintendo released *The Wind Waker* (2002) in a toon-like *chibi* style.<sup>15</sup> Parts of the Western audience assigned the game the derisive name 'Celda', referencing the Japanese cel-animation the aesthetics were based on, which they considered to be too childish (2016, 265) (fig. 3.1).



Figure 3.1. Link in the SpaceWorld GameCube Tech Demo in 2000 (l) & 2001 (r). Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

The reaction demonstrates the emotional meaning that is attached to form and style in videogames. The designers clearly took note, as the main console Zelda games in the decade after the release noticeably steered away from the *chibi*-design. The next major release, *Twilight Princess* (2006), was consequently developed along the aesthetic lines of the demo, with a more mature Link model and monster designs leaning closer to horror imagery. Its graphics were rendered in the style mimicking that of the major Western games of the year like *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* (Bethesda 2006) (fig. 3.2. 3.3). DeWinter notes that Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of the series and executive producer of *The Wind*

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<sup>15</sup> *Chibi* is a genre within the *anime* aesthetics that is characterized by extremely deformed anatomy.

Waker, stepped down midway through production of *Twilight Princess* in favor of Eji Aonuma (2015, 95). Taking this into consideration, it is no stretch to imagine that Nintendo’s shareholders pushed the designers to move away from idiosyncratic ‘Japanese’-smelling cuteness, instead adhering to popular ‘Western’ game aesthetics in order to appeal to the global market.



Figure 3.2 Monster design in *Twilight Princess* and *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* are similar in eerie rendering. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo and Bethesda.



Figure 3.3. The castle towns in *Twilight Princess* and *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* look closely alike. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo and Bethesda.

Nintendo’s efforts to adhere to Western aesthetics continued with *Skyward Sword* (2012), which retained the realistic shaders while combining it with the physiognomy of *anime*. However, in the promotion of the game, *anime* was never mentioned. Rather, Nintendo’s representatives labored to establish a link between the game and Western art history, claiming that it had incorporated the palette of the impressionists into its design. During a 2010 E3 presentation, Miyamoto referred to the graphics as resembling “a moving painting” and later at a roundtable mentioned that he was a fan of the “soft, warm colors and wayward brush strokes of Cézanne’s artwork” (Plunkett, 2010).<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the 2000s, the *Zelda* franchise appealed to the global market by assimilating to its conventions, downplaying ‘Japanese’ elements in favor of connections to Western art history and game aesthetics. This tendency could be observed throughout the Japanese videogame industry. In the documentary *Ebb and Flow: Conversations on the Momentum of Japanese Games* (Archipel 2018), lead designers of several major Japanese videogame companies confirm that, as Square Enix’s Yoko

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<sup>16</sup> This comment is technically incorrect, as Paul Cézanne is considered a post-impressionist, not an impressionist. The namedrop however demonstrates that the aesthetic references said less about the actual graphics of the game, and all the more about the marketing appeal via Western-scented image traditions.

Taro notes, “we had to sell games to the global market, so we mimicked titles developed in the West”. SIE’s Keiichiro Toyama is shown with a sheepish smile when he says, “our games were, how should I put it, not so great”. While *anime* and *geemu* had already been part of the global circulation of commodities for decades and Japanese game franchises like *Final Fantasy*, *Mario*, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Resident Evil* were doing well internationally, the emergence of Microsoft’s Xbox brought a paradigmatic change to the *geemu* industry, resulting in artistic and commercial decline (Navarro-Remesal Loriguillo-Lopez 2015, 4). The documentary argues that the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was experienced as an industry-wide identity crisis in which the producers had to turn to mimicry out of financial dependence on the global markets.

Cultural debates surrounding the mimicry of Western conventions as a Japanese practice long predate the Zelda franchise. They are part of a larger narrative termed *dōka*, the notion that Japan presumably holds the unique capability of being able to successfully mimic- and adapt to foreign influence without losing their Japanese core identity (Martin, 575).<sup>17</sup> Herein arises a central point of tension for the construction of the Japanese subjectivity, which has vexed Japanese intellectuals since the Meiji period and the birth of the Japanese state (Koschmann 2006, quoted in Martin 2018, 571). As Okabe points out, throughout the Meiji period (1868–1912) the mimicry of Western art and culture was seen as both a way to rise in the world (*risshin shusse*) and as a Western infection (*seiyō kabure*) (2019, 42). While the West was seen as a model to borrow from, it also inspired a sense of inferiority, competition and desire to “preserve national and cultural difference” (Silver 2008, 132). According to Hutchinson, this cultural ambivalence led to an identity crisis that influenced much of the cultural production of both the Meiji and Taishō (1912-1926) era (2001, 177).<sup>18</sup>

After the Second World War, Japan’s identity became predominantly articulated through its subordinate position to the United States (Iwabuchi 2002a, 56). While their status as a leading economic power grew, Japan acquired a positive self-image as an assimilator. They considered themselves “successfully Westernized” (ibid 1998, 172), and prided themselves on their ability to indigenize, something they considered a, “uniquely Japanese quality” (ibid 2002a, 57). At the same time, an obsession grew with the discourse surrounding *nihonjinron*, theories about the supposed unique identity of the Japanese.<sup>19</sup> Iwabuchi writes that in its post-war position, Japan became, “obsessed with claiming its racial purity and homogeneity through the binary opposition of two culturally organic entities, ‘Japan’ and the ‘West’” (56). He further notes, through this nationalistic

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<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of *dōka*, see, for example: Iwabuchi (2002), Oguma (2002), Yoshino (1992)

<sup>18</sup> Hutchinson (2001) has argued that the works of Meiji writers like Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, Nagai Kafū and Shimazaki address pressing questions about Japan’s changing identity in the modern world via, “images of both West and Orient as defining Others for the Japanese Self” (11).

<sup>19</sup> While these narratives have been criticized as racist, xenophobic and essentialist, Hutchinson argues that they indicated anxiety and a need for “certainty and reassurance that Japan was still significant, a source of pride and security” (Hutchinson 2019a, 84). For further reading on *nihonjinron*, see: Dale (1986), Mouer and Sugimoto (1986, 1995) and Befu (2002, 2008).

obsession, Japan was also able to conveniently forget its own pre-war colonial aggression in the region (ibid).<sup>20</sup>

In his historic overview of the Japanese game industry, Picard observes that this competitive interaction between Japanese and Western industries lies at the heart of the birth of the Japanese game. Rather than passively importing Western games, Japanese producers felt determined to actively mimic, clone, and enhance Western products in order to compete (2013, np).<sup>21</sup> While this suggests an empowered competitive position, Iwabuchi points out that Japanese products were only able to go global because of their historical know-how with regards to ‘Western’ assimilation, pointing out the ‘culturally odorless’ nature of Japanese export products in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (1998, 166). He argues that in contrast to American export icons like Coca Cola, Japanese icons like its *anime* figures and Nintendo characters are defined by their *mukokuseki* (‘stateless’) design. These products consciously erase “racial or ethnic characteristics and any context that would embed the characters in a particular culture or country” (167). In other words, while Picard points to assimilative tactics as a Japanese quality, Iwabuchi maintains that Japan’s economic power could only be achieved through active self-erasure.

In the *Ebb & Flow* documentary, Fumihiko Yasudo of *Nioh* (Koei Tecmo 2017) pulls a grim face as he recalls the period of mimicry, noting that it, “really hindered any creativity we may have had”. In the larger argument that the documentary makes, the necessity of mimicry is painted not as Japanese quality but rather an oppressive assimilation which recalls the historic sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the West. The documentary argues that with the release of games like *Persona V* (Atlus 2016), *NieR: Automata* (Square Enix 2017) and *Breath of the Wild*, Japanese videogame production is now experiencing a renewed momentum. Critics have similarly described the year 2017 as marking the “renaissance” (Lennon 2017) or “comeback” (Webster 2017) of Japanese videogames in the West, and the “year Japanese RPGs caught up to Western RPGs” (Leack 2017). Within this momentum, it is suggested that Japanese games have found renewed freedom to express ‘their’ identity after being oppressed by the economic forces of globalization that favored hegemonic Western conventions. This same jubilant rhetoric also undergirds Takizawa’s commentary about the inherent ‘Japaneseness’ of *BotW*, marking a significant shift in the recent history of both the franchise and the industry at large.

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<sup>20</sup> The debate surrounding Japanese identity as either essentially homogeneous or ‘mixed’ in nature, due to the country’s historic annexation and territorial expansions, has been researched extensively. Eiji Oguma (2002) in particular has shown the diverse range of perspectives that have shaped ideas of Japanese identity, while Morris-Suzuki (1998) has pointed out how Japan’s foreign policy has been influenced by its self-image *vis-à-vis* Asia throughout the twentieth century to the present (Morris-Suzuki 1998). See also: Dower (1986), Mouer and Sugimoto (1986), Yoshino (1992), Iwabuchi (1994, 2002), Lie (2001), and Weiner (2009).

<sup>21</sup> Picard cites the example of *Pong* (Atari 1972), which was quickly cloned by both Sega and Taito. As a result of the ‘cloning strategy’, Japanese companies were able to gain commercial success to the point where they could develop their own games, leading to the eventual creation of major commercial successes like Taito’s *Space Invaders* (1978) and the formation of some of Japan’s contemporary leading videogame producers.

## The discursive construction of 'Japan'

Takizawa and the documentary recall the historical anxieties pertaining to the construction of Japanese subjectivity in cultural production. In their comments, the notion of what constitutes their games' sense of 'Japaneseness' is discursively produced in a twofold manner. First, through binary contrast: Yoko Taro notes, "considering art forms like *anime* and even *ukiyo-e*, the Japanese people have never really focused on realistic portrayals. I think we prefer this kind of surreal and unclear world, and personally I think this is a really big difference between Japan and the West" (Archipel 2018). Essential characteristics are ascribed to two stabilized entities – the 'realism-loving West' and 'surreal Japan'.<sup>22</sup> As a discursive construction, 'Japan' as a nation and 'Japaneseness' as an identity, attain meaning through clearly demarcated boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Iwabuchi 2019, 6).<sup>23</sup>

Second, the game designers suggest a transhistorical link between their products and Japanese artistic heritage, specifically *ukiyo-e*. This narrative has also been perpetuated by other Japanese cultural producers like the renowned artist Takashi Murakami and art historian Tsuji Nobuo.<sup>24</sup> The notion that the artistic heritage of *ukiyo-e* ought to be considered the predecessor of contemporary *anime* has been contested by critics like Sharon Kinsella and Adam Kern, who argue instead that *anime* is a product shaped by the transnational flows of contemporary globalized popular culture, and that the notion that it can be traced back to an eighteenth-century artform must be understood predominantly as an effort to legitimize a cultural form (Kinsella 2000, 19) (Kern 2006, 132).

Moreover, Daliot-Bul writes, "using Japanese tradition as a means to add uncontested respectability to recently invented cultural products is a well-known tactic in modern Japan" (Daliot-Bul 2009, 253). The tactics used by the Japanese videogame producers do more than brand their own products, and are part of a discursive- and performative framework that Iwabuchi calls 'pop-culture diplomacy' (2015, 420). He observes that in Japan's postwar era, the country has increasingly come to rely on nation branding through its cultural output in order to internationally enhance its image.

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<sup>22</sup> The 'surreal' quality plays into what Hutchinson (2019a) detects as a common online trope that arose in the 1990s, where reviewers would link Japanese culture and cultural products like their games to a sense of the 'bizarre' that "only Japan could come up with" (Hutchinson, 23). She dismisses it as an Orientalist and essentialist notion, but one that Japan itself can also perpetuate as a form of strategic self-Orientalism. More on this in chapter 5 and 6.

<sup>23</sup> On the definition of the Japanese 'Self' as defined via its Others, see: Gluck (1985), Tanaka (1993), Morris-Suzuki (1998), Clammer (2001), Oguma (2002), and Hutchinson (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Nobuo and Murakami have collaborated on exhibitions and publications that aim to transhistorically link Murakami's *anime*-inspired paintings to those of *Edo* artists. Upon viewing them, Murakami exclaimed, "it's like meeting my father! Oh, this is my DNA!" (Nishimura 2018, 135). Nobuo traces contemporary manga aesthetics back to of *kibyōshi*, *ukiyo-e*, and *emakimono*. He writes of the famous Frolicking Animals scroll *Chōjū-Jinbutsu-Giga*: "there is a shared use of pictorial techniques, trans-historical conventions, to which the modern manga illustrator may (deliberately) hark back" (Nobuo 2001, 64). Takizawa's GDC 2017 PowerPoint shows the same scroll, suggesting that he indeed views the game as a successor to the heritage of *Chōjū-Giga*.

Policies, events and significant allocated budgets have been produced in order to affectively influence the international perception of Japan as 'Cool'. As mentioned in the introduction, alongside these efforts, the METI publishes annual bluebooks that detail tactics to communicate Japan's attractiveness via a consciously constructed brand they term the 'Neo-Japanesque'. This includes creating associations between Japanese heritage and its contemporary pop culture. Note the speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who, addressing the National Diet in 2007, stated:

“as shown by the fact that Japan is the very country of the cradle of ‘Japanimation’, Japanese contemporary culture’s coolness is founded in and derived from its traditional culture”

(Abe 2007)

The phenomenon of nation branding is by no means unique to Japan, but has rather become an international booming business throughout the late 1990s and 2000s in which nations seek to construct a more distinctive version of their country's Self (Subramanian 2017, 19).<sup>25</sup> As Anderson points out, nation and nationalism are not formed through an awakening to a particular identity, but through conscious invention and imagining processes through texts and different media (Anderson 1983, 6). The Japanese pop culture media mix has become not only, “one of the main governmental resources of brand nationalism, but also the perceptual frame through which ‘Japan’ is popularized both internally as well as externally” (Miyake 2015, 94). The commentary made by cultural producers like the Japanese videogame designers is grounded within these identity politics. From this understanding arises the question how their videogames are engaging with these discourses.

## Ghibli Zelda

When *BotW* was announced, the designers stated their aim had been to completely rethink and overhaul old Zelda conventions. Beyond its novel open world approach, the marketing no longer emphasized the ties to Western image traditions. Where *Skyward Sword's* watercolor aesthetic was linked to impressionism, Eiji Aonuma noted in an interview for *BotW*: “the colors that are used are very reminiscent of a type of paint called gouache; a material that is often used in [Japanese] animation.”<sup>26</sup> While gouache is as much an originally European product as the impressionists' watercolors, Nintendo's marketing consciously references its use in Japanese production. The game's 'Japaneseness' was further stressed through an announcement trailer that included so many references to *anime* and the *Ghibli* aesthetic in particular that fans promptly declared the game 'Ghibli

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<sup>25</sup> Van Ham (2001) points out that during late 1990s, Great Britain for example began recasting itself as 'Cool Britannia' as well.

<sup>26</sup> See Nintendo Minute's "The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild Gameplay with Eiji Aonuma": [https://youtube.com/watch?v=WAWAQIQ\\_nw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=WAWAQIQ_nw)

Zelda’ and responded with discussions and fanart that married the two franchise universes (fig. 3.4).<sup>27</sup> After the game was released, fans then produced hours of video- and blog-content exploring the many ‘Japanese’ elements that *BotW* holds.<sup>28</sup>

The Zelda franchise has seemingly ended its 15 year period of adhering to *mukokuseki* game design mimicry and has instead embraced the pop culture diplomacy of brand nationalism in which ‘Japaneseness’ is no longer an odor, but a ‘cool’ and unique smelling flavor. As a discursive practice, the constructed world of videogames reinforces particular social ideologies, which in the case of *BotW* must be understood in the historically and culturally situated context of Cool Japan and discourses on ‘Japaneseness’. As a Japanese production, this thesis presumes *BotW* dreams ludic dreams about Japan’s sense of Self and its Others. What follows is a discursive analysis of that representation, understood to be laboring within the complex Japanese socio-economic historical context of cultural mimicry, assimilation, cultural hegemonic flows and nation branding efforts.



Figure 3.4. Fanart by @Miavern posted on her Twitter account on 19-04-2018 with the caption: “*Breath of the Wild* stole all its lore straight from *Castle in the Sky* but that’s okay by me, it’s good taste”. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.5. The original screenshot from *Castle in the Sky* (1986). Courtesy of Studio Ghibli.

<sup>27</sup> See for example the following discussion on the r/Zelda Reddit in 2016, a year before release of the game: [https://www.reddit.com/r/zelda/comments/4u0k1c/breath\\_of\\_the\\_wild\\_inspired\\_by\\_studio\\_ghibli/](https://www.reddit.com/r/zelda/comments/4u0k1c/breath_of_the_wild_inspired_by_studio_ghibli/)

<sup>28</sup> Wen even titled their blogpost “The Japanese Flavours of Breath of the Wild”, emphasizing the change in Iwabuchi’s sensory metaphor: <https://damisanthrope.wordpress.com/2017/04/23/the-japanese-flavours-of-breath-of-the-wild/>. See also Beyond Ghibli’s *With Eyes Unclouded* (2017): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fPz7kGduT4>

# IV. Space



Figure 4.1. Welcome to *Breath of the Wild*. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

## 4.1 Introduction

Walking into the bedazzling world of Hyrule is surely as subliminally chill-invoking to the just-awoken Link as it is to the player, free to take Link wherever they<sup>29</sup> desire. On their travels, they will encounter vast deserts, mountains that turn to ice and mountains that turn to fire, lands forever shrouded in mist, forests torn by rainstorms and frozen in perpetual autumn. This is Hyrule, 100 years after the fall of its civilization at the hands of the demon Ganon. As the player soon learns from speaking to those who survived, Ganon infected Hyrule's bloodstream like a virus, spreading his darkness into their technology and turning it against them. After the fall of the kingdom, nature overtook the world, turning into wilderness. Humble settlements survive, often protected by their seclusion and strategic locations, hidden in mountain valleys and nestled in the shadows of natural barriers. Ruins littering the grassy fields suggest not all were so lucky. New creatures, born from Ganon's energy, have now made Hyrule their home.

To set off on this thesis' aim of analyzing the discursive aesthetics of *BotW*, this chapter begins at that which encompasses all other representational objects within the game: the landscape itself. It will read Hyrule playable landscapes for the claims it makes about who gets to gaze and consume,

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<sup>29</sup> This thesis employs the gender-neutral 'they' for players.

what the gazed at are designed like to invite that consumption and how this ties in with the lived world- and its art histories.

## 1.2. Looking at landscape

*BotW* is the first game to introduce open world design to the Zelda franchise, allowing for free traversal of the terrain and myriad opportunities to do so. Every surface can be accessed and climbed: the lands, the mountains, even the sky becomes easily traversable via the use of a wind-glider. Open world design and agency itself are already ideologically embedded, as they suggests cultural investment in values about celebrating individual freedom and spatial privilege (Krzywinska & King 2006, 172). Art historical scholarship on the representation of landscape has long noted the ideological implications of constructing and looking at landscape. In *Landscape and Power* (1994), art historian W.J.T. Mitchell writes, “landscape as a cultural medium has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable” (Mitchell, p. 2). The postcolonial theorist on travel writing, Mary Louise Pratt (1998), similarly writes, “landscape description has long been recognized as an exceedingly fruitful case for studying the interaction of aesthetics and ideology” (21).

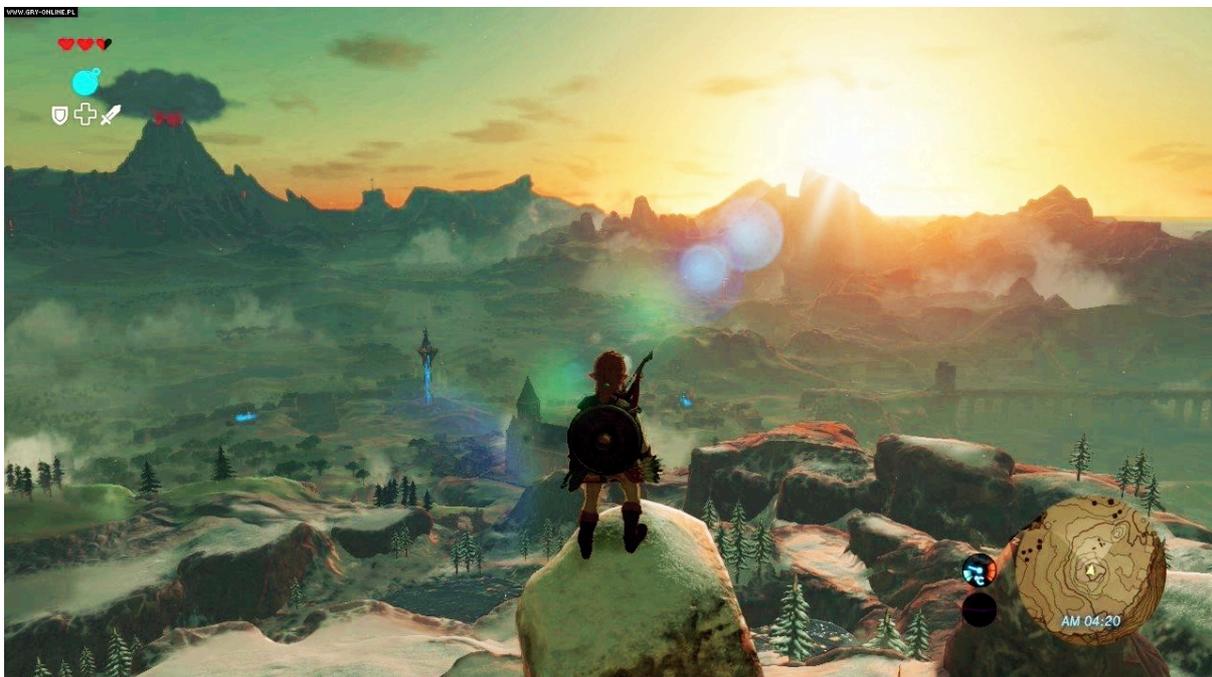


Figure 4.2 Gazing onto the vast landscapes of Hyrule via Link's shoulder. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

In fig. 4.2 a particular set of conventions are employed: a lone figure is monumentally depicted within the center of the image, perched high over the landscape. He is rendered in some of the darkest

hues of the image, due to the light coming from the front. His shape contrasts with the landscape's horizontal format through his upright, vertical form, establishing the central vertical axis of the valley's bilateral symmetry. Note the similarities with fig. 4.3 and 4.4. The flanking hills and banks of fog appear like extensions of the shadowed body, the horizontal of his waist determining the image's midline and dividing the picture into symmetrical upper and lower halves. In all these images, a lush space stretches out in front of figure, giving off hints about possible points of interest that might contain both resources and narrative elements to be discovered. For easy recognition, those elements are highlighted in contrasting colors like teal blue and magenta red in the gamespace. In the back looms a dark volcano, to the sides can be seen large glittering lakes and bridges leading to unseen lands. The images are wrapped together by the dramatic horizon lights that sets the lands and sky ablaze.



Figure 4.3. The *BotW* box art intentionally references Friedrich. Courtesy of Nintendo.

Figure 4.4. Friedrich, Caspar David. 1818. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*. Oil on canvas. Hamburg: Kunsthalle.

Version of this image are repeated excessively throughout *BotW*, from the opening sequence in fig. 4.1 to the box art in fig. 4.3, and continuously through gameplay as in fig. 4.2. When leaving a shrine area, the camera pans out to cast a look over Link's body into the gamespace below, as if to say: 'look at all there is surrounding you, waiting for you to discover'. During gameplay, the player constantly encounters watchpoints that similarly evoke the image of Link's body in the foreground

with the cacophony of nature below him. The watchtowers in particular cast a panoramic image for the player, offering a 360 degree view of the area surrounding it. As the player gazes over Link's shoulder, they are able to survey everything around them and determine where they want to go next.

When the game offers this image, it is redeploying a pre-existing convention found throughout both visual and narrative traditions: what in visual art is called the *Rückenfigur*, a staple of romanticism that dates back to Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818) (fig. 4.4), and what Pratt (1988, 21) in travel writing has coined the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' trope. The image has become a stock-trope of videogames, as seen particularly well from *Assassin's Creed* synchronization points. The art historian Steigerwardl writes, "Friedrich's images of natural environments, and the human presence within them, can be regarded as acting as mediators between the viewer and landscape, subject and object, consciousness and nature, drawing the beholder into the canvas and making the landscape seem more immediate" (Steigerwardl & Fairbairn, 454). The trope can be read as the proto-image for third-person open-world games themselves - like the *Rückenfigur*, Link too serves as quite literally the 'link' between the external perspective of the player and internal, diegetic world of the gamespace. Link, as a *Rückenfigur*, is a being who sees and is seen, who mediates the position of the subject, the player, within the landscape.

Pratt argues that the monarch-of-all-I-survey is invoked in order to render the act of discovery itself meaningful (21). She outlines that meaning-making is achieved via three representational principles. First, the landscape is represented "like a painting" (ibid), making the aesthetic pleasure so great that it singlehandedly constitutes the value and significance of the journey. In the case of *BotW*, the landscape is rendered as awesomely beautiful by its subliminal light, color and soaring music. It reifies the association with painting via its NPC painter Pikango (4.5), whose paintings serve to remind the player of the painterly-ness of the landscape, as well as through aspects of gameplay: players are encouraged to take pictures of the landscape, momentarily flattening the gamespace to a 2D object, which can then be used to locate particular resources, as well be uploaded online.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 4.5. The Sheikah painter Pikango can be found travelling the world and helps out recognizing locations. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

The marrying of the beautiful with the pragmatic – that is, for consuming the resources in the land, is what Pratt secondly points out. Within the monarch's view, landscape is always represented as dense, extremely rich in material and semantic substance. As the player is gazing down over the lands, they seek what it is in the space that they can consume: the

<sup>30</sup> See for example the blogpost "Playing Breath of the Wild like a Wildlife Photographer" here: <https://www.giantbomb.com/the-legend-of-zelda-breath-of-the-wild/3030-41355/forums/playing-breath-of-the-wild-like-a-wildlife-photogr-1808054/>

resources, the enemy strongholds, the points of interest. These referents, Pratt argues, “tie the landscape explicitly to the reader” (23). In other words, it makes it personally relevant to the gamer’s gameplay. Unlike other open world games like *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (Bethesda 2017) or *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games 2017), *BotW*’s interface map does not give hints about where resources might be found. Rather, it pushes the player to access watchpoints and use the binocular zoom to gaze out over the land in order to discover landmarks, resources and enemy strongholds, which they can then mark down and navigate towards. The watchpoints serve to mobilize the player’s gaze, employing the landscape’s visual cacophony as aesthetic gratification that then compels further spatial exploration and consumption, while continuously rendering that discovery meaningful and spectacular.

The monarch’s third principle for rendering discovery meaningful is through establishing a relationship of dominance between the seer and the seen: there is the one who towers over- and the one who falls under its shadow; the one who takes, and that which is taken. The monarch-of-all-I-survey holds a particular social meaning, an affordance of power due to the ability to create oversight via the height and the panoramic view. As Koerner writes on the Friedrichean wanderer, “all lines of sight converge upon him, as if landscape were the mapping of world to body” (2009, 227). The monarch convention that *BotW* casts as its main image is of a figure whom is granted the power of the gaze and spatial privilege to cast it. It is an image which, as Pratt tentatively suggests, “embodies aesthetically and ideologically, a kind of ‘discourse of empire’” (25).

## 4.3 A discourse of empire

### 4.3.1 Dominating the playground

Videogame landscapes typically offer a sandbox area which the player-character is allowed to explore. It is for this reason that games are often described as playgrounds, a favorite metaphor of *Zelda*’s creator Shigeru Miyamoto (DeWinter 2015, 30). The overwhelming density of the playground becomes more manageable over time, as progressively, the player discovers more and increases their understanding of the geography, biology and physics. It is as such that slowly, there is a growing sense of oversight, and thereby mastery, over the gameworld (Martin 2011, n.p.). This logic structures most videogames, and can be said to hold affinities with what Pratt calls a ‘discourse of empire’. After all, control over an unknown world is slowly established through discovery by a player-character who approaches the land as commodity, and whose often violent interventions in the land are framed as necessary and just. More bluntly put, as Murray writes: “the typical use of a game landscape [is] as a theatre for asserting dominion over space through the player’s mastery of gameplay” (2017, 143).

This spatial logic was already signaled out early in the field of game studies by New World Narrative specialist Mary Fuller and game theorist Henry Jenkins (1995). They found that the latter's contemporary object of study was invoking particular pre-existing conventions that it was taking from former's historical one. That is to say, they saw striking similarities between the narratives of physical space navigated, mapped, and mastered by European voyagers and travelers in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the narratives of fictional, digitally projected space mastered by players. They observed that Nintendo enabled new spatial fantasies that allowed for, "exploration, colonization, and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining" (58). While written some 20 years before the release of *BotW*, Jenkins following observation remains startlingly poignant: "Nintendo®'s central feature is its constant presentation of spectacular spaces. Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough, to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen. [...] All of these details constitute a form of visual excess ('eye candy', as computer enthusiasts call it), a conspicuous consumption of space" (62). Fuller concludes, "If Nintendo® feeds the appetite for encountering a succession of new spaces (as well as helping to create such an appetite), that same appetite was, of course, central to New World narratives" (64).

This understanding of landscape as ideological has long been understood by art historians like W.J.T. Mitchell (1994), who argues landscape can best be understood as, "something like the 'dreamwork of imperialism' (10). At the level of the representational, he notes, "landscape does not usually declare its relation to imperialism in any direct way; it is not to be understood as a mere tool of nefarious imperial design" (ibid). Rather, as dreamwork, it is the cultural ideology and values encoded *within* the aesthetics that may find affinity with a discourse of empire. Jenkins & Fuller first published their findings in 1995, in an era of videogaming that only allowed for simplistically pixelated visualization of the landscape and characters. If the authors saw parallels between the rhetoric of Nintendo's products and New World writing then, the question arises what relationship emerges between New World aesthetics and the 'eye candy' that Nintendo games with 4K graphics rendering capacity offer now. Placing in-game screenshots of *BotW* side-to-side with landscape paintings from early American painters like Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902) and Thomas Cole (1801 – 1848), both part of the Hudson River School, fascinating parallels surface.<sup>31</sup> Their imagination of the nature - overwhelming, mythological, subliminal and dramatically colored in pastels and golds - is exactly that of *BotW*.

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<sup>31</sup> the Hudson River school (1825–1870) was the first native school of painting in the United States. See: Howat (1987), Sullivan (1991), Avery (2004).

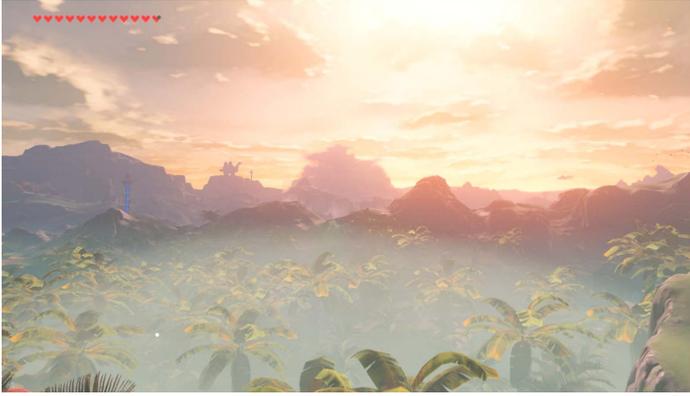


Figure 4.6. Luminescent morning light over Hyrule's misty jungle. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.7. Bierstadt, Albert. 1867. *In the Mountains*. Oil on canvas. Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum.



Figure 4.8. Autumnal colors light up the Akkala region. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.9. Cole, Thomas. 1845. *The Hunter's Return*. Oil on canvas. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum.



Figure 4.10. Overgrown ruins of former vestiges. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.11. Cole, Thomas. 1843. *Mount Etna from Taormina*. Oil on canvas. Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum.

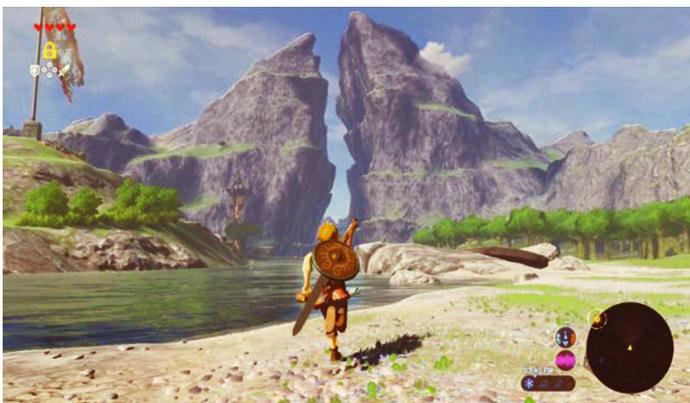


Figure 4.12. The river flowing through the Dueling Peaks. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.13. Cole, Thomas. 1843. *Evening in Arcady*. Oil on canvas. Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum.

#### 4.3.2 New World aesthetics

Consider the images above (fig. 4.6-13)<sup>32</sup>. Paintings by Hudson River School artists have been placed next to in-game screenshots from Hyrule. All read as dramatic images due to the high contrast color palette of the tonal ranges and the background that fades into cooler, bluer tones that dramatize the effect of depth. The game's light-sliders create the same dramatic shadows. Large mountain ranges rise up on either side while large clouds roll on from above to emphasize the smallness of the wanderer. The splendor of brilliant fall foliage is exaggerated by the colors and atmospheric light effects. The light breaks out through the clouds, filling the darkened world with bursts of warm amber golds that emphasize lushness with saturated and vibrant sunsets and twilights.<sup>33</sup> In both the paintings and the gamescape, there are points of interests to be discerned in the distance: little hints of things waiting to be explored, like towers, ruins, bridges over a body of water, mysterious shapes looming on the horizon. *BotW* is certainly borrowing from the conventions of the romantic American painters.

The American painters were themselves drawing on earlier established conventions of European romantic landscape, representing 'their' new motherland as the quintessential pristine unspoiled paradise. W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) describes how landscape representations in Western imaging practices always involved the encoding of particular ideologies about the land itself, as well as the nation and the social identities tied to them. He writes that, "the semiotic features of landscape, and the historical narrative they generate, are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives itself simultaneously as an expansion of landscape understood as inevitable, and as a progressive development in history, an expansion of 'culture' and 'civilization' into a 'natural' space in a progress that is itself narrated as 'natural' (17). The historical narrative in the American landscape paintings followed that of Manifest Destiny – the cultural notion that American landscape was there to be 'discovered' and subsequently 'preserved' after the settlers had established control over it.<sup>34</sup>

Thomas Cole noted melancholically in *Essays on American Scenery* (1936):

"In civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified. [...] And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away"

(Cole, p. 112).

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<sup>32</sup> These images show some of Hyrule's landscapes. Fans have made travel logs that chronicle their travels while photographing the landscape. See, for example: <https://garciasevilla.com/2017/03/11/Zelda-travel-log/>

<sup>33</sup> A fan-mod shows what *BotW* would look like without its cel-shaded palette of pastels – Hyrule becomes grime by comparison and eradicates the aesthetic wonder that propels the need to explore. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oBnOEpAYLO>

<sup>34</sup> Manifest destiny was a widely held belief in the 19th century United States that its settlers were destined to expand across North America, based upon their god-given rights. See: Horsman (1981), Stephanson (1996).

A paradox arises in the cultural dreamwork construed by Cole's mythology: while he laments the expansion of empire and desires the sublimity of the wild to remain untouched by forces of civilization, his very presence is part of the imperialist venture that naturalizes the narrative of American landscape as 'primitive' *vis-à-vis* 'cultivated' Europe and as such, "open up not just a spatial scene, but a projected future of 'development' and 'exploitation'" (Mitchell, 10).

The visual conventions from which *BotW*'s landscape aesthetics borrow are thus not simply representations of nature, but rather artificially created contexts wherein ideology and the distribution of power is embedded. Shinkle (2007) notes, "the discourse of landscape – its definitions, its conventions, its history – authorizes a specific cultural vision of nature, and its political potency is, in part, a function of its ability to naturalize this vision behind *a screen of benign realism*" (n.p, my emphasis). That benign realism, what Jenkins called Nintendo's 'eye candy', gives rise to relations pertaining to domination, control and consumption. While landscape paintings could only show hints of waterfalls and mysterious ruins in the background and pose the question what those might look like up close if the viewer were able to go and discover them, it is this exact wish-fulfillment that videogames grant. The subliminal imagery shapes the desire for exploration whilst simultaneously drawing up a narrative of that effort as natural and justified, posited upon ideologically construed dichotomies of civilized and primitive. Those who are allowed to gaze upon the land, ludically pulled there under the guise of exploration, become in fact, as Mitchell writes, "the eye of the predator" (10).

#### 4.4 Primitivism

This chapter has so far focused on the dialogue between *BotW*'s landscape and the art historical conventions from which it draws. It has analyzed how both the aestheticization of the land itself and the particular way in which Link's body and gaze are positioned in relation to it suggest a relationship of dominion and consumption. Pratt conclusively states: "the landscapes described in both literary and nonliterary texts since the seventeenth century emanate from a conventionalized discourse in which the landscape is viewed first and foremost as a commodity" (24). The conclusion that this is the logic that also structures the visual politics of *BotW* is therefore perhaps predictable. More provocative, however, is the notion of a colonial simulation. In what follows, the potential for this ideological interpretation is explored before, by stumbling upon its limitations, an alternative reading emerges that, placed in the wider cultural context of Japan, suggests the referenced landscape conventions are not simply being re-employed, but are rather being ideologically reshaped.

*BotW* might be summarized as follows: a figure opens his eyes in an unknown world both verbally and visually coded as ‘the wild’, while he himself hails from a world that was (once) sophisticated and technologically advanced. The figure is male, white, and is considered part of a race coded as Anglo-inspired medieval folk. As he wakes, a voice speaks of his destiny to save the land from a usurping evil codified as a bestiality, whose equally bestial ‘primitive’ creatures inhabit the lands. Benign ‘exotic’ species inhabit the lands too, eagerly awaiting the figure’s saving from the evil creatures that hold them and their princesses captive. As Jenkins and Fuller point out, the rescue plot only serves as the excuse for the true point of the colonial logic: the pleasure of exploration and consumption in the name of benign saviorism (58).

The above description illustrates that it is possible to interpret *BotW* as a colonial venture. In the lived colonial enterprise, European colonizers imagined the indigenous inhabitants of the lands they were conquering as ‘primitive’, a construct that codified indigenous inhabitants as savage, inherently tied to nature and therefore in need of cultivation, domination and penetration by the European Self (Arvanitakis & Hübinette 2012, 277). From contemporary illustrations like the ones found in Victor Hugo’s novel *bug-jarqal* (1826) (fig. 4.14), it can be gauged



Figure 4.14 Mouchot, L. 1888. Book illustration. In: Hugo, Victor. 1888. *Bug-jarqal*. Paris: Hugues.

that some of the conventions of representing the indigenous people were through hairy, dark bodies and clawlike hands and feet, a lack of clothing in favor of loincloths and bone accessories. Associated weaponry were simplistic sticks and clubs, as well as sharp teeth emphasizing their bestiality. These conventions have been taken up in contemporary imaginations of the ‘primitive’ – Disney’s *Tarzan* (1999) being a famous example -, and are employed in *BotW* for their main enemy, the Bokoblin, and the related species Moblin and Hinox (fig. 4.15). They are brutish creatures, with large ears and a pig-like snout, tiny eyes and fanged beaks, living in communities in caves and treehouses or outside next to fires where they can be found roasting meat, sleeping or dancing. Significantly, the design of the Bokoblins has vastly differed over the course of the *Zelda* series. *Skyward Sword* imagined them closer to pirates, while *Twilight Princess* renders them imp-like with grey-haired dreads and aged look. *The Wind Waker* donned them in full outfit, complete with sword and shield. *BotW* is the first to give them a stereotypically ‘savage’ design - which reinforces the ‘wild’ imagery of the game, and with that, supports a reading of the game as a colonial simulation.



Figure 4.15. The change in Bokoblin design. F.I.t.r.: The Wind Waker, Twilight Princess, Skyward Sword, Breath of the Wild. Digital Illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.

However, a closer look at these ‘primitives’ reveals a contradiction within the convention: while they are monstrous, many fan blogs have noted that the bokoblin are strangely endearing. Observing them from a distance, the careful observer will note that their animations suggest they are living distinct lives of their own: the bokoblin dance; joke around with one another; chase birds; flee screaming from bees and lightning strikes; can pursue wildlife from horseback; scratch their butts and pick their noses. Combat too gives off a paradoxical message: when shooting a hinox in the eye, it flinches, looks desperately hurt and momentarily scared as it clutches for its eye; bokoblins can beg for mercy when you corner them, their cry as they are slain sounds fearful. There are even special camouflages that allow Link to sit among the bokoblin and observe them quietly. Why would a game, predicated a Manichean good-evil binary wherein Link is the unquestioned benign savior, contain these interactions?

The ambiguous nature of the bokoblin has certainly been picked up by fans, as seen from fanart (fig. 4.16) and assertions of doubt on forums, as when one blogger writes that they feel, “kind of bad for killing them”.<sup>35</sup> And yet, Nintendo’s design philosophy can be summarized as ‘form follows function’, meaning that enemies, functioning as threat and resource, must read as such too (DeWinter 2015, 24).<sup>36</sup> While Nintendo’s intellectual property traditionally leans towards the cute, other monsters in *BotW*, like the serpent lizalfos, are not granted the same types of ‘humanizing’ animation that the bokoblin are.<sup>37</sup> While the complexity to their design is subtle, and might not compel the average gamer into a ‘vegan run’<sup>38</sup>, their inclusion into the design of the ‘primitive’ is significant, as it complicates the framing of Link’s violence against them as natural and benign. The popular indie-game *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) consciously explores this framing by placing the player in an unknown land

<sup>35</sup> Source: <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/632936-the-legend-of-zelda-breath-of-the-wild/75081106>

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer DeWinter recalls about Shigeru Miyamoto’s design philosophy: “he has famously stated that he is more interested in gameplay than narrative, asking his development team to cut back on the narrative elements”. His designs grow from their ludological needs, such as Mario’s size-increasing design so that he can jump freely - rather than narrative ones.

<sup>37</sup> In *Observant play: colonial readings in Breath of the Wild* (2019b), Hutchinson too argues that through observant play of *BotW*, subtle counter-messaging about the assumed ‘barbarism’ of the monsters and ‘civilization’ of the kingdom can be observed. She focuses on the carnivorous lizalfos, who, she points out, can be observed worshipping fruit, suggesting both sentience and complexity (2).

<sup>38</sup> Vegan runs of *BotW* have been executed and documented. For more on this particular topic, please see: Westerlaken (2017).

full of ‘monsters’ that they can kill. Unspoken, however, is the option to play the game fully pacifist, which is the way to achieve the game’s happy ending. Though no such conscious didactic design lies as the heart of *BotW*, there is not a single monster that roams Hyrule freely that must necessarily die for the game to advance. Murray writes that, “power relationships between playable and non-playable characters are determined by the game mechanics, which embody particular cultural meanings in the game’s system of computational expression” (104). While the representation of the NPCs is explored in-depth in chapters 5 and 6, it is significant for the analysis of landscape here that the reading of *BotW*’s space along the lines of a cornucopia of commodity, a *terra incognita*, a primordial wild awaiting its savior-settler, as this chapter has traced until now, becomes complicated by the design choice to computationally render sentience, complexity and agency into the design of the ‘primitive’ opponents.



Figure 4.16. Fanart shows that fans have clearly picked up on the sentience of the Bokoblin and further expand their lovability. Mnelsonart. 2018. Fanart.

## 4.5 A Japanese playground

It must be stressed, as Murray does, that game representations are thoroughly intentional (2017, 171). She recalls Jenkins’ assertion that, “game worlds are totally constructed environments. Everything there was put on the screen for some purpose. [...] Game designers create immersive worlds with embedded rules and relationships among objects that enable dynamic experiences” (2002, 62). The choice to at once represent the most prevalent enemies in the game as more stereotypically ‘primitive’ than any of its previous renditions while simultaneously modelling a space for empathy within them chips at Link’s image as the benign savior, posing a moral calculus to the player about the violence they are transferring onto the bokoblin through his body. In other words, while the

naturalizing screen of benign realism is by no means shaken, there is a small tear to be observed. From there then derives the question – why, and where else?

The control that Link establishes over Hyrule through his killing and consuming of the resources is partially undone every few in-game days by a mechanism called the Blood Moon. During the event, the color in the sky turns red, and all the slain creatures, spawns of Ganon's power, are reborn. Although this mechanic is procedurally necessary to replenish resources for the player, it also undermines Link's control over the land. If Link represents the disciplining forces of civilized culture, then Ganon, designed as a bestiality, represents the forces of nature aligned with those of the moon. As such, the blood moon 'resets' nature and returns the indigenous inhabitants to the land. This does not, of course, stop Link in any way from plundering on. On first glance, it seems like everything in the land is up for grabs – the roaming animals can all be killed and eaten, the trees all chopped, the flowers destroyed.<sup>39</sup> However, upon closer look, it appears some elements do resist Link's control. For example, deep within a meadow on Satori Mountain lives a strange glowing creatures that only appears every so often. Satori, known as the 'The Lord of the Mountain' in the English localization, is a horse-deer hybrid, whose design strongly references the aesthetic of the Japanese animation company Studio Ghibli through its combination of the extraterrestrial with the fairy-tale, as in fig. 4.19. While Satori can be mounted if it is snuck up to very carefully, it cannot be captured the way horses can.<sup>40</sup> This is remarkable, because due to its superior stats, it is the best mount in the game. Alongside Satori live the Blupees, glowing rabbit spirits that similarly look straight out of a Ghibli world. They will drop Rupees when struck by a weapon, but like the Lord, they are fleeting immortal beings who slip through the player's fingers.

Through Hyrule's skies also roam three majestic dragons, who plunge out of lakes and disappear into holes in the horizon. It is hard to describe quite how much respect they demand – they are enormous, made up of glittering scales in bright yellow, blue and red corresponding to their elements electricity, ice and fire. As they appear, a lilting tune plays up and the quality of the air around Link changes to an uplifting draft, which he may ride via his wind-glider to soar alongside the dragon. They too are immortal and fleeting. While Link may shoot arrows at them in the hopes of acquiring a dragon scale or two, they cannot ever be captured or controlled by him. Like the bokoblin, dragons are a staple of the Zelda franchise as well. Their design too has been overhauled for *BotW* in significant ways. *Skyward Sword*, *Twilight Princess* and *The Wind Waker* all had dragon designs whose physique was based on the European Wyvern iconography, characterized by a large belly. *BotW*'s

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<sup>39</sup> A humorous sidequest parodies Link's destruction. If he steps into a particular flower patch, its caretaker viciously attacks him for it. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijx0lsQiytA>

<sup>40</sup> For further reading on the horses in *BotW*, see Seraphine (2018).

dragons however are serpentine and gracious, based on the iconography of Shōhaku’s dragon (fig. 4.21-4.24).<sup>41</sup> The design also recalls the dragon Kohaku from Studio Ghibli’s *Spirited Away* (2001).

All these immortal, fleeting creatures are *kami*, nature spirits worshipped in the Japanese religion *Shintō*, whose central principal is the understanding of nature as both holy and spirited. So too are the Korok, sentient leaf-*kami* who are one of the seven major NPC races of Hyrule. Korok are scattered all over Hyrule but can be found in large quantities near their father who is a large, sentient tree that watches over the Master Sword. They draw parallel with the Kodama of Ghibli’s *Mononoke-Hime* (1997), who make a similar jingle when they are near and stem from a parental tree as well. While they seem relatively harmless, the Korok are in fact tremendously powerful. When Link tries to visit their town hidden within the mists of the Lost Woods, the Korok are able to kill him for making a single mis-step into the mists, as they giggle gleefully.<sup>42</sup> No other race is shown to be capable of killing Link. The Korok’s power over Link is subtle and playful, but subverts his control in their forest.



Figure 4.17. The Korok design recalls the Kodama. Digital illustration. courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.18. The Kodama in *Mononoke-Hime* (1997). Animation still. Courtesy of Studio Ghibli.

The representations in games are complex, and their embedded ideologies, revealed through close consideration, speak to the contexts in which they were made (Murray, 188). As Dovey & Kennedy remark about game space in particular, “we can only understand the game space through its relation to the non-game space” (2006, 145). Recalling chapter 3, *BotW* was published in the year that would be dubbed the ‘renaissance’ of Japanese videogames, following a fifteen-year period of commercial decline, in which practices of mimicry of Western conventions and adherence to neutralizing *mukokuseki* game design were commonplace. From the documentary *Ebb & Flow*, it appears Japanese game designers felt creatively repressed throughout this period; Miyamoto’s stepping down as director throughout the development of *Twilight Princess* can be taken as a sign that there may have been internal struggle within Nintendo too. In the light of this context, the choice

<sup>41</sup> Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781) was a Japanese Edo period artist. His famous ‘Dragon and Clouds’, whose design forms the inspiration for *BotW*’s dragon design, is in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. See: <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/26118>.

<sup>42</sup> In the following playthrough by AwesomeFaceProd, it can be observed how difficult it is to get to the Korok town hidden within the trees: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=SgWCRTUY12U>. Their giggle is gleeful but equally ominous, establishing that beyond their cute nature they hold devious power and are therefore rightfully the watchers over the Master Sword.

to afford a superior power position to those elements whose aesthetic corresponds to a sense of 'Japaneseness' is significant. Within a landscape whose discursive logic is one of all-consuming empire via the 'benign' colonial violence of the hero Link, that choice ought to be considered a highly ideologically charged decision that is thoroughly intentional. Put differently - while on the one hand, *BotW's* landscapes are rendered fecund for the underlying, ideologically charged motivation for colonial-scented acts of gazing, exploring and consuming, there is also a counter-ideology at play that excludes 'Japaneseness' from that grasp.



Figure 4.19. Satori (right) and the blurpees (left). Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.20. The deer god *Shishigami* is similarly made up of fur combined with see-through blue glittering matter, with bright ruby eyes and glowing antlers. Movie still from *Mononoke-Hime* (1997). Courtesy of Studio Ghibli.



Figure 4.21. Dragon design in *The Wind Waker* (2002). Screenshot and digital illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.22. Dragon design in *Twilight Princess* (2006). Screenshot and digital illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.23. Dragon design in *Skyward Sword* (2012). Screenshot and digital illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.

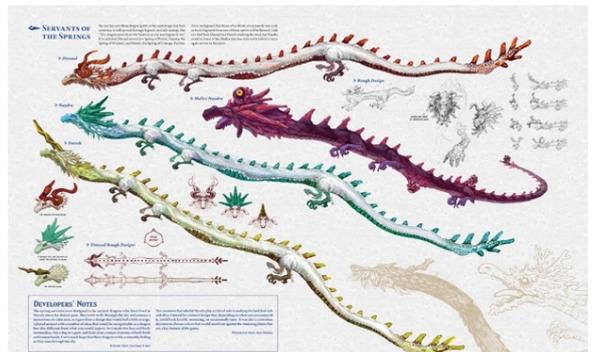


Figure 4.24. Dragon design in *Breath of the Wild* (2017). Screenshot and digital illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 4.25. Soga Shōhaku. 1763. *Dragon and Clouds*. Set of eight panels, ink on paper. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.



Figure 4.26. *BotW*'s dragon design recalls Ghibli's Haku and Shohaku's Dragon. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

Figure 4.27. The River god Kohaku from *Spirited Away* (2001). Animation still. Courtesy of Studio Ghibli.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has taken a first look at the world of *BotW*'s Hyrule, and found that the game heavily draws on conventions of representation from European romantic- and colonial painterly traditions, and applies the same representational principles in order to stimulate and ideologically justify acts of gazing, exploring and consuming. However, as Pratt notes, when conventions are re-employed, there exists the potential for “their being contradicted and eroded. [...] The conventionalized discourse of domination in landscape description is prone to both variation and undermining” (26). The referencing of existing pictorial histories comes with the possibility to play with the image sets and their underlying power-relations, to reshuffle them and pastiche the images together differently. This mindset is described by the neo-medievalist Clements, who argues that when contemporary media like videogames borrow from pictorial conventions (like ‘the medieval’), they participate in a post-modern practice of representation that is, “independent, detached, and thus consciously, purposefully and perhaps even laughingly reshaping itself into an alternate universe” (2012, 56). It is a universe created through a filtered application of the “thousands of collectively owned tropes” (62). Indeed, taking a

broad look at *BotW*'s lands, it emerges the game is an anachronistically pastiched universe, made up of tropes related to the medieval, contemporary modular prefab houses, Japanese *jomōn* pottery-houses, Roman amphitheatres, Gaudian palaces, Hawaiian palm tree huts and Romanesque cathedrals.<sup>43</sup> As Clements writes, "in this elaborate postmodern artifice, its self-conscious remaking of a new 'medieval' world, there is room for different, sometimes opposite, ideologies to play" (ibid). The inaccuracies are the result of a "careful kind of carelessness"; an act of taking care to consciously impose contemporary ideology.

The post-modernist Hutcheon similarly argues that postmodern representation is highly self-conscious and self-reflexive, as pastiche, appropriation, intertextuality, irony or parody. She argues that representations might on first glance look to be perpetuating a particular discourse, but can in fact by ironically quoting them, ideologically both continuing and differentiating them, installing and parodying them (2002, 93). She coins the term 'complicitous critique', a political act that politicizes representation through unsettling ('de-doxifies') all doxa, normalized beliefs and ideologies. Postmodern representations, "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there" (106). In other words, while *BotW* may well import and reproduce the ideologies surrounding empire and dominance from image conventions like the *Rückenfigur* and Hudson River School, it can play with their power distribution by lifting 'Japanese' signifying elements out of the power matrix and playing with conventions like the primitives. While a Manifest Destiny-esque narrative can be applied to *BotW* easily, what this suggests is that the game is not simply perpetuating it, but rather complicating it and subtly subverting it. According to Hutcheon, postmodern cultural products, "acknowledge and accept the challenge of tradition: the history of representation cannot be escaped but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody" (55). It is as such that this chapter concludes that the Japanese cultural dreamwork done by *BotW*'s landscape is one that dreams up a world which at once complies to the pressures to deliver a *mukokuseki* colonial venture game that adheres to the 'Western' markets' tastes and expectations, but simultaneously shapes spaces of resistance for itself.

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<sup>43</sup> The blog <https://architectureofzelda.com/> chronicles the extensive and myriad architectural influences of the Zelda series. Its creator Talbot zooms in on local elements to examine in-depth the inner functioning of that space, from where it draws its imagery and how this relates to the larger overworld. It is a project done with deep respect for the game design as autonomous aesthetic expression.

# V: Race

## 5.1 Introduction

In the words of Stuart Hall (1989), “representation implies the active world of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labor of making things mean” (64). In this chapter, that active representational labor is further explored by zooming into the landscape and asking who gets to inhabit it, or, in other words: what socio-cultural ideologies are conveyed through the visualization of race in *TloZ: BotW*? While the first chapter found that between Link and the landscape exists an ideology of dominance, this chapter builds onto its intersection with the representation of race and the histories of imagined notions of the ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient’. Simultaneously, the observed counter-ideology of ‘Japaneseness’ will be traced for how it runs throughout the race relations, and what this signifies within the context of the Japanese cultural dreamwork.

## 5.2 Occidental Hegemony

On surface, the land of Hyrule is a rich space filled with different cultures, architectures and beings to discover. There are four non-humanoid races, based on elemental essences: the aquatic Zora, volcano-dwelling Goron, avian Rito and forest spirit Korok. Additionally, there are three humanoid races based on broad ethnic stereotypes: the Anglo-medieval Hylians, the Oriental Gerudo and the Japanese Sheikah. Amongst- and within them, the designers clearly intended to represent a diversity of body size and phenotype. This ideological dream of plurality can be discerned from a major sidequest wherein the player is asked to find people from all races whose name ends in -son, eventually filling a the newly established ‘Tarrey Town’ with a diverse group of Hyruleans, some of whom even intermarry. Behind these attempts at plurality, however, lies a Hyrule that remains mostly segregated into its seven distinct races.

The understanding of race as a social category is inherently tied up with identity construction. Yegenoglu observes that the modern notion of the subject, the individual ego ‘I’, hinges upon the assumption of total autonomy, which in turn gives the subject its universal status (2009, 5). This rings especially true for open world videogames like *BotW*, where Link’s body serves as a vessel that grants the player total autonomous freedom. Yegenoglu continues, “this universal status is produced in a complex discursive strategy. The construction of the subject requires another term from which the subject distinguishes itself” (ibid). In this structure, that which is marked as ‘Other’ is attributed the

opposite characteristics of the subject in a binary relation. In videogames, the races tend to be specific, easily-recognizable constructions based upon essentialist and exoticized elements that renders them Other (Monson 2012, 49). *BotW*'s races are based on broad racial- and elemental stereotypes, their design drawing upon real-world imageries and architectures like Native American dress, Art Nouveau jewelry and Gaudian architecture in order to enhance the sense of the 'exotic'. They passively await Link's 'discovery' of their cultures, shaping his identity as the game's autonomous 'I' by contrast.

On the surface of the representation, the power balance in the world of *BotW* favors the Hylians, a race whose characteristics correspond most closely to that of Anglo-medieval farming folk as seen from their tunics, belts and leather boots and their farming villages where they labor as fishers, farmers and artisans. They are considered the divine race of Hyrule, chosen by and named for the goddess Hylia. The protagonists of the franchise, Zelda and Link, reincarnate time and again into the Hylian race, and for this reason it is always a Hylian family who rules the kingdom. Their culture is implied to be hegemonic within Hyrule, as their architecture and language are the only ones to spread beyond their immediate biome.<sup>44</sup> Their language is the *lingua franca* and key words resemble the English language: Hyrule for example denotes 'high rule', further evidence of their hegemony. The other races echo this power structure, with the local chief leaders answering to the Hylian royal family.



Figure 5.1. The Hylian court with king Rhoam Bosphoramus. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

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<sup>44</sup> The compendium book *Creating a Champion* (2018) notes that all kinds of vestiges throughout Hyrule are classified as ancient Hylian cultural relics (412).

While *BotW* is the first Zelda game to render a plurality of skin colors within its races, the significant Hylians, Zelda and Link, remain Caucasian characters with anglophone names even in the Japanese version. The franchise's core narrative draws upon Anglo-medieval iconography: the sword-wielding knight, the Rapunzel-like princess, a castle tower serving as her prison. Notably, the majority of dark-skinned Hylians are centered around Lurelin village, the town considered the least integral to the game. From these instances it can be concluded that the Hylians are to be read as analogous to the 'West'. They are a representation of Occidentalism, which Miyake defines as, "a cumulative constellation of discourses, emotions, practices, and institutions based upon the idea of the so-called 'West'" (2015, 95). The notion of the 'West', as opposed by the Othered 'Rest', has been "one of the most effective in inscribing the whole world and humanity along hierarchic and fluid lines of inclusion and exclusion" (ibid). Considering the Hylian hegemony, this is also the case in Hyrule.

On the narrative level, *BotW* revolves around the story of an apocalypse. A hundred years before the events of the game, the demon king Ganon wiped out civilization, turning Hyrule into wilderness. In the game's present timeline, survivors from the seven races set out into Hyrule for trade and communication, being careful not to get caught by Ganon's free-roaming monsters. On the visual level, however, while the other races have a few token travelers, it is only the Hylians that can be found abundantly on the roads, camping in the bushes and sleeping in the stables. They are granted a spatial privilege the other races are not. Moreover, observant play leads to the conclusion that Hylians are the only race that can be found being ambushed by Ganon's monsters, the Bokoblin. While the Hylians need Link's saving from the immediate danger of these 'primitives', the other races are depicted as impotent in more stratified and essentialist ways. They demand Link's help in resolving internal and external pressures threatening the safety of their cities and people, often in the form of the Divine Beasts attacking them. These instances together draw up a particularly colonial image of wild savages attacking innocent whites and torturing 'exotic' natives unable to protect themselves. As was discussed in chapter 4, *BotW* can be read as analogous to a Manifest Destiny narrative where Link, a white Caucasian man, wakes up in *terra incognita* wilderness after having journeyed there from a technologically advanced society in order to submit the primitive creatures to his power and save the 'exotic' races and their princesses. On first impression, *BotW*'s racial dynamics thus suggest affinities with a power fantasy about Occidental hegemony, one that hinges upon a colonial logic of white man's burden.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hemmann (2017) has pointed out that *Twilight Princess* also holds up a colonial logic in which Ganondorf is codified as an abject bestiality. She argues that Ganon can be read as a site of resistance to Hyrule's imperial rule. *BotW*'s Calamity Ganon is not given any narrative complexity, but he is the reincarnation of all previous Ganons. He is similarly presented as an uncivilized bestiality that must be tamed, recalling historical colonial narratives.

### 5.3 The Oriental Other

The analysis of *BotW* as an Occidental and colonial power fantasy fits a pattern identified in both postcolonial game studies and by scholars of the fantasy genre. Monson argues that high fantasy narratives continually draw upon the iconography of an idealized medieval Europe to represent its benign hegemonic fantasy cultures, whilst Muslim and Jewish stereotypes are often employed for the malignant border races (Monson 2012, 54). That same pattern has long been a convention of the Zelda franchise. In *Ocarina of Time* (1998), the Gerudo were introduced as the principal enemy race, a fierce ‘savage’ people from arid southern lands, from whom the demon Ganon originated. The original Japanese version of *Ocarina of Time* featured the Gerudo’s symbol resembling the crescent moon of Islam and Arabic chanting (Lee 2014). Kimball notes that *Ocarina’s* representation of the Anglo-Christian Hylians at war with Middle Eastern-inspired Gerudo’s reinforces a colonial power fantasy, writing: “this ideology serves not only to utilize non-Western and Orient cultures as a visual shorthand for evilness or Otherness but to position Western European culture as that of a civilized savior, acting to perpetuate its own interests and ideologies” (2018, 10).

In the events of *BotW*, the Gerudo are no longer hostile. Rather, they are now a benign clan, an all-women militant race that recall the Amazonians, who are resentful towards Ganon.<sup>46</sup> On the aesthetic level however, there is a clear continuation from *Ocarina of Time’s* Ganon implied in the Gerudo’s large noses, red hair and bulky physiques. Moreover, at the time of writing, the recently



Figure 5.2. A clear stylistic continuation between *Ocarina of Time’s* Ganondorf (left) and *BotW’s* Gerudo princess Riju (right). Screenshot and digital illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.

released trailer for the sequel to *BotW* has revealed Link and Zelda approaching a monstrous mummified body with red hair and the mark of the Gerudo. It is therefore likely that the sequel will cast the Gerudo Ganon as its main enemy, retracting the Gerudo to their earlier demonic status. In *Reel Bad Arabs* (2003), Shaheen deconstructs the representation of the Arabian cultural Other, pointing to features such as the ‘hooked-nose’ Arab (175). Gerudo women boast many of these

<sup>46</sup> This history is recalled in *BotW* by Urbosa, a proud leader who expresses desire for revenge at her connection to Ganon: “It was written that Calamity Ganon once adopted the form of a Gerudo. And that... will make this victory all the more satisfying.”

characteristics: the hooked nose is their defining facial feature, the scantily-dressed belly-dancer outfits complete with golden jewelry their dress, and their town is a female-only space of secrecy that Link must sneak into.

In Gerudo town, the designers re-employ images drawn from the European 19<sup>th</sup> Century Oriental painting tradition, which imagines its Eastern towns along a very specific set of characteristics: a particular color palette of glittering golden sunlight against stone slabs and islamic tiles, Byzantine-like architecture with small windows, large entry halls littered with carpet and patterned cloth hung in the small alleyways to provide shade (fig. 5.3-5.12). People sit on the ground, some merchants, some just lounging. As Tromans writes, “[in Orientalist paintings], the figures would be shown doing ‘typical’ Oriental things, or rather *not* doing them, for typical Oriental pastimes were understood to be sitting around languorously.” (Tromans 2008, 157). Gerudo Town is littered with Gerudo whose bodies are positioned this way. Oriental figures in the paintings seem pre-occupied with hedonism: smoking, drinking, relaxing. Similarly, in *BotW*, Link can find a drunk Gerudo woman mumbling about her misfortunes in acquiring a man, whilst to the side women are lounging and gossiping.



Figure 5.3. The Princess Riju. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.4. Constant, Jean Joseph Benjamin. 1887. *La Emperatriz Theodora*. Oil on canvas. Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.



Figure 5.5. A drunk Gerudo sleeping, while others gossip in the back. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.5. Richter, Edouard Frederic Wilhelm. Unknown (before 1913). *Sheherazade*. Oil on canvas. Private collection.



Figure 5.7. A Gerudo lounging. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.8. Bonnat, Léon. 1870. *An Arab Sheik*. Oil on canvas. Baltimore: Walter Museum.



Figure 5.9. Link staring out over the Gerudo bazar. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.10. Bauernfeind, Gustav. 1890. *The Gate of the Great Umayyad Mosque, Damascus*. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

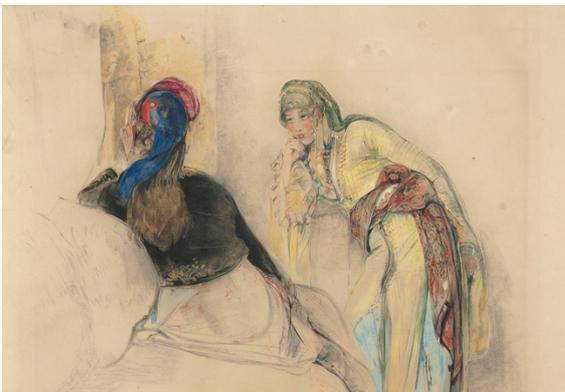


Figure 5.11. Lewis, John Frederick. 1841. *Two women in an interior, Bursa*. pencil, black and red chalk, watercolour and bodycolour on paper. London: Eyre & Hobhouse.



Figure 5.12. Gossiping Gerudo. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

The image production presented through the Gerudo suggests a reinforcement of Orientalism, the body of discourses pertaining to the imagined 'East'. Edward Said has maintained that the binary Manichean logic of 'East' and 'West', where one represents the civilized and the other must be saved or defeated, is a particular power fantasy that enabled the definition of Europe's Self by contrast (Said 1978, 31). The Gerudo are rendered Other through absolute difference. On the level of language, all humanoid races have their own. However, while the designers fully developed the Sheikah language to include an alphabet and hidden messages for players to decrypt, the Gerudo language does not extend beyond a few token words. One of the Gerudo merchants has been modelled to say '*willcome*', emphasizing how the hegemonic Hylian tongue is not native to them. On the level of religion, while no longer linked to Islamic imagery, the Gerudo are still construed as religiously deviant, following the religion of the Seven Goddesses as the only race in Hyrule. This deviancy is emphasized through the crumbled Goddess statue found in a back alley. Their Otherness is also expressed through their physique. The Gerudo are noticeably larger than the Hylians and Sheikah, and they are more physically mature. Their clothing is revealing, their poses and expressions daring; if Link spends the night at Gerudo Town's inn, moaning and giggling is heard during the cut scene, implying a Gerudo woman visits him. Despite still being a child, the Gerudo princess Riju is sexualized, gazing down at Link from her throne, one arm resting on her throne, her head cocked to the side and an eyebrow raised. Troublingly so, her outfit has even been modelled to allow peeping at her underwear.<sup>47</sup> Tromans notes that, "it was a European or Western assumption that the gaze must be free to wander anywhere there is work to be done" (ibid, 164). This is certainly true of the Gerudo. Theirs is a society structured upon secrecy and catering to the pleasure of forbidden peeping – in particular, white-coded peeping, as a Hylian woman named Traci can be seen peering down at the Gerudo from their palace wall and making observational notes.

The tense power dynamics surrounding gazing are explored are part of the game's main quest. In order to access the female-only Gerudo Town, the player must acquire a set of Gerudo clothes from a trans-reading Hylian who dresses as a Gerudo, so Link can pass as female. This recalls the tradition of the genderbending white male adventurer. Boone (1995) has analysed the writings of Occidental men who visited the Middle East as tourists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, noting that some of these experimented with masquerading, dressing up as Arabs and crossdressing. By framing the Orient as a space of inherent femininity, white 'adventuring' men such as T.E. Lawrence created a safe Othered space for experimentation with their gender that did not destabilize their sense of Self (Boone, p. 112). Said pointedly remarks, "it is the wish-fantasy of someone who would like to think that everything is possible, that one can go anywhere and be anything. T.E. Lawrence in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

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<sup>47</sup> The complexity of the character Riju is discussed in detail in chapter 6.

(1922) expresses this fantasy over and over, as he reminds us how he, a blond and blue-eyed Englishman, moved among the desert Arabs as if he were one of them. [...] Was there ever a native fooled by the blue or green-eyed Kims and Lawrences who passed among the inferior races as agent adventurers? I doubt it ...” (1978, 44) Indeed, many within Gerudo town hint at their awareness that Link is cross-dressing, but rather than taking offense the game models them to enable his trespassing by being only slightly amused. Ahmed argues: “whiteness can only be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space, and what they ‘can do’” (2007, 149). This logic extends to Link, who, by virtue of his white, savior role, can seemingly cross any boundary, cultural or spatial.



Figure 5.13 Link crossdressing as a Gerudo woman. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.14 T.E Lawrence disguised as a Syrian gipsy woman. Photograph in Lowell, Thomas. 1924. *With Lawrence in Arabia*. London: Hutchinson.

If *BotW*'s racial representation adheres to an Occidental power fantasy, this emerges not just from its white rulers and colonial savior, but also from its reliance on long-established Oriental bodies of imagery and practices re-employed in the Gerudo. As Miyake writes, Orientalism, “as a process of contrastive and explicit othering, has contributed in the modern age to shape, by binary opposition, Euro-American identity, enabling the very idea of ‘West’ to remain in many cases implicit or unmarked as the universal norm” (2015, 97).

#### 5.4 Japanese Orientalism

The binary Oriental-Occidental image production in *BotW* suggests the continuation of a discourse of empire that empowers an Occidental gaze and indicates Western-coded colonial ideology is woven into the ludic fabric of a Japanese production. This might be explained as another form of *mukokuseki*,

an assimilation to the universal 'neutral' gaze which is white and male in order to adhere to the global market. Yet such an interpretation would be reductive to the complexity and specificity of the Japanese context. As Martin eloquently puts it in his analysis of *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2009), "the cultural baggage of Western discourses of race and colonialism becomes interleaved with a Japanese social imaginary [...] the game tells us little about Africa and not much more about European colonialism. What *does* resonate throughout the game are aspects of the Japanese social imaginary in the first decade of the 21st century" (emphasis in original, Martin 2018, 570).

Said already noted himself that, "to speak of Orientalism is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise" (1978, 33).<sup>48</sup> What then of a Japanese enterprise? As touched on briefly before in chapter 3, Japan has historically struggled with what Hutchinson calls its 'Tōyō paradox'. On the one hand, Japan could identify with 'East/Orient/Asia' (tōyō) in contrast to the 'West' (seiyō), while on the other, it felt the anxiety of establishing itself as a distinct (island) identity unto itself (*shimaguni*) (Hutchinson 2016, 169). Moreover, Japan's experience with colonialism involved both the Western colonial presence in Asia and Japan, as well as the Japanese colonial presence in Asia (ibid). Japan can therefore be positioned simultaneously as a colonizer and as a 'colonized' nation (Okabe 2013, 55). As a result, the Japanese have historically not only distinguished their Self *vis-à-vis* the 'West', but also versus other Asian countries through their own particular Orientalism.<sup>49</sup>

Taking the *SoulCalibur* (Bandai Namco) franchise as her object of study, Hutchinson has analyzed how Japanese videogames inherit and reproduce these racial discourses. She writes: "characters in *SoulCalibur* play on the Meiji paradox of Japanese identity, with Japan trying to separate from mainland Asia whilst simultaneously drawing on Asian cultural heritage for a sense of non-Western Self" (2016, 168). She observes, for example, that all non-Japanese Asian characters in the game have red hair. She postulates this is a marker of pure Otherness that finds its roots in feudal Japan.<sup>50</sup> This is also the case for the Gerudo, whose red hair has been their defining feature since *Ocarina of Time* and links them back to the demon Ganon as a pure sense of Otherness. Moreover, in the *Creating a Champion* (2018, hereafter *CoC*) compendium book, lead artist Hirohito Shinoda writes that he drew on Indian and Chinese culture for the Gerudo design (137). This is significant, as it not only seems to draw attention away from the aforementioned Arabian-Oriental iconography, but also grounds the Gerudo as not *any* exotic, vaguely Middle-Eastern race, but a distinctly East Asian-coded Other through the visual referents to China and India.

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<sup>48</sup> The application of Said's framework to the Japanese context has been called into question by Eiji Oguma (2002), who criticizes Japanese scholars for applying it to the Japanese framework without taking the ambivalent double colonizer-colonized position into account.

<sup>49</sup> On Japanese Orientalism, see also: Ito (1991), Lamarre (2005) and Hutchinson (2011, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> The first European foreigners that arrived in Japan were the Dutch on Dejima, who were known for their ginger-blonde hair. They came to be known subsequently as the red-haired barbarians (*ketō*).

Whereas the Gerudo of previous *Zelda* games served as the Othered vessel in an Islamic-Christian-scented dichotomy, in *BotW* the Gerudo are constructed out of pieces drawn from both Western Oriental imaginaries and particular Japanese Oriental imaginaries of the non-Japanese Asian Other. Grounded within the historical complexities surrounding Japan's desire to at once align with and be separate from the West, the Gerudo thus emerge as something of an *über-Other*, an amalgamation of Orientalisms in which the Western and Japanese gaze unite.

## 5.5 Japanese Occidentalism

In the sections above, it has been argued that upon first glance, *BotW* seems to present an Occidental power fantasy posited upon a predictable Occident-Orient binary. Upon closer examination however, the discursive practice of representing the Gerudo as an amalgamation of Western and Japanese Orientalism reveals its constructing Japanese hand. This implies that in the Japanese social imaginary there lives the anxiety to be aligned with the 'Western' gaze. From this follows that, since the Occidental Hylians are equally part of the Japanese discursive representation, it warrants taking a closer look at them as well. Chen points out that in imagining the 'West', the 'East' is empowered to gaze back and to, "participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others" (2002, 4-5).

Re-assessing the Occidental Hylians beyond their hegemony, the sense emerges that the divine race is perhaps not all it proclaims to be. The physiognomy of certain Hylians is crude to the point of ridicule, such as the farm boy Manny who stands outside the inn in Hateno Village hoping to woo the local shop girl. His beady, too-close-together eyes and rounded face recall stereotypes of medieval smallfolk more than they do the idea of a divine race (fig. 5.15).<sup>51</sup> The Hylians also display racism and feelings of superiority. For instance, a Hylian farmer stops Link from entering Hateno until he realizes he too is a Hylian, noting, "*Hylians are generally good folk, so...*" (fig. 5.16). Within the Hylian village Hateno, a corrupted goddess statue can be found that allows manipulative Faustian deals to be made, implying Hateno's villagers have a particular greed to them. In the *CoC* compendium, it is moreover explicated how Hyrule came to its demise: a Hylian king of the past began to fear the technological prowess of the Sheikah, exiling them and ordering the abolishment of their research facilities (101). As a result, knowledge of the technology gradually faded to the point where, when threats of Ganon's return became apparent, the Hyruleans no longer knew how any of the technology worked. Because the knowledge was lost, Ganon was able to infect the Guardians and Divine Beasts

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<sup>51</sup> Throughout Hyrule, Hylians with warped physiognomy can be found. Observant fans have made it a sport to find, and share, the 'ugliest' they could find. See: [https://www.reddit.com/r/Breath\\_of\\_the\\_Wild/comments/5zxcvc/challenge\\_find\\_the\\_ugliest\\_npc\\_in\\_botw/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Breath_of_the_Wild/comments/5zxcvc/challenge_find_the_ugliest_npc_in_botw/)

easily and provoke mass extinction. It is in these particularities that a parody of the Occidental race via the 'indigenous creativity' of the Japanese construing hand might be detected.

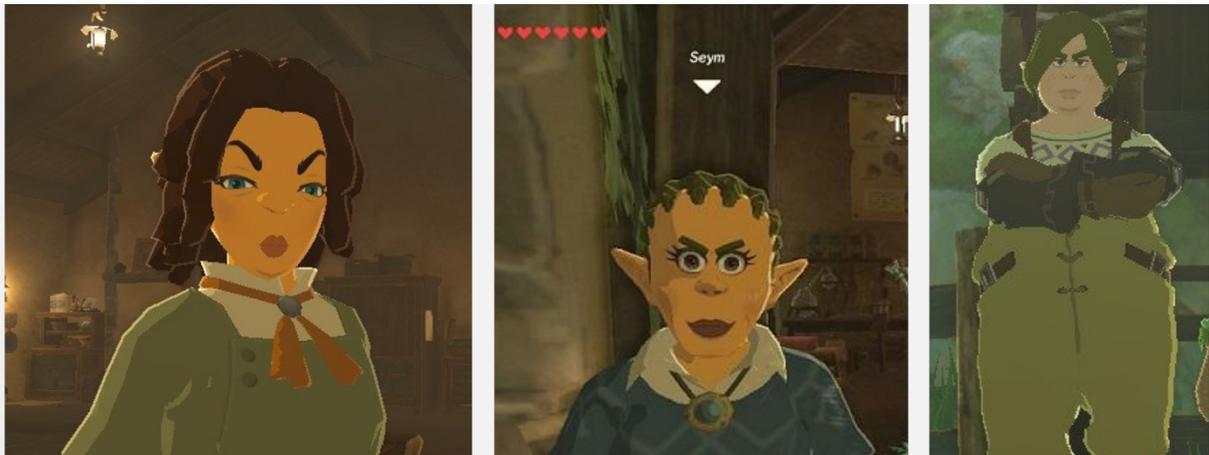


Figure 5.15. Three Hylians with crude-reading physiognomies. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.16. Racism against non-Hylians as displayed by the Hylian Thadd, who guards the entryway into Hateno Town. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

### The Japanese Self

Identification with the Hylians as the normative Self has been a staple of the Zelda franchise. While a subtle criticism of the Hylians can be detected in the instances above, it does not significantly challenge their noted hegemonic status. However, *BotW* is the first game to introduce a new humanoid race into its established East-West binary. As will be argue below, it is through the Sheikah that the game establishes its Japanese sense of Self, and it is here where the identity politics in which it traffics most clearly emerge.

While the Sheikah were mentioned in earlier games as a mysterious race that served as the right hand of the royal family, *BotW* is the first to flesh them out as a deeply sophisticated race that draws strongly upon traditional Japanese iconography. They wear robes kept together by belts knotted at waist, reminiscent of *kimono* garb. Their town, Kakariko, is made up of buildings in the *shinmei-zukuri* style, with paths marked by *torii* and *shimenawa* strings. The ancient Sheikah

technology too draws its inspiration from Japanese art history, specifically the *Jōmon* period of Japanese history (10,000 BCE), using the upside-down shape of the vases for the Guardians and shrines and the intricate rope design on the tech (fig. 5.17-18). Art director Takizawa says their use of *Jōmon* was because “it is relatively unknown to much of the world. It has a nuance of mystery and wonder that we found really appealing” (Nintendo 2017). Nicole Rousmanière, curator of Japanese Art at the British Museum, notes conversely that, “there has been a reanimation of the *Jōmon* identity as Japanese identity. These figures are booming” (Kleinman 2017). Here too, Takizawa’s commentary seeks to enhance the sense of uniqueness through the appropriation of Japanese art history, connecting heritage to Japanese identity.



Figure 5.17. Jōmon pottery dating from 3000-2000 BCE. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 5.18. Sheikah shrines and guardians, both based on upside down Jomon pottery. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo.

The *CoC* compendium notes that the Sheikah were once Hyrule’s lead scientists, assassins, and artists, before their grandeur led the greedy Hylian king to exile them (101). This implies not only the egocentrism of the Hylians, but also that while the Hylians derive their power passively from history and tradition, the Sheikah are powerful for their multitude of capabilities, as well as their loyalty. Most of the Sheikah obeyed the king, casting off their technology and turning to feudal farming life whilst secretly passing on their noble fighting techniques. Some, however, did not. The Sheikah find their counterpart in the Yiga clan, a shadow organization born out of rebel Sheikah that declared war on the Hylians after being exiled and joining Ganon’s cause. The Yiga evoke the *shinobi/ninja*

archetype, likely named for the *Iga* and *Kōga* clans.<sup>52</sup> They fight with sickles, teleport via hand mudras and are able to disguise themselves before attacking Link. The Sheikah outfit that Link can purchase in Kakariko evokes the *shinobi* style too, but on the whole, the Sheikah themselves rather recall the noble samurai archetype. Barrett points out that in the representation of archetypes in Japanese film, the samurai figure was marked by his honorable loyalty (1989, 34). This *bushidō* mindset can, for example, be observed in the Sheikah Steen and Olkin, who teach Link their noble fighting techniques, which contrast the guerilla tactics of the Yiga ninjas.



Figure 5.19. A Yiga warrior with sickle. Courtesy of Nintendo.

In the current timeline, Kakariko Village is led by the elder Impa, who once served as the royal advisor. Link is told to find her after he wakes from slumber, and she acts as the spiritual guide on his main quest. She instructs Link to find her sister Purah in the Hylian town Hateno, where Link can receive additional Sheikah weapons and upgrades to his Sheikah Slate, a device that grants Link further power and guidance. Ancient Sheikah technology, based on *Jōmon* iconography, litters the land in the form of the living- and dead guardians, the towers and the shrines. Within the shrines, Link finds ancient mummified Sheikah monks enshrined in stasis while waiting for his return. They oversee his trials and reward him magical substance which, when praying to the Goddess Hylia, can be exchanged for heart- or stamina containers, before turning to dust. These monks visually reference the practice of *Sokushinbutsu* (即身仏)<sup>53</sup>, an ancient Buddhist practice of self-mummification whereby the monks slowly starve themselves in such a way that their body does not decay (fig. 5.19-20). Presumably, these monks have waited for Link's reincarnation for up to 100.000 years.

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<sup>52</sup> While the Yiga are likely named after the Iga clan, the Yiga's leader is called 'Kohga'. The Iga and Koga clan were two of Japan's most well-known *shinobi* warriors. Interestingly, just like the Sheikah and Yiga, the Iga and Koga were once allied, before a war drove them apart. See: Souyri (2010) .

<sup>53</sup> The *Sokushinbutsu* tradition developed in medieval Japan. The process involves a monk slowly starving himself, first eliminating all his fat before reducing liquid intake to shrink the organs. The monks would die in meditative chanting, their body becoming naturally preserved as a mummy with skin and teeth intact without decay. Many Buddhist *Sokushinbutsu* mummies have been found in northern Japan and estimated to be centuries old. See also: <http://www.dainichibou.or.jp/en/>

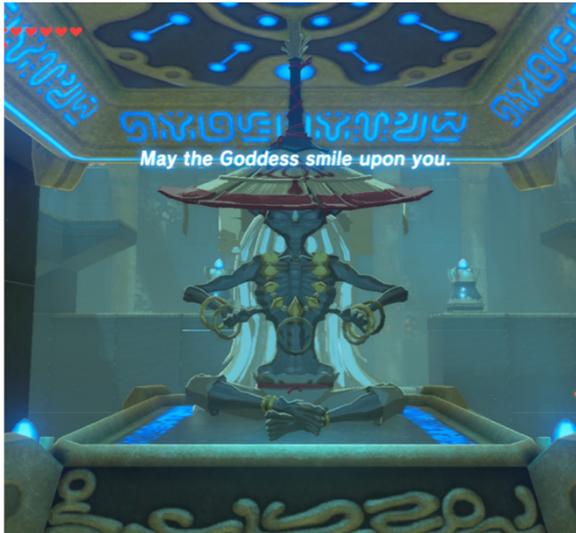


Figure 5.20. A Sheikah Monk awaiting Link's return. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 5.21. The *sokushinbutsu* monk Shinnyokai-shoni (1687-1783) at Dainichibou Temple. Courtesy of <http://www.dainichibou.or.jp/>

The Sheikah evoke two types of Japanese Orientalism: on the one hand, they are the quintessence of nostalgic traditional Japanese culture, while on the other they evoke Techno Orientalism (Ueno 1999) through their technological prowess. As a Japanese representation, they thus play into a self-Orientalizing discourse. While these stereotypes cater to exoticizing fantasies, Miyake argues that, “this kind of cultural self-orientalism [...] would not have been possible without its own strategic advantages” (2015, 102). Indeed, the Hylians and Sheikah are placed in a particular power position together: they are linked in bringing forth the hero, and set apart from the Other races. From a cartographic point, this division is particularly striking: all the non-Hylian/Sheikah towns have no names beyond stating the race to which it belongs (‘Rito village’, ‘Goron City’, ‘Gerudo Town’, ‘Korok Forest’, ‘Zora’s Domain’), whilst the Hylian and Sheikah have multiple towns, all of which have poetic names that they gave presumably gave to themselves (‘Lurelin Village’, ‘Kakariko Village’, ‘Hateno Town’). This suggests their personal autonomy, a sense of Selfhood. It is also a Sheikah town first and a Hylian town second that the player is told to visit within the tutorial phase before true open exploration begins. As such, Hylians and Sheikah can be considered two forms of a conjoined Hyrulean Self. Considering their real-world cultural counterparts, there is thus a convergence implied between Japan and West that politically undergirds the representation.

## 5.6 Japan & its Others

The conjoined Western-Japanese sense of Self is supported by a sense of Otherness that is a particular Japanese construction. Creighton analyses Japanese representation of its Other through the lens of the *gaijin* (‘outside person’), the Japanese concept of foreigner which, she argues, is to be

understood as a *white* foreigner. She notes that linguistic code distinctions occur for black and non-Japanese Asians (*'gaikokujin'*), as they are conceptualized differently from white foreigners within the social imaginary of the Japanese dreamwork. She writes, "Japanese renderings of *gaijin* are occidentalisms that stand opposed to Japanese orientalisms about themselves [...], highlighting contrasting statements about the specialness of being Japanese like their uniqueness and cultural homogeneity" (1995, 137). The *gaikokujin*, the non-white Other, reinforces the Japanese uniqueness in relation to them. Ohnuki-Tierney argues further that because for the Japanese foreigners have always been equated with the outside, they have historically been represented as equivalent to deities from whom both blessings and destruction flow. She writes, "for centuries Japan looked to China for this role. However, from the Meiji Era (1868 – 1912) on, the role of the strangers/outside shifted to white Westerners, transforming the Chinese along with the other Asians into marginals who were neither insiders nor outsiders" (1987, 147) This very narrative undergirds the triangle construction of the Japanese Sheikah, the *gaijin* goddess-chosen Hylians whose foolery of stripping the Sheikah of their power led to the demise of Hyrule, and the *Gaikokujin* Gerudo, who are a Chinese-Indian-middle Eastern amalgamation of Asian combined Otherness from whom the great evil Ganon originally stemmed.

Within this conjoined Self exists a similar tension as was explored in the previous chapter. Like the previously discussed Japanese signifiers that subvert Link's imperial power over space, here again that which reads as Japanese is hierarchically favored. The world is suggested as an Occidental hegemony, but it is equally a world wherein the 'Occident' repressing a technologically powerful race, a metaphor for Japan, leads to the total demise of the world. The only way to save it is by having Link be fully dependent upon that which is visually coded as 'Japanese': their people, their technology, their spirituality and their aesthetics. This suggests not only a racial commentary but a process of bringing the Occident under control by the indigenous constructing hand of the Japanese designers. Through the Sheikah, 'Japan' is represented (and represents itself) as culturally unique in a binary opposition to the Othered Asian-Oriental Gerudo. It also represents itself as both aligned with and independent of the Occidental Hylians. Iwabuchi notes, "while Japan's construction of its national identity through an unambiguous comparison of itself with 'the West' is a historically embedded project, Japan's modern national identity has, I would argue, always been imagined in an asymmetrical totalizing triad between 'Asia', 'the West' and 'Japan.'" (2002, 7). These representations of *gaijin* and *gaikokujin*, of Occidental and Oriental, end up reaffirming Japanese merit and centrality.

## 5.7 Conclusion

Returning to the narratives and image-productions of videogames as part of the Hallelu 'dream life' of culture, it has been suggested that *Breath of the Wild* dreams the ideological dream of Japanese resistance to Occidental hegemonic dominance and superiority through appropriation and remixing of particular conventions of representation and image traditions. Herein, whatever image traditions it re-employs are assumed to be, as Linda Hutcheon maintains, conscious and potentially complicitous critiques. On the surface, the imperial logic of an Occidental hegemony is maintained within the game, and visually, the Lawrencian fantasy of the Occidental explorer of the Orient is played out. At the same time, however, the Occidental race is parodied and the explorer revealed to be utterly dependent upon the Japanese race that enables him. It is herein striking that while Link receives particular spatial privilege due to his status as white savior, the one other figure that appears everywhere throughout the world is Pikango, the Sheikah painter mentioned in chapter 4 (fig. 5.21). In other words, the Japanese race escapes from, aligns with and receives the same privileges as the Occidental one.

The Oriental race moreover not only invokes the traditional Western invention of the Orient, but is mixed with particular Japanese forms of Orientalism. This suggests the game labors to shape a conjoined Western-Japanese sense of Self in relation to a particular set of exotic Others. This construction at once reveals the anxieties on the part of the indigenous creators to align themselves with the West, yet it also labors to resist colonial subjugation and promote Japanese superiority. It does so aesthetically through inclusion of Japanese art history, ranging from ancient Jōmon to contemporary Ghibli. The power dynamics also become clear from the other Japanese-signifying race, the Korok. Unlike the other elemental races, the Korok are not under threat by Ganon and rather than awaiting Link's saving, like the Sheikah, they await him only to grant him further power by giving him back the Master Sword. As such, this simultaneously reinforces that Shinto elements cannot be endangered within the colonial logic of *BotW*, and that Occident is dependent upon Japan for its power.



Figure 5.22. Pikango, the other wanderer with gazing- and spatial privileges. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

# VI: Gender

## 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have traced the Japanese dream of equality, independency and superiority *vis-à-vis* its racial Others within the cultural mythmaking of *BotW*. In the final content chapter, these findings are deepened by the analysis of gender, which will be considered as a site where not only cultural dreams emerge, but in particular also tensions come to the surface, as the representations seek to marry fourth wave feminist ideology with heteronormative Japanese discourses and *anime*-specific gender tropes. After having analyzed the power positions of the gazer- and that which is consumed and dominated by that gaze within Hyrule's landscape and the races that populate it, this chapter zooms in on the gendered gaze, probing not only who is gazed at in which way, but also what type of gaze the game renders normative. It asks: what socio-cultural ideologies are conveyed through the visualization of gender in *Breath of the Wild*?

Within the axes of identity and representation, the locus of gender has received by- and large the most scrutiny from videogame scholars, journalists and fans. This is perhaps unsurprising as, "gender and sexuality constitute a society's innermost core of self-identity and hold a defining power over it" (Croissant et al 2008, 1). Challenges to the status quo in this realm are keenly felt, as shows from the 2014 'Gamergate' controversy in which several North American female game makers and critics were severely harassed.<sup>54</sup> Amongst them was the feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, who became a target after she began publishing a series of videos online in which she analysed common female tropes and stereotypes in videogames. Sarkeesian was by no means the first to dabble in gender based videogame research, just one of the first to do it in a popular form, building on scholarly research that had already found that women have always been severely underrepresented in videogames (Glaubke et al 2001, Williams et al. 2009, Lynch et al. 2016) and that if they *are* present, they are rarely the playable characters (Ivory 2006) and usually there for voyeuristic consumption (Martins et al. 2009, Pulos et al. 2015). Despite the research, a mob of mostly anonymous gamers perceived the critiques by feminist and 'social-justice' minded ideologies to be an unjust attack on 'their' games. The Gamergate controversy is often cited as part of the internet culture wars (Nagle 2017), but it should also be seen as emblematic of feminism's fourth wave, spearheaded by the slogan 'representation matters' (Harvey 2019, 20-22). In the wake of the movement's spread into popular discourse, popular

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<sup>54</sup> for more on GamerGate and its aftermath, see Chess & Shaw, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2016; Massanari 2017.

media have been forced to re-examine their gender ideologies, as there is now a significant public who scrutinises them in return (Banet-Weiser 2018, 1).<sup>55</sup>

While Japan cannot be conflated with these Western culture wars, it can be assumed that due to the transnational flows of culture and the enduring dependency on the Western markets, Japan's games industry certainly cannot escape having to engage with them. In the case of the Zelda franchise, traditionally posited on the save-the-princess trope that Sarkeesian (Feminist Frequency 2013) called out for its sexism, this has led to overhauls in *BotW* that highlights points of tension between the old and the new. For example, the Gerudo clan were previously rendered as Oriental goons in belly dancer outfits. *BotW*'s recreates them as closer to proud and fierce Amazonian warriors, which certainly may read as a feminist inflection. This intent however clashes with their design's continued reliance on Oriental stereotypes, at whose core lies a traditional understanding of femininity as passive and sexually available to the heteronormative male gaze. As such, the Gerudo all wear heels, even those purportedly part of the army fighting in the desert. Their armour, moreover, is made up of loose silk pants and a cropped breast plating, highlighting their breasts and leaving their bodies open to harm in battle. The emergent feminist gender discourse clashes here with the residual discourses of the representation's convention, highlighting points of tension in the gaze.

## 6.2 The princess

### 6.2.1. The post-modern princess

When Fuller & Jenkins (1994) analysed how Nintendo's playable landscapes recall colonial discourses, they also pointed out how colonial writing often featured a princess that is in need of saving. They concluded that the rescue plot is in reality simply a justification for continued exploration and violence to the land. This has always been true for the Zelda franchise, which, despite its name, has seen very little of princess Zelda's 'legend': traditionally, her story has revolved around being captured and stuck away to serve as Link's motivating vehicle. In the wake of fourth wave feminism, this convention has become problematic for those in the business of telling stories about princesses, and has led to what Stover calls 'the postmodern princess'. "Like Elsa, Merida and Moana", Stover writes, "the postmodern princess embodies ideals of feminism while representing the pressures and entrapment of pre-feminist culture [...] while Sleeping Beauty waited in the castle for a handsome prince to save

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<sup>55</sup> Havas et al. (2020) argue that female-centred serial programming with a rhetoric of progressive gender politics is a popular trend of Anglo-American television in the 2010s, tapping into a Zeitgeist of popular feminism. A relevant example in the context of the princess genre is Dreamwork's reboot *She Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018) in which stereotypically heteronormative white characters from a 1980s show are reimagined as queer, and racially and bodily diverse.

her, the postmodern princess rejects suitors in favor of her personal ambitions” (2013, 13). The postmodern princess as such becomes a criticism of her earlier type.

*BotW*'s Zelda adheres to this description. While locked up in the present timeline, in-game memories show that Zelda was deeply uncomfortable with her identity as a princess, much preferring to become a Sheikah technologist. Her father, the king, however demanded she focus on unlocking her godly powers by performing priestess-duties under the protection of Link, to which she eventually begrudgingly complied. On first glance, Zelda reads like a subversion of her tradition, rejecting her assigned role as princess, her father and Link – all symbols of patriarchy. Strikingly, Ganon does not capture Zelda in *BotW*. Instead, she captures him, doing so to save Link as he lays dying before her. In the opening image of the game, Link wakes up from his slumber 100 years after that event. The image visually references *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*, implying Link is the princess here, while Zelda is the prince who wakes him up through the power of her voice (6.1-2).



Figure 6.1. Snow White waiting to be woken. Courtesy of Disney.



Figure 6.2. Link waiting to be woken. Courtesy of Nintendo.

Despite the changes, Zelda remains largely absent within the game, which fits Goldberg et al.'s (2015) observation that female characters in videogames are characterized by inaction in order to highlight male strength and power by contrast. Zelda's power is narratively implied but only glimpsed once. Instead, what we see are images of the princess submitting to her duties, eventually changing from a comfortable pair of pants (a first in the franchise) to a restrictive strapless white priestess' dress designed to emphasize virginal and virtuous femininity, linking her to the 'praying *bishojo*' anime trope (fig. 6.3-6.5). Power means something entirely different for Link and Zelda's relation to space as well: whereas for the princess attaining power means becoming locked up in a castle, for Link it means the world begins to open up. What is more, after Ganon is defeated, Zelda mentions she has lost her power once more. Returned to the world, she regains movability but at the immediate cost of being powerless and in need of Link's companionship again. This ultimate dependency is visually expressed in a memory where Zelda is attacked by bandits and stares up helplessly and wide-eyed at Link, reifying her need to be saved despite it all (fig. 6.6). As such, Zelda's

representation emerges as a tense site between empowered feminist values and traditional tropes enabling patriarchal values surrounding heroic masculinity.



Figure 6.3. The princess as priestess. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 6.4. *Kamikaze Kaitou Jeanne*. Animation still. Courtesy of TOEI animation.



Figure 6.5. *Sword Art Online*. Animation still. Courtesy of A-1 Pictures.



Figure 6.6. Link saving Princess Zelda. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

## 6.2.2 The princess triangle

Zelda is not the only princess that *BotW* introduces (fig. 6.7). The Gerudo clan are ruled by princess Riju in the present timeline, while the aquatic Zora clan were ruled by princess Mipha before the Calamity struck. Riju is the youngest ruler in Hyrule, though her exact age is hard to determine. Consider fig. 6.8: on the one hand, she has a childlike physique compared to mature Gerudo, owns a large collection of plushies and is endearingly clumsy. On the other hand, she reads as sexually mature due to her daring gaze and skimpy outfit, which one can peep under if the camera is angled right. Despite having the Gerudo army at her disposal, Riju needs Link to save her people from the Ganon-infected Divine Beast that rampages outside her city. The Zora's princess Mipha was one of the Champions, their healer, who ruled the Divine Beast Vah Ruta, where she was killed during Ganon's invasion. Despite being significantly older than Riju, Mipha is rendered sexually innocent: her arc revolves around her unrequited love for Link. While she is childish in her love, Mipha is mature in her body, which, despite being a hybrid fish-humanoid, still displays traditional markers of human womanhood through rounded breasts and a v-slit crotch. While Mipha has perished in the present timeline, Link still needs to save her, as her soul is stuck in the Divine Beast. Both seem on first glance to be empowered women, yet like Zelda, are rendered helpless to enable Link's saviorism.



Figure 6.7. The three princesses Riju, Zelda and Mipha. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo.

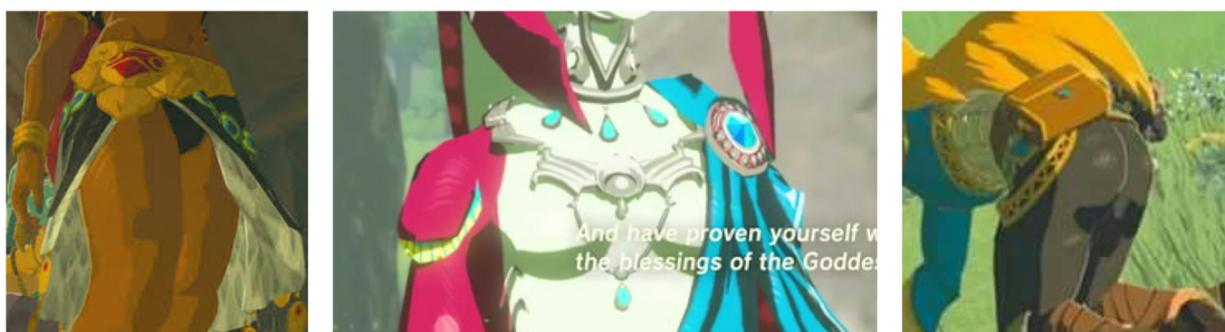


Figure 6.8. The princesses' designs emphasize their consumable femininity through curves and panty shots. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo.

The three princesses of *BotW* are construed out of tropes derived from the *anime* media mix, which Azuma (2009) has likened to a database of feminine archetypes of the *bishojo*, the beautiful

anime girl.<sup>56</sup> Zelda follows a *'tsundere'* arc, a trope where a character goes from cold to eventually allowing cute behavior (fig. 6.9-10). Riju similarly goes from powerful position - sexually charged gazing down at Link – to showing her cute and clumsy side (fig. 6.11-12). Mipha expresses her affection to Link at one point by averting her eyes, before suddenly gazing at him determinedly and declaring she will protect him (fig. 6.9-10). These expressions all serve to produce the affect called *'moe'* in the player, which can be described as a powerful feeling of endearment for their *'kawaii'* ('cute') girl, and by extend, a desire to protect them (Galbraith 2019, 76). Lamarre (2006) argues that the *anime* image operates via a “distributive visual function” (364), meaning that fans are less interested in narrative complexity, but rather desire to compulsively repeat the excitement they feel when consuming girls construed out of database tropes of specific kinds of skirts, breasts hair, weapons, expressions and behaviors. Lamarre concludes, “what powers such repetition is an élan for the image that allows attention to, and interest in, new images—that is, *moe*” (380). Eventually, this may lead fans to declare a girl their *'waifu'* - their virtual wife (Galbraith 2019, 121).<sup>57</sup>



Figure 6.9. Zelda blushing innocently. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 6.10. Manaria Friends. Animation still. Courtesy of CygamesPictures.



Figure 6.11. Riju gazing amusedly. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 6.12. Food Wars! Shokugeki no Soma. Animation still. Courtesy of Dentsu.

<sup>56</sup> Azuma draws on complex post-structural thesis that is outside the scope of the present project. However, his main premise is that the *otaku* approaches the *anime*, and by extend, the world, not as structured out of the logic of narratives but rather as a large non-narrative database structure from which derivative simulacra continuously flow (2009). As such, the *otaku* can accept that characters appear across a universe of media without narrative logic or consistency, and that their likeness might appear as entirely new characters in different media projects, as for example is the case with many of the characters from Studio Clamp and Studio Ghibli.

<sup>57</sup> It is a common practice amongst dedicated fans to declare a digital *anime* girl their *'wife'*. Less common but also present is the organizing of weddings, honeymoons, and petitions for legal recognition of such unions (Katayama 2009, Condry 2013).



Figure 6.13. Mipha looking up from under her eyelids. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 6.14. *To Love Ru*. Animation still. Courtesy of Geneon Universal Entertainment.



Figure 6.15. Paya looking embarrassed. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 6.16. How not to summon a demon. Animation Still. Courtesy of Tezuka productions.

Daniel Black notes that the construction of *bishojo* is one that hinges on a fetishized tension between innocence and sexuality (2012, 219). While Riju has a childlike body and behaves clumsily, she holds a sexual gaze and wears a peep-able outfit; Mipha is sweet and naïve yet her fish-body is marked by her breasts; Zelda at one points jumps excitedly at a frog in childlike innocence, leading to an image that has gone viral amongst fans, showing Zelda’s sprawled body with emphasized round buttocks on skin tight pants (fig. 6.17). Mulvey notes that the displayed woman on the screen functions on two levels: “as erotic subject for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (1975, 11-12). Indeed – as Zelda bends over, the gamer can gingerly gaze along over Link’s shoulder at Zelda’s sprawled body. The girls oscillate between hyper innocence and sexual both within their design and amongst each other, as they are in relation to one another as the ‘Three Faces of Eve’, a gender trope which essentializes femininity into three categories: the innocent (Mipha), the virtuous (Zelda) and the sexual (Riju). They are thus not marked not by a sense of self, but by how they are perceived within the heteronormative apparatus by the male gaze which, as Berger notes, defines the girls’ essence by “what can and cannot be done to her” (1973, 51). In other words, what type of ‘wife’ they will make.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> See for example the following forum that posts a poll to decide which of the women of *BotW* is their ‘*waifu*’: <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/189707-the-legend-of-zelda-breath-of-the-wild/75127614>



Figure 6.17. Zelda bending over while Link gazes over her body. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo.

While the narrative of *BotW* posits the princesses as empowered, it clashes with their reliance on the database of *bishojo* conventions, which traffic in conservative gender values based on the *moe* affect of the *kawaii* aesthetic that imagines *anime* girls as idealized simulacra based on tropes oscillating between impossible levels of innocence while simultaneously sexually objectified ‘wife material’. To rephrase, the discourse at the heart of the media mix sees the *anime* woman as fetish, wholly construed in terms of productivity and the potency of her matter (Lamarre 2006, 384). However, it must also be noted that a fourth princess figure exists: the Sheikah girl Paya is technically not a princess, but she is the grand-daughter of Impa, the Sheikah ruler (fig. 6.18). While the three princesses are construed in relation to one another, Paya is positioned as a unique entity onto herself.

Her design is based on *bishojo* tropes surrounding the shrine maiden and *yamato nadeshiko* (‘Japanese carnation’), a floral metaphor denoting an idealized Japanese woman that is shy and demure (Goldberg et al. 2015, 46) (fig. 6.16).<sup>59</sup> As chapter 5 found, the Sheikah, as signifiers for ‘Japaneseness’, hold a unique position within *BotW*’s



Figure 6.18. Paya. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

<sup>59</sup> See also: [https://allthetropes.fandom.com/wiki/Yamato\\_Nadeshiko](https://allthetropes.fandom.com/wiki/Yamato_Nadeshiko)

power matrix. This is true for Paya as well. While the three princesses are all under direct threat from Ganon – Riju’s city, Mipha’s soul and Zelda’s body all await release from his torment -, Paya is never directly threatened by Ganon. Her heirloom is at one point stolen by the Yiga clan, but this is a minor subplot that is not designed to facilitate Link’s conquest. Paya’s body is moreover treated differently: while she is subjected to sexual innuendos - her grandmother jokes with Link that Paya’s name derives from a papaya-shaped mark on her butt-cheek -, Paya’s visual design does not allow the gaze to travel over her body in the way that it is allowed to do over the princesses (fig. 6.15). Much like the other ‘Japanese’ signifying elements within *BotW*, the ‘Japanese’ princess, while still objectified, is afforded a unique power position.

### 5.3 The male gaze - masculinity and queer parody

#### 5.3.1 The Princess & The Otaku

The commodification of femininity via *moe* tropes enables a traditional heteronormative patriarchal gaze, which is unsurprising within both the Japanese media mix and the larger discourse of empire that the previous chapters have threaded. However, the princesses can also be approached as a site from which complex Japanese anxieties pertaining to masculinity and the politics of gazing emerge. Who, after all, is allowed to consume them? Having extensively discussed the spatial, racial and gendered objects consumed by the dominating gaze, this thesis is left with the question how this gaze itself is discursively constructed as normative onto Link’s body - and which types of gazing must be abjected by extend.

Black argues that the production of digital femininity within Japan’s media mix must be understood in relation to the particular male gaze that it serves – that of the *otaku*, the consumer of *anime* (2012, 219). While *otaku* is now used a general term for anime fans, it is wrapped up in specifically Japanese anxieties surrounding masculinity. Galbraith (2019) traces the waves of moral panic surrounding the figure since its emergence in the 70s, arguing that in Japanese media discourses, for decades *otaku* were portrayed as at best young men refusing to grow up, and at worse perverts who were potentially predators and pedophiles.<sup>60</sup> He argues that the politics of *moe* must be understood as nestled in the crisis of hegemony in Japan in the 1990s, considered to be Japan’s lost decade due to the economic crisis, where a large number of men were perceived as failures within the apparatus of hegemonic masculinity due to their inability to transition from good schools to good jobs and start families (2009, 123). Facing this “love gap”, they began to imagine and create

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<sup>60</sup> This was exacerbated by the gruesome murder of four young girls in 1989 by a man whose home was found littered with stashes of slasher films. Galbraith points out that while the man owned some adult *anime* as well, the media immediately painted him an *otaku* whose mind had become warped through his attraction to *anime*’s young girls (2019 67-69).

alternatives in the form of virtual worlds, friends and lovers (Allison 2006, 201). This continued into the 2000s, when concerns over declining marriage and fertility rates in Japan began to increase and *otaku* were once more vilified as failures because they did not comply to reproductive heterosexuality (Galbraith 70). Moreover, as *anime* began to be exported, fears arose that this would lead to impressions of Japan as weird and perverted (171). Galbraith concludes that in the wake of the Cool Japan policies, the *otaku* figure has now been transformed into a cleaner and somewhat loveable version that is as much a part of ‘Japan’ as other stereotypes like the geisha and samurai (fig. 6.20). However, seen from recent anxious reports about the *hikikomori* recluse (Butet-Roch 2018, McKirdy 2019, Lam 2020), its shadow twin still haunts it today.<sup>61</sup>



Figure 6.19. Bozai. Digital illustration. Courtesy of Nintendo.



Figure 6.20. Typical representation of *otaku*. *Otaku no Video*. Animation still. Courtesy of Youmex.

In *BotW*, the player encounters an *otaku* figure named Bozai outside the gates of Gerudo town (fig. 6.19). Addressing him in female garb, Bozai begins to hit on Link, with parts of his inner dialogue being shown (“*this is a golden chance to woo...*”). He tells him about the legend of a forgotten eight heroine statue he would love to gaze at, noting, “*make sure at least the statue’s upper half is visible, OK?*”. His desire for gazing is consistently emphasized by both his quest as well as his dialogue: “*At the very least, let me gaze after you until you disappear from my vision!*” / “*I want to burn the image of your boot-loving self into my retinas!*”. Graffeo writes that, “*otaku*, on the one hand, fail to engage adequately with social norms and obligations, and lack the skills required to succeed financially or sexually. On the other hand, they display an excessiveness (of emotion, of enthusiasm, or of body)

<sup>61</sup> *Hikikomori* are reclusive Japanese adolescents and adults who have withdrawn from society and stay isolated within their homes for long periods of time. About a million Japanese are estimated to live this way, and coincide with the *otaku* identity in their usual heightened interest in *anime*. They are therefore a similar source of anxiety because of their failure to participate within reproductive heteronormativity (Rizzo 2016).

that is positioned as off-putting or inappropriate” (2015, 25). Bozai’s excessive and inappropriate desire for gazing reads as the male gaze made hyperbolically explicit - but unlike Link, Bozai is denied to actually perform it successfully. The discomfort of his behavior is lifted through Link’s deadpan responses, cutting him short and rendering him feeble. It allows the player to laugh at Bozai, who is surely a failure.<sup>62</sup> In comparison to Bozai’s pathetic deficiency, the gaze of Link and the player, who will enter Gerudo Town moments after interacting with Bozai, emerges as appropriate and normative by comparison.

### 5.3.2 Gender panic

Kinsella points out that *otaku panic* constitutes a form of gender panic: “*otaku* appear as a queer existence [...] no longer embedded, they have no fixed identities, no fixed gender roles, no fixed sexuality” (1998, 137). A major source of anxiety is that these are men who, in engaging with *bishojo* culture so much, can no longer be recognized as men within the confined understanding of what constitutes masculinity, and instead might collapse into femininity.<sup>63</sup> This anxiety is ludically simulated in *BotW*, when Link’s body fluidly morphs into a girl as he dons the Gerudo garb (fig. 6.21). As a female, Link becomes the subject of Bozai’s advances, playing into both homosexual- and *otaku* panic which can be immediately resolved through humorous abjection. Notably, the phenomenon of forcing a male character to cross-dress occurs in multiple Japanese videogames, like *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix

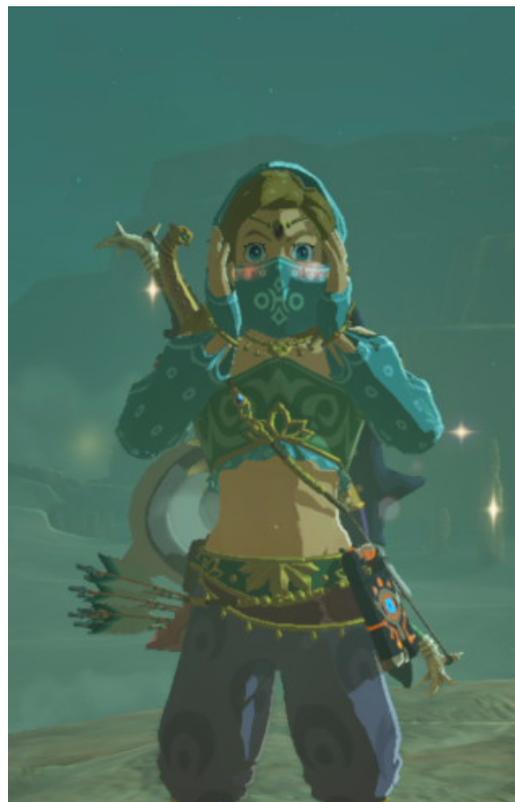


Figure 6.21. Link cross-dressing in a female Gerudo outfit. Screenshot. Courtesy of Nintendo.

1997), *Hatoful Boyfriend* (Hato Moe 2011), *Persona 4* (Atlus 2008) and *Tales of Vesperia* (Bandai Namco 2008), as well as the earlier *Zelda* game *Ocarina of Time*, where Link also cross-dresses as a Gerudo.<sup>64</sup> In her study of *Final Fantasy VII*, Glasspool mentions how Cloud can obtain a pair of ‘bikini briefs’ by paying a visit to member’s club (brothel) Honey Bee and taking a bath with a group of muscular, moustachioed men in shorts and singlets (2016, 110). These men, who read as *bara* gays,

<sup>62</sup> The didactic impact of this scene can be seen from the response it has had from players online. In a YouTube video that shows the quest, the uploader, Ventus, has written “seriously guys this isn’t how you woo a girl” as the blurb. See: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=1hmtSsE1Oho&t=237s>

<sup>63</sup> Galbraith points out that some *otaku* indeed enjoy engaging in crossplay (cross-gender costume play). Notably, crossplay was banned in Tokyo’s neighborhood Akihabara where *otaku* like to congregate from 2008 onwards (2019, 177).

<sup>64</sup> See also: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DisguisedInDrag>

deeply discomfort Cloud, but he needs the briefs in order to cross-dress and save a girl.<sup>65</sup> A similarly charged event sets Link up to be able to access Gerudo Town: after hearing rumors of a Hylian ‘man’ that has slipped into town dressed as a Gerudo, Link finds Vilia, who, it is inferred, identifies as female (fig. 6.22). The player then has the ability to either misgender her (“you’re.. a man?”) or compliment her beauty, the latter leading to obtaining Gerudo garb from her. Vilia alludes that she would like to go on a date with Link, who, when a sudden gust of wind blows her veil aside to reveal some facial hair, jumps back in horror. This scene, ostensibly played for laughs, frames Vilia’s queer gaze as deviant, relieving the homosexual panic through abjection. It is telling that almost identical moments happen in several major Japanese videogame franchises, and suggests particular cultural anxiety surrounding the queer gaze and its destabilizing effect on masculinity.

Several scholars have noted that Link’s body is androgynous and might be read as queer due to his ‘twink-ish’ qualities (MacKnight 2013, 99) (Pugh 2018, 225). However, these readings miss the particular *anime* aesthetic from which Link’s androgyny derives: that of the *bishōnen* (‘beautiful boy’) tradition. While the *bishōnen* aesthetic - a combination of idealized masculine qualities with idealized feminine qualities -, might read as queer within the Western context, they are policed by rigid compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance (Glasspool 2016, 121). Glasspool points out that in *Final Fantasy VII*, this is done through both an absence of genuine queer interaction and humorous denigration of those that do exist, reifying deviance and normativity. This is true for *BotW* as well, where Link’s collapse into Gerudo womanhood is stabilized by showing many of the women in Gerudo



Figure 6.22. Three queer types: the transfemale, the dragqueen and the gay man. Screenshots. Courtesy of Nintendo.

<sup>65</sup> *Bara* is a masculine type of gay man. See the original FFVII clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coRm-da6dXw>. Note how at one point one man says, “why don’t you stick around and play a bit, daddy is lonely”.

town are 'in' on the joke, recognizing him as male and hitting on him, reifying the heteronormative script. Despite Gerudo town being filled with only women, no queer relationships exist between them. Instead, the queer-reading sites in *BotW* read as jokes. Besides Vilia, a stereotypical gay-reading character named Bolson can be found flirting with Link, calling him "studly" and "perky" (fig. 6.22). Similar to Bozai and Vilia, Bolson comes across as excessive, which signals him out as a deviant clownesque trope that at the same time reinforces heteronormativity. While Link is the object of many characters desire, *BotW* reduces male desire of Link to humorous and inappropriate, which fits observations that despite the popularity of *yaoi* and *yuri*, homosexual and lesbian *manga*, homosexuality in Japanese culture is not normatively accepted (Tamagawa 2016, 160) (Dale 2020, 1).<sup>66</sup>

Heterosexual female desire of Link on the other hand is rendered as genuine and driving the plot forward. That is to say, *almost* all females, with the exception of the four hidden fountain fairies, goddesses in slumber until Link pays them enough to wake up. Visually, they read as by far the most sexual characters in the game, marked by large bosoms and moaning sounds of pleasure. The fairies in fact carry such excessive markers of femininity that they recall drag queens instead (fig. 6.22). They lift, kiss and drag Link into their fountains, after which the screen goes dark and Link can be heard screaming. These parodied interactions suggest particular Japanese cultural anxiety surrounding queer gender and sexuality, in particular as it pertains to who is allowed to do the gazing. While Link's body is androgynous and can fluidly move into femininity, his 'core' masculinity is stabilized through homophobic micro-aggressions against queer bodies and the enduring normative male gaze Link casts upon the females.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The final chapter has found that from the representation of gender emerge complex and clashing discourses that speak to the context in which *BotW* was made. Superficially, the gender politics are predictably heteronormative, with princesses there to be voyeuristically consumed by the player via the vessel of a dominating and all-powerful white, heterosexual, able-bodied cisgender male hero. Following the thread of counter-discourse traced throughout the representation of space and race, the logical conclusion to the ludic Japanese dreamwork is reached through the 'Japanese' figure of Paya, who represents an idealized type that both Link's saviorism and the male gaze are only marginally allowed to touch. However, this chapter explored beyond the dreams of the Japanese Self, and traced some of its anxieties too. The princesses are clearly influenced by feminist discourses,

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<sup>66</sup> For a summary on all the characters showing libidinous investment in Link, see Eurogamer's humorous summary: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=9RXAEGyc9h8&t=2s>

hence they are all rulers and protectors in their own right. However, this intention is undermined by the database of *moe* tropes from which they are construed, at whose core lie gender values pertaining to submission, impossible levels of innocence and sexuality, and a lack of identity beyond their functionality to the male gaze. That gaze has then been deconstructed against the background of Japanese anxieties surrounding normative masculine gender performance and compulsory heterosexuality. It was found that bodies that do not comply with the apparatus and exert a queer gaze – the homosexual man, the transgender woman, the dragqueen, the *otaku* – are rendered excessive and abjected through parody and humorous denigration. The feared collapse of masculinity is played out via Link's *bishonen* androgynous body, which can crossdress yet remain normative through his abjection of queerness. These discourses provide insight into the game's cultural mythmaking, allowing the resolution to anxieties that cannot be resolved in real life (Hall 1989).

Through the logic of Self and Other, Link's body emerges as natural and, mapped onto the physical vessel, so does the player's gaze upon the *moe* bodies which are produced for it. This effectively means that while Bozai is vindicated for his desires, the player can take a peak at Riju's cute underwear while comforted they are surely not like the creepy guy outside. Miller (2011) points out that these female representations and the gaze they enable are part of the officially sanctioned discourses by Cool Japan, which she criticizes for "selling the fantasy of cute girls" to the world (19). Galbraith (2019) moreover argues that the split between the 'normal' *otaku* who is allowed to consume *moe* femininity and the 'weird' or 'creepy' *otaku* who draws up associations with perversion and pedophilia is a direct result of intervention by Cool Japan policies. In order to achieve the image of 'cool *otaku*' that could be part of 'Cool Japan', he argues, the 'weird' *otaku* had to be disciplined and punished, which was achieved through regulating media representations and policing lived *otaku* bodies via policies that forbid them to crossplay (153).<sup>67</sup> This process and its subsequent imagery are thus certainly political in nature. The disciplining strongly resonates with *BotW*'s abject dynamic between Bozai and Link, and shows how the game interacts with discourses promoted by Cool Japan. Returning to these politics, the conclusion will wrap together the visual analysis with the larger discourses on brand nationalism and pop cultural diplomacy, in order to make its conclusive statements surrounding the visual politics of *BotW*.

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<sup>67</sup> See footnote 63.

# VII. Conclusion

Central to this thesis' question has been the study of visibility as bound up in structures of cultural struggle surrounding dominance, identity and power. It has followed Hall's (1989) understanding that media representations are part of cultural dreamwork, coupled with the analytical tools from visual studies and the understandings from postmodern scholars like Pratt (1998), Hutcheon (2002), Azuma (2009) and Clements (2012) that representations follow from databases of pre-existing image conventions and their respective discourses, which can be re-employed in self-conscious, subversive and playful ways. *Breath of the Wild* has been approached as a potent visual-cultural product that gives insight into some of, "the core fears, fantasies, hopes and anxieties" (Murray 2018, 18) within contemporary Japanese society and its particular cultural, economic and political history.

In order to unravel the cultural dreamwork, this thesis has threaded the multiple levels of dialogue happening between the representation of space, race and gender with visual histories and their attending discourses. At the surface of the representation, *BotW* references bodies of imagery which suggest affinity with a discourse of empire (Pratt, 25), or rather, an Occidental and patriarchal power fantasy not unlike that of Manifest Destiny. The landscapes reference romantic painterly traditions, whose sublime aesthetics invite gazing and consuming of the land; the races reference 'exotic' visualities like imaginations of the 'barbarian', there to be disciplined and punished by the benign hero, and the 'Oriental' figure, there to be 'discovered' and saved; their princesses are construed as commodified *moe* types that must be protected, enabling the rescue plot and the male gaze. These findings are consistent with the literature, which finds that games by- and large follow the logic of capitalism, neoliberalism and patriarchy (Baerg 2009, Mukherjee 2018, Ivory 2006, Williams et al. 2009, Lynch et al. 2016). On this level, *BotW* can easily be interpreted as a recycled American New World myth, part of *mukokuseki* game design (Iwabuchi 2002) meant to appeal to Western market, and thus reflecting the further absorption of Western imaginary because of its cultural hegemony.

However, through the postmodern use of iconography, it has been argued that *BotW* partakes in complicitous critique in significant ways. That is, many sites within the game suggest that *BotW* functions as a subtle parody that, "installs and ironizes at the same time" (Hutcheon, 93). This opens up the possibility of the game's agency, that it is in fact participating in a complex dialogic relationship with the 'West' and its conventions. On surface, the game adheres to the colonial logic of Link's benign saviorism, but this naturalization is momentarily undone when the endearing nature of his malignant

counterpart, the bokoblin, is observed. It is subverted in more stratified manners by other elements – the deer god Satoshi and the immortal dragons, the uncanny Korok and Paya, the princess who does not need to be saved from Ganon – who all symbolize signifiers of ‘Japaneseness’. They can neither be subjected to Link’s heroic antics, nor used as objects to enable or excuse his colonial venture. In fact, the Occidental Hero materializes as fully dependent upon ‘Japanese’-reading Sheikah technology, wisdom, spirituality and aesthetics to achieve his power. This counter-discourse might be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance or counter-play to dominant hegemonic cultural flows. Lacan notes, “The effect of mimicry is camouflage...it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare” (quoted in Bhabha 1984, 125).

After all, *BotW* was released after a long period of enforced mimicry and compliance to Western conventions, which, as recalled in the opening to this thesis, *BotW*’s art director Takizawa clearly resisted when he proclaimed that the game arises from a ‘Japanese’ art history rather than a ‘Western’ one. However, beyond resistance alone, this conscious selecting of history is also part of an effort to normalize and nationalize *manga*, *anime* and *geemu* as Japanese heritage, identity and nation. While Takizawa’s claim itself is easily contested and *BotW* clearly borrows from all sorts of visual histories, what matters more is the rhetoric underlying the selection – and its effect. After all, as the game labors to position signifiers of ‘Japaneseness’ as powerful and unique, affective associations arise in those who engage with them: Japan comes across as inherently and uniquely ‘cool’.

This thesis argues that the pro-Japanese shifts that occur within *BotW* (and in its designers’ rhetoric) must be understood in relation to larger cultural phenomena surrounding the Cool Japan governmental policies, through which the culture industries have become tasked to enhance Japan’s image in the social imaginary abroad. Iwabuchi argues that in the age of globalization, there has been a significant return to nationalistic rhetoric (2019, 3), which is in part achieved through commercialized nation branding via the culture industries. Media culture is driven by the globalized exercise of soft power via nation branding, which means the nation’s images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country’s reputation (Fan 2010, 101). Games herein play a significant role, as they access publics of millions and implicate gamers in the world through their interactivity. As such, they can fulfill a persuasive function within the social imaginary (Murray 2018, 32).

Galbraith argues that the international success of *manga*, *anime* and *geemu*, as well as reports of fandom in North America and Europe since the early 2000s, represented for Japanese politicians not only the possibility of economic returns after the economic crisis of the 90s, but also of, “winning hearts and minds” (2019, 228). What was dreamed of was the ability to turn *anime* fans into “Japan

fans" (Sugimoto 2013), to translate affective attachments from a particular media to the nation. While it is hard to determine the exact ties between the Japanese game industry and governmental agencies responsible for Cool Japan promotion like the METI, it is obvious that Cool Japan rhetoric has trickled down. As observed from the similarity between art director Takizawa's speech, the comments made within the *Ebb and Flow* documentary and the speech by Prime Minister Abe, creating an image of the nation rooted in a Japanese cultural essence unchanged from past to present has been of key importance to the Japanese soft power venture (White 2015, 103). The specific image of 'Japaneseness' that *BotW* offers similarly collapses past and present: the *kami* at once recall historical ties to Shinto while also offering associations to contemporary Ghibli pop culture, and the Sheikah are construed out of techno-orientalism (Ueno 1999), combining shrine maidens and ninja with robots and other hyper-advanced technology. While this arguably plays into self-Orientalizing discourses, it is also a tactical strategy that ties together past and present in order to posit 'Japan' within the gamespace. Under a nationalizing Cool Japan discourse, the signifiers of 'Japaneseness' - once an odour to be removed - have thus become a flavour which reinforces a Cool Japan trope that seeks to affectively create 'Japan fans'.

White observes that the rhetorical strategies of historical continuity, uniqueness and flavours of Japanese heritage that are perpetuated in Cool Japan differ little from the scripts of nativist *nihonjinron* literature, the essentialist genre of mythmaking publications briefly mentioned in the introduction which first became popular in the 1970s (2015, 111). *Nihonjinron* rhetoric has always indicated Japanese anxiety, a reaction to its double consciousness as colonial oppressor and victim and a need for, "certainty and reassurance about significance, pride and security" (Hutchinson 2019a, 84). The continuation of such anxiety into the 2010s is not necessarily surprising, considering the long and ambivalent relationship with the West marked by oscillating positions of *risshin shusse* (wanting to be successful in the West), and *seiyō kabure* (feeling infected by it) that re-emerged after the perceived loss of international power during economic crisis of the 1990s (White 2015, 102) and the subsequent assimilative *mukokuseki* design strategies that the *Ebb & Flow* interviewed videogame producers lamented (Iwabuchi 2002).

However, in focusing on the dichotomous relationship between Japan and the West, the complexities between Japan and other Asian countries threatens to be overlooked. This is a strategy that Japan itself has eagerly adopted since the end of the Second World War in order to conveniently forget its own pre-war colonial aggression in the region (Iwabuchi 2002, 56). Ohnuki-Tierney (1989), Creighton (1995) and Iwabuchi (2002) all point out that the construction of the Japanese identity hinges not only on a binary Self-Other relation with the West, but rather should be considered a triangle shape between notions of 'Asia,' 'the West,' and 'Japan'. Japan's specific ambivalent historical position as both a colonizer and a colonized nation, marked by anxieties of inferiority and desires to

be both alike and different to both the 'West' and other Asian countries, are inherited by *BotW*, where the triad power matrix is reflected in the construction of the humanoid races of *BotW*. The Occidental Hylians and self-Orientalized Sheikah are culturally hegemonic, while the Oriental Gerudo are rendered culturally, physically, linguistically and religiously deviant. The Gerudo are pastiched out of a database of Western Oriental Arabic imagery as well as specifically chosen Indian and Chinese elements - an amalgamation of Orientalisms in which the Western and Japanese gaze unite. Beyond Cool Japan dreamwork, *BotW* thus also shapes a mythology in which complex and unsolved tensions surrounding intra-regional power relations are being negotiated.

As the ultimate site of abjection, the Gerudo serve as a particularly potent case-study for the negotiations of specific cultural anxieties. Amongst the Gerudo, Link can meld into womanhood, recalling Lawrencian fantasies of genderbending but also the contemporary Japanese anxiety surrounding the collapse of rigid gender boundaries as exemplified by the dysfunctional figure of *otaku*. By humorously denigrating the *otaku* figure Bozai and the transwoman Vilia, these abjections ensure Link's androgynous *bishonen* body does not collapse into queerness (Glasspool 2016), and by extend that the consuming male gaze mapped onto him can emerge as normative onto the bodies of the women. As 'empowered' soldiers whose outfits do little to protect their exposed flesh and led by a princess who recalls the Lolita complex fetish, the Gerudo also provide a lens on clashing ideologies about femininity within *BotW*. Miller (2011) argues that Cool Japan sells "sanitized versions of frilly Japanese girlhood endowed with innocence and gendered essentialism that forestalls a consideration of female agency" (2011, 27). This is also clear from the titular heroine Zelda, who, despite the post-modern inflection of her plight, remains firmly functional to the patriarchal politics of saviorism.

In sum, *Breath of the Wild* conjures dreams and nightmares of the Japanese social imagery pertaining to gender, race and post-colonial identity, and emerges as a fractured cultural dream of unsettled ambivalence and resistance, a site where unresolved cultural, social and political frictions are being negotiated while simultaneously trafficking in the ideologies pertaining to Cool Japan and positively shaping notions of 'Japan' for both the internal and external markets (Miyake 2015). The rhetorical function of these pro-Japanese expressions and attendant views on race and gender seem to be working in tandem with governmental nation branding efforts which rework and strengthen notions of the national via cross-border media flows (Iwabuchi 2010, 89). They certainly cohere with art director Takizawa's nationalistic sentiment, a tone which has also been observed in other Japanese videogame like in the the *Ebb & Flow* documentary. It thus warrants much more research to understand more broadly the changes going on within the Japanese videogame industry, particularly in those games considered part of the 'comeback' momentum and how they engage with nationalistic and strategic cultural narratives surrounding heritage and identity whilst simultaneously having to negotiate with Western

cultural hegemony and demands of the international markets. The hope of this thesis is to have woven together the first threads of such research.

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