GAMING THE TEXT

Understanding Videogames as Textual Discourse

Mentored Scholarly Paper

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Videogames, though relatively young, already comprise a small universe of experiences. Players can leap into the richly imagined futures of *Mass Effect* or *Dead Space*; they can fight the real or fictional battles of the present in *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor*; they can creep through the haunted corners of *Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*; they can rise from poverty in *Grand Theft Auto*'s Liberty City, or see how the Old West was lost in *Red Dead Redemption*'s New Austin—and these worlds, fully realized in themselves, are merely a few in a system of many.

As people of various ages and backgrounds venture boldly or cautiously into these worlds, seeking excitement or escape, meaning or mischief, or any combination of feelings and curiosities, the scholarly community begins to seriously wonder: What treasures of knowledge lie unmarked, or at least unopened, throughout these travels? Writers such as James Gee, Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins have initiated discussions on how games promote long-term learning and audience engagement (Gee, *Pleasure and Learning*, "Audience Engagement") and consequently how they might be incorporated into teaching practices (Squire and Jenkins). This research base is supported by other scholars who highlight that videogames can affect literacy practices (Hsu & Wang); outfit science education with immersive simulations (Barab and Dede); expose or reinforce certain historical myths (Wills; Ash, Romanillos, and Trigg); and facilitate improvements in general reading and motivation (Compton-Lilly). All these are in addition to the myriad of psychological studies on videogames that have assessed task difficulty and motivation (Orvis, Horn, and Belanich); effects on cognitive control (O'Leary et al.) and goal orientation (Brusso et al.); increasing stress management skills (Bouchard et al.), etc. Clearly, there is an interest in understanding how videogames affect people socially and cognitively.

What remains absent is an exploration into the games themselves—specifically how they play a textual game with language and meaning. There are remarkably few studies focused just

on the languages embedded in different videogames and how they interact to create subversive, transcendent or just generic meaning—and then how various players react to said meaning in ways that overlap with and differ from other media. In other words, there is very little akin to 'literary criticism' with regard to videogames. This paper aims to rectify this matter by 1) delineating how videogames constitute a text worthy of consideration; 2) assessing two related games—*Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*—for a concentrated example of how a game's thematic power overlaps with and diverges from other mediums; and 3) outlining the possibilities and limitations of such analysis in order to spur further research.

1. Games as a Type of Text; Text as a Type of Game

The simplest reason for why the English discipline has largely avoided videogames is likely the field's foremost attachment to print materials and traditional genres. In North America, at least, the study of literacy and 'literate' practices (not to mention all the socioeconomic markers of such practices) have been deeply entrenched in the print medium since at least the early nineteenth century (Graff), which has created several cultural needs that are often imposed on the English discipline. These needs have ranged from the establishment of a literary canon that defines the national identity, to the development of methods for increasing reading and writing fluency, to the exploration of techniques and interpretations that expand our knowledge about language at various levels of usage. In short, English studies have been charged with the text: what it is, how it functions, why it persists, when and where it succeeds and fails.

For a long time, the 'text' has been a seemingly straightforward way to talk about recognized print forms such as novels, short stories, poems and speeches. In the past few decades, however, some scholarship (e.g., Derrida, Barthes) has sought to complicate the very

idea of a text, which has given rise to an expanded notion of the text's identity. In theory, this new identity is imagined as a *game*: between reader and writer, between text and culture, between even the words and their meanings. Barthes, for instance, argues that denotation and connotation "enables the text to operate like a game, each system referring to the other according to the requirements of a certain *illusion* [original emphasis]" (9); and that this process of dynamic interaction disrupts the idea that "every text [be] univocal, possessing a true, canonical meaning" (7), leaving various fields (e.g., history, psychology, etc.) to impose their own rules on the 'game' to arrive at relevant meanings. Consequently, it becomes easy to imagine that any cultural artifact partaking in this language game constitutes a text—a fact evidenced by the rising desire to study films, advertisements, adolescent literature and other works often associated with the pop culture and previously ignored by English studies (for an obvious example, see Sellnow's "The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts").

Videogames are a natural extension of that desire, and perhaps one of the more obvious choices since they, as a textual object, take this theoretical stance quite literally. First, they immerse players in an ecology of meaning that must be deciphered in order to complete the experience: in each game the player must learn the method of control (e.g., buttons, voice, touch, etc.), the range of possible actions (e.g., jump, hide, shoot, etc.), and the goals that need to be reached (e.g., solve a puzzle, collect items, kill the enemy, etc.). These elements, which comprise the fundamental *structure* of the game, are typically entrenched in a narrative framework that, just like in any text, may rely on historical facts, popular assumptions, generic conventions and cultural expectations. This framework primarily depends on *textual* and *visual* elements: how characters interact with one another, how the art style represents reality, what players are led to read and what they are allowed to see, etc. Earlier discussions focused intently on this dichotomy

between narratology (the study of narrative) and ludology (the study of structure), with scholars arguing back and forth that videogame criticism should depend more on one than the other. However, this separation ignores the 'game' within the game, that is, the interactions between the languages of structure and the languages of narrative that give rise to thematic potential. Later scholars seem to have realized this fault: Squire asserts that videogames "present players with complex holistic problems" that encourage them to "confront gaps or flaws in their current understandings" (4) while Bradford advocates for a "hybrid methodology which acknowledges not only the game's narrative and ludic features, but the ideological implications of its representations and gameplay, and their interface with cultural values and practices" (62).

If we see other media such as novels and poems as a game, then this hybrid methodology is not terribly different from other modes of criticism: we are ultimately concerned with the discourse 'game' happening within the text, and as Bogost argues, a flexible methodology "might very well expose fungible unit operations at work in any text" (14). A poem, for instance, might employ its powers over rhythm and space to operate multiple, perhaps evolving units steeped in a core feeling—say, naturalism or nomadism. By contrast, videogame criticism requires that scholars be sensitive to the fact that "games, crucially, rely upon activity" (Bradford 56), and that this activity differs from the act of reading a book or watching a film. It is both of those activities in conjunction, modulated by an activity of *configuration* in which players assemble an experience out of the elements offered by the game and then form interpretations based on their unique assemblages. This process of configuration may mean, as Bradford says, that "concepts of reader positioning in narrative theory are not sufficient to analyze the experience of playing video games" (56) because players could switch between being interpreters of a systematic narrative (in which all representations conform to some ideology) or

creators of a configurative narrative (in which interpretations are formed based on a plurality of experiences glued together by a narrative). This duality aligns neatly with New Literacy theories in which readers are expected to use traditional acquisition and interpretative skills as required by print along with the configurative and synthetic skills demanded by technologies like the Internet (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro and Cammack). Videogames simply take these abstract skills and apply them to a textual environment that can, like any subversive text, raise questions about persuasive intent, moral reasoning, genre expectations, agent motivations, language dynamics and perhaps most of all, lived experiences.

Of course, accepting that videogames are a type of text is relatively easy; the real question is whether they are worthwhile object of study for the field of English. The analysis offered in the next section aims to demonstrate that videogames are ripe with thematic potential if explored sensitively, but it is important to first establish the importance of performing any such assessment. First, there is a statistical reality that is hard to ignore: A great number of people across the age spectrum are exploring these textual environments. The average game player is a 34-year-old who has been playing for 12 years and spends an average of eight hours per week involved in a computer or console game; and at least 40% of them are women (ESRB). These are people who have grown up playing videogames and who share their hobby with their children. Such diffusion inevitably translates into a new generation of students who are experienced in this medium and have an opportunity to assess its thematic potential and generic conventions. Ignoring or rejecting their knowledge, instead of encouraging and cultivating it, may incline students to think negatively about English studies, labeling the field as 'old fashioned' or 'out of touch' with a world that, while still deeply attached to print, is more multimodal than before.

Second, the field of English is already devoted to the skill sets needed to fully enjoy and explore a videogame. On the most basic level, many games rely on text—and sometimes a great deal of text easily rivaling any lengthy novel—as the primary conduit for narrative delivery, which means that players should develop strong reading skills. Additionally, players often need to understand the intertextuality between games and other artistic works, even in those games that focus on gameplay over narrative. The 2010 action game *Vanquish*, for example, uses peripheral references to Voltaire's *Candide* (such as statues of Pangloss) to help texture its futuristic—but like *Candide*, satirically absurd—environment. Likewise, in 2011's neo-noir crime game *L.A. Noire*, the player is tasked with deciphering a Percy Shelley poem as part of a murder investigation. Furthermore, some research indicates that students still benefit from traditional instruction and discussion when interacting with these worlds: As Hsu and Wong's review illuminates, the games themselves can supply an "improvement of motivation," but this "discovery-based learning may not lead to meaningful learning" unless practitioners offer a "review and analysis of events that occurred in the game itself" (401).

Finally, videogames provide English studies with a useful way to show that new mediums do not completely displace their predecessors; rather, they engage in a borrowing act that can refresh old meaning. This fact is evident even in the historical parallel shared by videogames and novels: just as the latter were originally discounted as "a waste of time" at best and a "serious instrument of evil" at worst (Hunter 21), so too have videogames been dismissed as children's toys at best and "murder simulators" at worst (Grossman). Because both mediums represent, in their own ways, "new and upsetting values and unpredictable ways of living, thinking, and believing" (Hunter 24), they make apparent that texts are tied to their historical

moment—but they go on living through their interactions with new texts, new readers and a developing culture.

By taking videogames under its wing, the field of English has yet another chance to exercise its greatest skill: establishing the complex connections between culture and language. But as Bogost says, we must "make room for interpretive strategies that remain faithful to the configurative properties of games" (108). For this purpose, this paper will rely on Bogost's methodology of 'unit operations,' which are "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (3). At its core, this methodology could be considered a focused application of the ideas espoused by Barthes, who argued that "the text must simultaneously be distinguished from its exterior and from its totality" (6)—the exterior being the overarching narrative that suggests a singular ideology and the totality being the assemblage of discrete actions and experiences that together create a language game. In any text, unit analysis seeks to affirm what Barthes calls the "plural existence of the text" (58): the idea that "everything signifies something" (51) and the critic "works back from signifiers to signified" (174) in order to discern a complex web of meaning. With videogames, unit analysis could be considered a bottom-up approach to text criticism that investigates the unit(s) of meaning at play in the text and how players configure those units in accordance with their own experiences. By applying this methodology and its underlying ideas to particular games, this paper hopes to add to a growing bond between videogames and the humanities.

2. The Hero of Time and the Discourse on Adulthood

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time and *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (hereafter referred to by their subtitles to reduce redundancy) are the fifth and sixth installments in the long-running series of fantasy action/adventure games, released worldwide on the

Nintendo 64 in 1998 and 2000, respectively. Both games share a protagonist: a young boy known officially as Link (but who can be given any name the player prefers). Every *Legend of Zelda* game features its own Link, who is an embodiment of courage and heroism, but the Link of *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* carries a specific title: the Hero of Time. As might be guessed, the issue of time is central to both experiences, but each game adopts a different discourse around the notion of time and its relationship to adulthood. These differing discourses are represented by the fundamental operations that define each game: Specifically, this paper argues that *Ocarina of Time* utilizes a system operation and *Majora's Mask* utilizes unit operations. Together these two games offer an opportunity to not only see these broad modes of analysis at work in a virtual text, but also to demonstrate how a sequential narrative can be a bridge between inverted discourses instead of just an elaboration of an existing world or plot. Videogames make this utility possible through their *activities* because those are the games' foremost representations of their discourse(s). As will be shown, these activities are embedded in three types of language—structural, textual and visual—which together create layered meaning that reinforces the discourse at work.

The Hero of Time is an excellent example of Barthes' idea that "the character and the discourse are each other's accomplices" because Link is never wholly a "psychological character (endowed by possible motives)" (178); he is both his own entity as well as an avatar for the player, thrust into two separate, but related journeys by the discourses that surround him. The narrative trope that connects these two journeys is a classic *Bildungsroman*, which "tells about the growing up or coming of age of a sensitive person who is looking for answers and experience" (Wikipedia). However, *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* retain different, almost opposing ideas about what constitutes "growing up," but looking at them collectively reveals that

they are like two sides of the same coin. Ryan's two broad conceptions of games' story-activity relationship help to illuminate this inversion: either the "story is meant to enhance gameplay" or the "gameplay is meant to produce a story" (45-46). *Ocarina of Time*, adhering to the first possibility, relies on the story of Link physically transitioning from childhood to adulthood in order to justify an expansion of his skills and their related obstacles. For instance, child Link can only carry a few small weapons generally made of wood, but as an adult he can carry a greater variety of gear that is generally more powerful and durable. The maturation of Link's body thus gives the player access to a wide range of abilities, all of which must be utilized properly in order to complete the story. This emphasis on physical growth and action produces one idea of adulthood: the reality of external change in terms of one's body and environment. The catalyst for this change, of course, is time—specifically, a *progressive* vision of time. "Like a river's flow, it never ends," Link is told; and this flow is "always cruel...its speed seems different for each person, but no one can change it" (*Ocarina of Time*). As Link moves back and forth in the time stream, the two 'modes' of reality coalesce in their representation of adulthood as a matter of physicality and, with that, responsibility—because in the game's fundamental structure, possessing physical capacity mandates its responsible usage.

Ryan argues that a "great emphasis on physical actions" in videogames tends to create a reliance on "archetypal narrative patterns" (50), which is certainly true of *Ocarina of Time*. The game's representation of adulthood as primarily physical and time as essentially inflexible reflects the rigidity of the overarching narrative framework, which depends heavily on archetypes. In line with Barthes' view that "everything signifies something," most of the game's elements conform to an archetype meant to substantiate the game's ideas of adulthood and time. For instance, the beginning of the game shows Link as living among a race of immortal children

(the Kokiri) who together comprise a "common iconographic figure" in mythic literature; but as tends to happen in such myths, the game establishes a divide between those children who will "be victim to his or her naïveté" and Link who "will, in the process of the story, become a wiser and therefore more mature person" (Eiland). This divide is enacted by additional archetypes: for one, Link is an outcast in Kokiri society as evidenced by his lack of a fairy and his sensitivity to premonitions (or "nightmares" as the game calls them, which is arguably a more child-relevant word) about a desert man on a black horse. Consequently, he is summoned by the Great Deku Tree—a male version of the "Earth Mother" archetype—and charged with a helper fairy, Navi, and an initiation, a "kind of test in order to be granted admission into a higher society" (Eiland). This initiation centers on finding and destroying the source of the Great Deku Tree's sickness; and even though Link is successful, the curse of the desert man known as Ganondorf "doomed [the tree] before you started" (*Ocarina of Time*). Before he dies, the tree assigns Link a "quest," which as Eiland says "will require an often difficult acquisition of a particular item, whether it be a talisman, the risk of a princess, or the defeat of some kind of foe" (or all three in this case).

Even in this introductory sequence, there is a multiplicity of archetypes working together with the visual and structural elements (e.g., the lush forest and happy children; the relatively carefree exploration and lack of danger) to ensure the player's acceptance of the game's discourse. What makes them so convincing is arguably their adherence to the principle espoused by Zolla: that "an archetype is impending when a symbol and an emotion coalesce" (195). The forest, the Kokiri and the Great Deku Tree are all designed to create an emotional attachment in the player, which then serves as a conduit to embracing what they symbolize: namely the reality of physical change brought on by the forward flow of time. With the Great Deku Tree gone, the Kokiri children must suffer confusion in their naïveté and Link must enter the wider world of

Hyrule to realize the archetype of the "journey," which is "the focus of the plot" (Eiland). During this journey, Link will physically grow up and the Kokiri will not—a contrast made poignant when Link returns to the forest in his adult body and no one recognizes him. Not surprisingly, only Link, with the advanced capabilities offered by physical growth, can save the forest. His reward for doing so is not the recognition of his childhood peers, however, but the realization that he was destined to embody an archetype, specifically that of the orphaned hero, which typically follows this narrative trajectory:

> After a birth trauma and a miraculous survival always comes a span of time symbolically described as "exile in the wilderness," where they hone their skills, test their mettle, and gather their armies, their allies, or their magic, before returning (as they always do) to the world that is their birthright. (Windling)

Link fits this description without question, albeit with the added condition that he "was too young to be the Hero of Time" (*Ocarina of Time*) when drawing the Master Sword from its pedestal—hence the containment of his spirit until adulthood. This "legendary blade," which echoes the archetype of Excalibur and similar mythic weapons, is the quintessential symbol for the game's discourse: not only does it represent the growth of Link's physical capacities (since only an adult can wield it), it is also metaphorically "a ship with which you can sail upstream and downstream through time's river" (*Ocarina of Time*). Utilizing both of the sword's qualities is essential to fulfilling the archetypes inherent to and outside of Link, which necessarily aligns the player with the game's ideology: that "growing up" means embracing the flow of time. Characters like the Kokiri children and others who cannot adapt to this flow are, in the game's logic, considered to be failed developments—or at least unreliable models for adulthood.

The intricate and ceaseless clockwork of archetype and action that comprises this narrative system seems to match what Barthes calls the impression of the classic narrative: "the author first conceives the signified (or the generality) and then finds for it . . . 'good' signifiers, probative examples; the classic author is like an artisan bent over the workbench of meaning and selecting the best *expressions* for the concept he has already formed [original emphasis]" (173). Players have a certain degree of choice in terms of how long they want to delay the narrative and just search the world for secrets, or in what order they want to complete certain events, which renders the game configurable to a point. However, winning the game will ultimately lead players through enough experiences to substantiate the singular discourse at work. But this is not the end of the discussion, for as Barthes points out, "the dramatic narrative is a game with two players: the snare and the truth" (188). In this case, the game is played across two separate titles: *Ocarina of Time* is the snare, essentially locking the player, however subtly, into a system of events that signify one generality; and *Majora's Mask*, acting as the truth, aims to test the merits of its predecessor's ideological foundation by completely inverting the experience.

One cannot understate the degree of inversion at work; it is all-encompassing. For example, Link's first adventure is prompted by "his heroic destiny," but his second one is entirely "personal," driven by a desire to find Navi, his fairy helper who left him without a word after he laid the Master Sword to rest and returned to his child body (*Majora's Mask*). In the scheme of *Ocarina of Time*'s archetypal narrative, Navi fulfilled her function (i.e., to help Link achieve his destiny) so the action of departure is contextually sensible. If this were the end of the discourse, Ryan would be correct in asserting that "the solitary nature of the hero's quest makes interpersonal relations dispensable" (50), but *Majora's Mask* wants to suggest that her departure, and Link's feelings about her absence, have delayed the completion of the *Bildungsroman*. For

Link, who starts and ends *Ocarina of Time* as "the boy without a fairy," nothing essential seems to have changed; for him personally, it was all perhaps a zero-sum game. So he begins a search for Navi, not as a functional helper, but a "beloved and invaluable friend" (*Majora's Mask*) who may ease the fact that his experiences have left him without a home—a place to be understood. Ironically, this search leads him to the world of Termina, a distorted replica of Hyrule where Link is completely unknown, left to wander among people who *physically* resemble many of those he met in his first journey, but who harbor completely different identities. In a sense, they wear a familiar mask to hide their alien nature, which is a crucial element of this experience.

Once in Termina, the inversion becomes even more apparent. For instance, Link retains the power to manipulate time, but time is represented as *cyclical* rather than *progressive*: the player has only three days before the world is obliterated by a falling moon, and although the flow of time can be quickened or slowed, Link is ultimately forced to relive the cycle numerous times in order to progress. When returning to the First Day, Link always begins in Clock Town, which lies at the center of Termina, further emphasizing the game's cyclical nature that contrasts with *Ocarina of Time*'s progressive sense of movement (i.e., starting in the forest and progressing outward). Furthermore, Link never returns to his adult body in *Majora's Mask*, instead inhabiting other bodies (or at least other faces) through the gameplay element of masks, which affect how people respond to him. And the people, rather than existing to serve the narrative's archetypal framework, lead idiosyncratic lives that players can ignore, observe or interrupt as they see fit. Fittingly, the increased emphasis on other people not only alters the role of the hero, but also of the villain: it is not a single man motivated by power, but what Barthes calls the "ultimate horror," which "is not death but that the classification of death and life should be broken off" (197). What this means is that the end of one's time is not a sufficient divider

between life and death, as it was in *Ocarina of Time*: here, the endless cycle of time eliminates any distinction; and because there can be no death, there can also be no life, that is, no growth.

        Majora's Mask, then, is less of a quest and more of a question: how does one grow when our common notion of time is stripped away? This question is embedded in the various units that comprise the game, units that, for the most part, can be experienced or bypassed according to the player's configurations. These units take the form of one's interactions with others, which are signified by the masks that Link encounters or receives. The core of these units still contends with the notion of adulthood, but rather than enforcing a systematic definition that invades all things, *Majora's Mask* plays a discourse game that Barthes refers to as "the excess of metaphor:"

> The game, which is a regulated activity and always subject to return, consists in . . .
> multiplying one form of language (in this case, comparison), as though in an attempt to
> exhaust the nonetheless infinite variety and inventiveness of synonyms, while repeating
> and varying the signifier, so as to affirm the plural existence of the text. (58)

In this case, the metaphor is the mask, signified in various ways by different characters in an effort to "exhaust" the comparison between different types of adult behavior and belief. In other words, the game uses its structural, textual and visual languages to communicate an idea of adulthood rooted in plurality rather than singularity. Because the gameplay needs to reflect the flexibility of this discourse, *Majora's Mask* adopts the second of Ryan's story-activity relationships—not surprisingly, the inverse of *Ocarina of Time*—in which "gameplay is meant to produce a story" (46). Consequently, the player's interpretations at the end depend on how he or she configures the experience: will you, as Link, do only what is necessary to escape this 'prison' of time, or will you spend your time immersed in the lives of other people? Unlike *Ocarina of Time*, which hides the fact that there is only one real path forward by portraying it as the only

right path to take, *Majora's Mask* leaves players to explore different assortments of paths in order to arrive at different and perhaps conflicting ideas about adulthood—which are, perhaps, a necessary condition for plurality.

The structure of *Majora's Mask*, then, is fundamentally *reflective*, whereas its predecessor is fundamentally *empowering*. While Link does acquire new tools during his time in Termina that allow him to solve puzzles and defeat monsters, they work in conjunction with the masks to substantiate the game's discourse. Tools extend Link's physical abilities, but masks represent Link's expanded understanding of other people, both of which are necessary to progress as they are the only objects that survive the resetting of time. This process is cruel in a way, crueler perhaps than the progressive notion of time because Link is essentially a ghost in Termina, his unique powers simultaneously causing the world to need him and forget him. At the same time, this structure inclines the player to assess the value of relationships, however short-lived: can they be fulfilling even in the knowledge that they will end, perhaps abruptly so? The masks that Link collects are a memory of those encounters, tangible proof that the experience of interacting with others is transformative even when the relationship concludes.

They are also evidence of the player's effort to push past the societal mask that characters wear, their surface persona, and uncover the spiritual mask underneath, the mask that represents their most important values. When Link wears the Goron mask, for instance, he inhabits the spirit of Darmani, a "proud Goron hero" whose physical strength belies the great "sorrows" he feels concerning his unintended death and the suffering of his people (*Majora's Mask*). Likewise, when Link wears the Couples mask, he is a witness to the oaths exchanged by two young lovers divided by society's biases and their own misunderstandings, whose attachment is deeper and firmer than what the mask can communicate to others. There are numerous examples,

all of which lend credence to Barthes' idea that "to read is to struggle to name," although in this case the act of reading extends beyond the written word into the "synthesis of meanings" (92-93). To read these characters fully, players must struggle to name their brand of adulthood based on the discrete set of actions that define their unit. Does their mask represent adulthood as courage, devotion, persistence, power, altruism, cowardice, status, loss—some combination of these values or something beyond them entirely? By exhausting the "infinite variety and inventiveness of synonyms," *Majora's Mask* asks the player to reflect on the plurality of its text: the idea that adult life, regardless of its distance along the continuum of time, is immeasurably complex in its attitudes and values, its anxieties and dreams, but profoundly simple in its needs—which might simply be called empathy.

Of course, players do not necessarily have to arrive at this belief, as they are free to ignore most of these experiences and their related masks in order to simply progress the story to its conclusion. But even this path of self-interest reveals diverging ideas of adulthood. There is the Skull Kid, the mischievous imp who stole Majora's mask and becomes enchanted by the malicious power it represents; there is the Happy Mask Salesman, the enigmatic collector who tasks Link with returning Majora's mask to him and arguably symbolizes an adulthood bent on possession and preservation; there is Tatl, the surly fairy who accompanies Link in order to reunite with her brother and take revenge on Skull Kid; and there are the Four Giants, the mortal guardians of Termina whose spirits are sealed by Skull Kid's magic and yet who resolutely believe in forgiving their friend. All of these central characters serve as ideological markers in the darkened maze of adult life, each competing for the player's attention—but which is right?

Naturally, there is no definitive answer; that would hinder the possibility for truth, for plurality. Instead, *Majora's Mask* offers what might be considered the most appropriate

conclusion for the game as text: a truly symbolic playground in which the units of experience can be synthesized. When Link summons the Four Giants to the clock tower on the Final Day, they are only partly successful in stopping the moon's plummet; Link must finish the job by following the now-sentient Majora's mask into the moon itself. What he finds there is intensely surreal: a completely open field, full of lush green grass and a single tree looming in the center. Around this tree are five masked children in pure white clothes: four of them, wearing the evil masks that held the giants, prance jovially around the field, while the one wearing Majora's mask sits alone under the tree. Faced with this oddity, the player has two basic actions: fight the Majora child or become a "mask salesman" for the other children (*Majora's Mask*). However, the game's reflective structure remains at work in either decision. In choosing to fight Majora immediately, Link aligns with a number of discourses: he is choosing revenge like Tatl; he is choosing self-interest like the Happy Mask Salesman; and perhaps most importantly, he is choosing empowerment like *Ocarina of Time*. In this final battle, he must rely on his own body and tools, abiding by the idea that conflict can be won through physical abilities; but *Majora's Mask*, true to its inverted nature, presents this as the more difficult choice. This fight, of child body pitted against childish spirit, is ultimately more consuming of time, energy and resources.

Then there is the other path: to give away every collected mask. In the game's logic, this action might be read as a symbolic gesture of stripping away the complexities of adult life to find the core questions of humanity underneath. With each child, Link must give away a certain number of masks and then play a game of hide-and-seek in which the child always hides. In order to find the child, players must properly utilize both Link's tools and masks; and at the end of this search, the child will pose one essential question:

Child 1: Your friends…What kind of…people are they? I wonder…Do those

people…think of you…as a friend?

Child 2: You…What makes you…happy? I wonder…What makes you happy…does it

make…others happy, too?

Child 3: The right thing…What is it? I wonder…If you do the right thing…Does it really

make…everybody…happy?

Child 4: Your true face…What kind of…face is it? I wonder…The face under the

mask…Is that…your true face? (*Majora's Mask*)

In order to hear all these questions, Link must relinquish every mask not directly tied to the plot,

which means all the masks bound to the game's units. Of course, these children cannot answer

their own questions and neither can Link. They ask questions just like they collect masks:

without understanding the plurality. They are the inverse of the Kokiri, bound to their childhood

not from a lacking awareness of time, but from a lacking awareness of self and other. No amount

of time can save them; and fittingly, they disappear upon receiving their masks. In a way, they

are merely a test to see if the player, as Link, understands that the mask itself is not valuable; it is

the memory of a relationship, the memory that gives rise to story, and with that, spirit.

The Majora child who remains, recognizing that "everyone has gone away" and that "you

don't have any masks left," now suggests a different kind of game: "good guys against bad

guys," except that "you're the bad guy" (*Majora's Mask*). In preparation for this game, the child

bequeaths onto Link the game's final mask—the Fierce Deity's Mask, which transforms Link

into an adult of immense strength, capable of decimating Majora in a matter of seconds. It is a

strange item to give away at first glance, but this final mask arguably represents how the child

sees Link and perhaps adulthood itself: as physical height, extended abilities and overwhelming

power—everything *Ocarina of Time* claimed it to be. This ideology is so gripping that the child imagines the adult as a god whose ferocity cannot be understated. But the child is trapped in the snare and only the player can see the truth: that it is a mask crafted from the plurality of experience; a mask forged from an unwavering empathy for other people and the values that carry them through life; a mask that sees in a child the potential for adulthood. It is a powerful textual moment, when a game employs its configurative nature and triad of languages to express an idea without ever *saying* anything about it. Finding these moments is, perhaps, the whole spiritual reason behind the continual exploration of texts.

As the game ends and Link bids goodbye to the characters who will remember him—the Skull Kid, happy that his "friends . . . hadn't forgotten about [him];" Tatl, happy to be reunited with her brother; the Mask Salesman, happy to have his treasure returned; and the giants, happy to see harmony once more (*Majora's Mask*)—one last questions lingers: what about Navi, the character whose absence spurred this adventure in the first place? If one played the game to simply escape this world, perhaps the search will continue; she will be the mask of loneliness that Link cannot yet shed. But if one collected all the masks—masks that the Salesman claims are "filled with happiness"—then Navi is free to become a memory, the name for a truth that Link has struggled to read: that "whenever there is a meeting, a parting is sure to follow . . . [but] Whether a parting be forever or merely for a short time...That is up to you" (*Majora's Mask*).

3. Conclusions and Suggestions

Like *Majora's Mask*, this paper places its stock in empathy—empathy for the field of English and its rooted attachments to print; empathy for the medium of videogames and their struggle to be taken seriously as an art form; empathy for a scholarship that has to resolve a societal tug-of-war between the relevance of the old and the impact of the new. This paper has

aimed to show that the page and the screen are not so fundamentally separated as to prevent mutual trust and cooperation between media. Like print materials, videogames feature a 'reading/writing' element in which the player, like a reader, is both interpreting and authoring the experience to a certain degree. It is therefore possible to use existing research on novels, poems and speeches as a foundation for studying videogames—particularly how people are making meaning in these worlds, how meanings across media overlap and diverge, and how these texts both support and resist cultural influences.

From a methodological standpoint, this paper sides with more recent scholarship such as Bogost and Bradford in rejecting the dichotomy of narratology and ludology with regard to videogame criticism, while embracing their combination in tandem with an understanding of cultural artifacts and ideologies. This paper believes that unit operations are a suitable methodology for studying this kind of game experience, but this may not always hold true for other games. Future research should consider comparing artistic works from separate mediums using this methodology, which might not only build stronger bonds between types of text, but reveal interesting patterns or changes between the old and new that are meaningful for the broader culture. A methodology such as unit operations also helps to keep in mind that a text can deliver valuable thematic content in ways outside of basic narrative systems. That said, this paper accepts that standard forms of narrative theory and literary criticism may still offer valuable insights into videogames as texts, but only if adapted to their configurative nature. For instance, a Feminist critique could be applied to how gender operates in games like *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*, but this analysis would need to assess how the structural, textual and visual languages of the game interact with the player's configurative opportunities. If nothing else, this paper hopes to contribute to and motivate an ongoing conversation about the dynamic life of text,

which will hopefully consider videogames as a component of the evolving game of language

play and cultural reproduction.

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