

Queering an Icon: *The Legend of Zelda* and Inclusive Diversity

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Classical Studies

I. Introduction: *The Legend of Zelda* and Queer Theory

When analyzing media for structures and communications that inform and construct personal identity, it is always of extreme importance to focus on the main character of relevant stories, films, shows, and video games. For video games in particular, the main character serves as the player's interactive avatar with the game world, a stand-in for themselves that serves as their contextual point for navigating the experiences within the game. In their work *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett identify the consistent use of white male avatars in video games to restrict the ability of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexuals to properly identify with their liaison into the game worlds. This is an extremely valid criticism of the game industry at large, but one of their primary examples leads to a major point of contention.ⁱ In tracing the lineage of white male protagonists in video games, the authors of *Toxic Geek Masculinity* set Link from *The Legend of Zelda* series firmly in their sights as the stereotypical white, male, blonde hero with a princess to save; part of the strain of straight white male characters that fail to represent all gamers equally and, in fact, actively push those outside the archetype away from the medium.ⁱⁱ Their analysis of Link and the tropes of protagonists in video gaming ignore the nuances of the communities surrounding such characters and how interaction with the art and game themselves can help to alleviate these concerns, though it is through these communities that the games and characters are disseminated to the public. Fan communities have been able to begin a process of transformation, taking once archetypal male

fantasy heroes and making them more inclusive to everyone, not only to women, but also those of the queer (LGBT) community.

Jack Halberstam argues that fictional avatars, regardless of the character's direct agency in whatever medium they exist in is as such, are the centrally important component in any individual's experience with a piece of art.ⁱⁱⁱ Link is, and has always been, depicted as a silent protagonist whose agency is given to him by either a prophecy, the player directly, or a combination of the two. In the character's newest adventure, *Breath of the Wild (BotW)*, Link received further character alterations to make him appear more androgynous than some previous renditions of the character. It is this version of the character, as well as those from far older titles such as *Ocarina of Time*, that fans of the series have taken to for fanart and discussion on forums across the internet. Despite Link's white, male, supposedly straight identity, gamers have managed to express different forms of identity through Link's canonical appearances and attitudes, as well as those players are able to ascribe to him due to their control of his actions directly through *BotW* and other titles.^{iv} Andrea Wood argues that women and others can easily identify with male characters such as Link once a certain aesthetic threshold has been breached, allowing fan communities and creations to have the distinct power of making traditional icons queer-inclusive.^v

Identity construction and affirmation through gaming and other nerd culture activities requires an unconventional disciplinary approach. Jack Halberstam, a proponent of queer theory, argues that analyzing and deconstructing media works to allow for a culture of understanding; media is the language through which identity is dispensed, distilled, and crafted, the place where all identities can be represented regardless of intent of the author or creator.^{vi} In addition, the communities formed around minority gaming and media groups have managed to create their

own interpretations of media to suit their identity needs.^{vii} Link, a character originally designed in the 1980s, has had a lot of time to become adapted and adopted into these various communities and become a figure of much broader appeal and avatar potential than would otherwise be assumed of a white male character.

II. The Hero of Time: Archetype of Masculine Heroism

The figure to the right is the basic image of Link that Nintendo spreads around as his primary state of being.

This art, from *Hyrule Warriors*, a decidedly more militaristic take on the character, shows the green-clad Link equipped for battle and in a pose that suggests not only strength, but also courage, as he leaps towards the enemy. Courage is a major aspect of Link's canonical character, as it is the part of the Triforce (a three-part artifact that is usually mentioned but rarely pivotal in more recent games in the series) Link himself is most closely



related to. The heroic archetype that Link is intended to fulfill is that of the courageous warrior with a heart of gold, evidenced by Nintendo's continued association of the character with nature and the simplicity of quests he undertakes from helping local farmers to saving the kingdom in which he lives.

The original artwork depicting a fully three-dimensional Link comes from the first



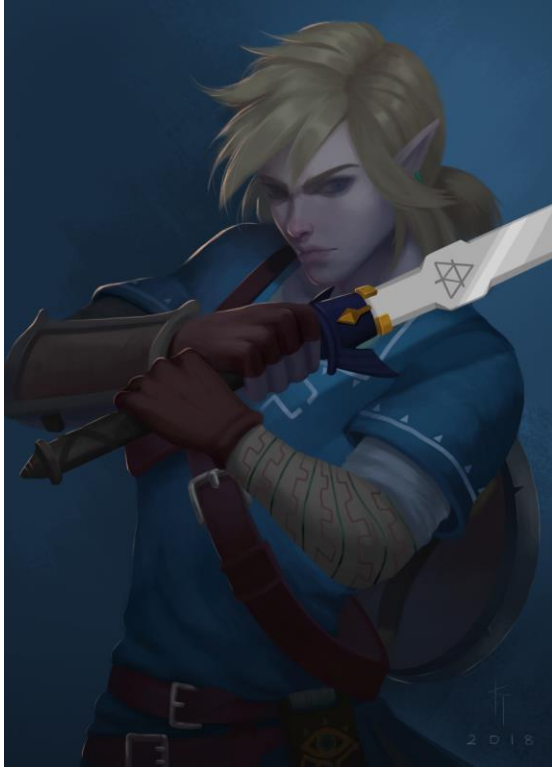
Nintendo 64 *Legend of Zelda* title, *Ocarina of Time*. The game features Link as two different ages, a Young Link and then a time-skipped adult Link; the age difference only shows in their facial structures and overall size, with Young Link's eyes being

slightly too large, but the body maintaining the heroic masculinity of the older figure. These

pictures include a furrowed, determined brow, angled features, and defined but not overly muscular extremities.^{viii} In an interview, one of the artists for *Ocarina of Time*'s Link, Yusuke Nakano claimed that this Link was meant to be “handsome, cool” and was based on a famous Hollywood actor at the time, likely referring to Leonardo Di Caprio.^{ix} The late 1990s was an important time for cartoons, anime, and video games in the United States, and this depiction of the central protagonist as manly and heroic was central to its entrenchment in this nascent video gaming culture entering a traditionally male space.^x The 2006 addition, *Twilight Princess*, was designed even more masculine, with the artists behind the more recent depictions suggesting they wanted to Link to be less skinny and more manly so as to seem more realistic when fighting large monsters, as well as making Link more wild and “wolfish.”^{xi} The most recent release for the series is *Breath of Wild (BotW)*, whose Link is far less masculine than these iterations, and the artists aimed to set this Link apart from earlier renditions due to the customizability of his appearance and equipment. They also sought to combine aspects of all of Link's portrayals, including those of the more cartoony games, and that led to a shrinking down of Link's physique again, which, along with the popularity of *BotW*, has in turn led to a large amounts of fan recreations of this version of the character.^{xii}

Link does fit within the grander narrative of game protagonists that are male and seek to save a helpless female character. As Salter and Blodgett argue, there is an over prevalence of games wherein “the white male hero plays out a classic narrative of save the world and rescue the girl.”^{xiii} Although the newest game in the *Legend of Zelda* series, *Breath of the Wild*, inverts this trope, the communities surrounding Link and the game series enjoy some aspects of this masculine hero figure. Kunniki Kaitlin Tai's “Link” takes the heroic portrayal of Link and brings

it to the *BotW* version that Nintendo sought to make less gritty than some earlier portrayals of the character. This image presents a darker aspect onto the normally brightly depicted *BotW*



images.^{xiv} Compared to Nintendo's official artwork, Tai's version more closely follows elven tropes of androgyny with regards to facial structure, though the upper body is identifiably male and harkens back to the *Twilight Princess* bulkier and stronger Link. He lacks a shield, as well as his various other accoutrements in this depiction, in opposition to Nintendo's portrayal focused on the variability of equipment. This is also similar to the Hyrule Warriors Link, and a similar depiction has served as Link's representation in Nintendo's newest *Super Smash Brothers* game which includes mascots from across

Nintendo's game worlds. The company has pushed this side of the character as the primary face of his series, and numerous fans have joined them in creating new versions of this heroic, male Link.

III. The Cute and Gentle Hero

The heroic, hyper masculine, often white video game heroes of the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the practice of objectifying women in many of those same games, were long seen as a barrier to keep non-straight white males from both enjoying and identifying with both the protagonists as well as, more generally, video game culture.^{xv} A large facet of online culture and fandom over the past few years has been centered around the cute and adorable. Rukmini Pande argues that “cybercultural” exchange, defined as the symbolic forms of discussion and cultural production between individuals and groups on the internet, has dominated fan discussion around video games within more marginalized groups, such as women and those of the queer community.^{xvi} Fan art draws inspiration from the Yaoi manga that has managed to penetrate the female and queer readerships of North America and Europe, presenting traditionally male-centric characters with features that inspire quite a different array of feelings.^{xvii}

Artist mmimmzel’s rendition of Link, again based upon the *Breath of the Wild* model, portrays the Hero of Time as a more caring and “cute” figure, containing the normative features of cuteness including large eyes, small smile, and relaxed look/posture.^{xviii} Unlike the piercing eyes of Nintendo’s artists or the pensive, evasive eyes of Tai’s piece, this Link’s gaze is inviting, as if he wants you to take a seat beside him.

He is also outfitted with numerous accessories, including the small pouch on his hip, the cloak overtop of his shirt, and what is likely a shield that is not his standard one (unlike the blade which is the usual Master Sword). The customization of accessories harkens back to Nintendo’s



various models, and the softer face is reminiscent of the younger and more cartoon-ish variations of Link Nintendo has put out for some of the spin-off titles. Nintendo's Link is present in mmimmzel's version, the major differences belonging to the hero's pose and overall tone of the image. Instead of the upright, combative stance of the more hyper-masculine Link, this Link is seated and is leaning on his blade rather than threateningly brandishing it. Changing Link's demeanor and pose is a relatively innocent form of "transgressive intimacy" practiced in female and LGBT fan art and online communities as described by Patrick Galbraith.^{xix} Galbraith argues that these communities enforce their own visions onto male characters in order to bring themselves into the greater community surrounding those characters, with the least cultural transformation being related to a sense of "cute" and the most represented by "yaoi," or male-male relationships between otherwise straight male characters. Intimacy, however, is the central component to Galbraith's theory, and the way in which Link is looking at the viewer of mmimmzel's piece distinctly shows a kinder, more intimate hero with whom someone could talk and relate.^{xx}

User Negoto_z's Link is also based upon the *Breath of the Wild* avatar of the character, this time focused on presenting the hero as a lover and caretaker of nature, decorated as he is with flowers. The focus on the steed is important here, as Nintendo traditionally has shown Link atop his canonical horse, Epona, in much the same way knights of the medieval period were depicted heroically atop their own mounts. The image represents a push towards gender-neutrality for Link as well, with his hair longer and more flowing than in official representations and most renditions focused on more masculine traits such as combat, hunting, or stoicism. Comparing it to mmimmzel's piece, Negoto's version maintains a similar air of intimacy with both the audience and the horse as well as many of the standard feminine and "cute" impulses of

modern Japanese art, including the blush marks under the eyes, the wide open smile, and the



action marks indicating the kiss-like gesture of the horse to Link's face.^{xxi}

The feminine traits of this Link are muted in comparison to the next section's, but in terms of exploring alternative traits for Nintendo's, Negoto's represents the peak "cuteness" of the more faithful adaptations to the

original design from *Breath of the Wild*, before moving into the queer worlds of *yaoi* and expressions of alternate sexuality provided by further examples.

IV. Gerudo Link and Alternative Masculinity

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild contains a major quest chain that includes Link needing to gain entrance to a village of all female warriors, similar to the Amazons of Greek and Roman myth. The Gerudo, as they are called, reject the need for “voes” or males in their society and so are very strict about them entering their holdings. In order to enter the village and speak with its leader, the player must acquire some feminine clothing for Link so he can attempt to fool the guards into thinking he is a woman. Interacting with certain characters wearing the armor indicates much of the comedy supposedly involved with crossdressing, as it is a common comedic trope in Japan, with them being surprised or confused by Link’s attractiveness in the costume.^{xxii} The leader of the village recognizes Link’s facade immediately, but admits that he looks adorable in the clothing regardless.



This series of events has been absolutely devoured by the female and queer online communities surrounding Link. Despite the comedic take Nintendo took on the issue, many in the queer community have flocked towards this feminine Link as a representation of a more fluid masculinity, as well as a possible transgression of gender roles and the gender binary itself. Kai Texel’s “Gerudo Link” perfectly symbolizes the feminine Link fans have created based on the circumstances Nintendo presented. This Link has the long hair of Negoto’s while also gaining highly pronounced eyelashes as if they were put on with makeup. The pose of the figure is reminiscent of belly

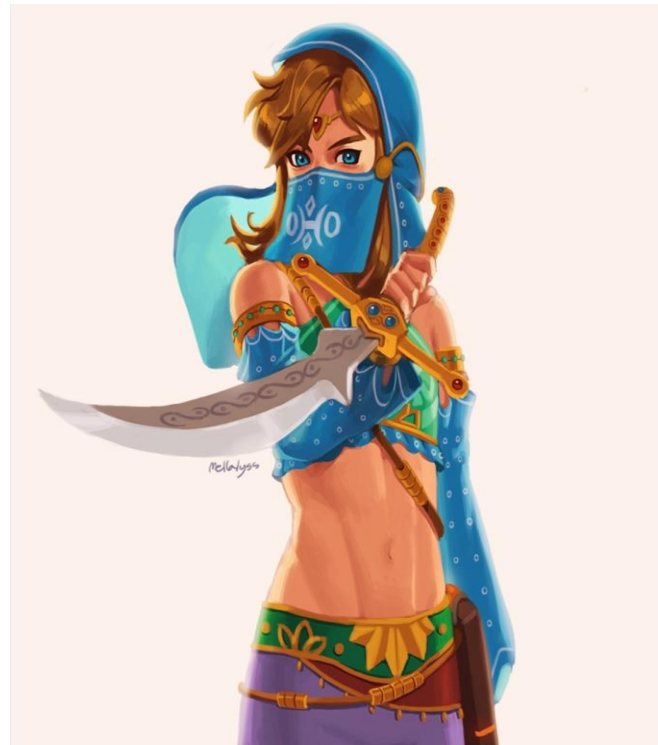
dancers, and the hero's hips and upper chest are accentuated to appear more feminine. Texel's "Gerudo Link" has seen numerous other appearances in *doujins*, or fan-made comics, typically depicting him as the object or "bottom" of a *yaoi* relationship.^{xxiii} This depiction of Link can have multiple gender interpretations, as the canonical knowledge of his male status is irrelevant within the fan-made creation at hand, despite the *doujins* focusing on Link as both the dominant and submissive male partner of other men.^{xxiv}

Halberstam argues that characters in costume do not necessarily have genders, using the specific examples of Batman and Catwoman whose sexual relationship is bound to their leather-clad personas, and that a supposed fictional male in clothing has and lacks a penis at the same time.^{xxv} Modern gender and sociological theories suggest that the "conceptual penis," that being the social construct of male genitalia based on gender performance, allows individuals and images to maintain enough ambiguity of gender in order to match the interpretation others place upon it.^{xxvi} These renditions of Link in the Gerudo clothing allow for a more representative gender and sexual existence of the character that the Nintendo versions don't cater to nearly as much. They also illustrate the connection between the female and queer fan communities, providing a more feminine archetype to a traditionally male character role and game.

Gerudo Link is not simply emblematic of cultural transformation and transgression from the female and queer communities; the figure also provides an arena in which to discuss the ties between masculinity and femininity. Mellalyss' version of Gerudo Link takes the standard poses of Nintendo and adds in some of the more feminizing traits in Kai's version. Link is brandishing a blade before him, not his normal Master Sword but a curved Gerudo blade instead, and looks intimidating rather than intimate or cute. The image retains styled eyes suggesting makeup and the hair and garments themselves are still flowing as symbols of the feminine, but the intensity of

the gaze has a decidedly masculine poise to it. The stomach is more muscular than Kai's piece and maintains that, despite the feminine appearance, this Link is both highly competent and dangerous, mixing the feminine with the masculine in a way that makes him look more deadly rather than less, like a male *femme fatale*.^{xxvii}

Applying the theory of the conceptual penis to Mallalyss' image, the figure presents as female but performs as male, allowing those in the dichotomous camps to associate with the figure as well as those not bound by standard gender definitions. This Link both has and does not have a penis in the sense that it matters most; practically, anyone can identify with this image so long as their perception has not been tinted one way or the other, and the phallic image of the blade can replace the existence of a physical penis as a projection of power.^{xxviii} This allows Mallalyss' depiction of Gerudo Link to



serve as a bridge between the male dominated video game industry and the need for representation much of the modern literature represents. Such versions of the character, as well as the appeal the series has had for women over the past few years, may have led to Nintendo's inclusion of Linkle into *Hyrule Warriors* as an entirely reimagined female Link.

V. Conclusion: Heteronormative Hero or the Perfect Self-Insert?



User z_sobobo.07's (Sobobo) rendition of the Hero of Time in stealth-based Sheikah armor takes the feminizing features of the Gerudo Links and returns the figure to the standard armor, equipment, and ferocity of Nintendo's heroic Link. This portrait contains the longer hair, along with the traditionally male Japanese bun, curved body, and feminine stance accentuating the legs and curvature of his lower body.^{xxix} This armor is worn by male characters in *Breath of the Wild*, and does not have the cross-dressing theme that the Gerudo armor does in the game, and yet the armor lends

itself to a similarly feminine interpretation of Link. The masculine, heroic norms the original Nintendo artists strived for in Link's design remain in the image, unlike the *yaoi*-based Gerudo equivalents, such as a determined gaze and combative stance with weapon at the ready. This figure is not the heteronormative, masculine hero depicted by Salter and Blodgett, and though unofficial, the community around *The Legend of Zelda* have taken inspiration from the games directly to create this alternative Link that serves all communities rather than one.

Jungmin Kwon, while discussing larger questions on online female and queer identity in East Asia, argues that altering existing male models into ones more representative of female tastes and appearances queers the characters and makes them inherently more inclusive regardless of the source material.^{xxx} Link is, and has always been, a major male character in the

long line and white, male protagonists saving a princess, despite Nintendo's recent inversions of both Link's gender (through Linkle) and the princess in peril trope (through the powerful female characters of Midna in *Twilight Princess* and Zelda in *Breath of the Wild*). This has not stopped fans from morphing the character into a far more inclusive version of his original self, one that blurs the lines between sexual preference, gender, and performance to allow for gender and sexual minorities to be represented in the series along with the larger group of women the transformations were originally targeted towards. Nintendo's Hero of Time is not alone in having been queered to the point of inclusivity, with numerous other cultural characters receiving a similar treatment. The fan program "Hawkeye Initiative" across the internet has focused on portraying Marvel's Hawkeye in positions and situations female superheroes often find themselves in, with the goal being the normalization of men in compromising positions in order to change the culture at large.^{xxxix} Fan cultural acquisition of characters fills a hole in representation that traditional media has been slow to fill, one of diversity and inclusivity, and Link, rather than being the stereotypical male-centric hero fans must take down in order to receive true female heroes, represents a major aspect of this movement. The amount of images involving a more queer representation of Link are numerous, as are the communities devoted specifically to this aspect of the character, and the identities of those involved not only receive validation through this creative act but also encourage others to embrace themselves through viewing it.^{xxxix} From the masculine, heroic archetypes of the past, communities can create new, queer models from which the cultural industry can then adapt and provide the stories needed for more diverse sets of individuals.

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- ⁱ Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 77.
- ⁱⁱ Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*, 76-77.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jack Halberstam, "Queergaming: Gaming, Hacking and Going Turbo," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 192-193.
- ^{iv} Link is never canonically straight, nor does he marry the princess he saves.
- ^v Andrea Wood, "'Straight' Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1/2: (2006): 396.
- ^{vi} Jack Halberstam, "Queergaming: Gaming, Hacking and Going Turbo," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 188.
- ^{vii} Adrienne Shaw, "The Trouble with Communities," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 159.
- ^{viii} Aria Tanner, trans., *The Legend of Zelda: Art & Artifacts*, (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2017), 158-159.
- ^{ix} Tanner, *The Legend of Zelda: Art & Artifacts*, 412.
- ^x Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*, 75-76.
- ^{xi} Aria Tanner, *The Legend of Zelda: Art & Artifacts*, 420.
- ^{xii} Tanner, *The Legend of Zelda: Art & Artifacts*, 427.
- ^{xiii} Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*, 77.
- ^{xiv} Original images based upon those in Keaton White, trans., *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Creating a Champion*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2018), 1-11.
- ^{xv} Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity*, 76-77.
- ^{xvi} Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 21.
- ^{xvii} Wood, "'Straight' Women," 396.
- ^{xviii} Weijung Chang, "Exploring the Significance of 'Japaneseness': A Case Study of Fujoshi's BL Fantasies in Taiwan," In *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, edit., Lavin Maud, Yang Ling, and Zhao Jing Jamie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 182.
- ^{xix} Patrick W. Galbraith, "Fujoshi: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among 'Rotten Girls' in Contemporary Japan," *Signs* 37, no. 1 (2011): 212.
- ^{xx} Galbraith, "Fujoshi," 213.
- ^{xxi} Rea Amit, "On the Structure of Contemporary Japanese Aesthetics," *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 2 (2012): 180.
- ^{xxii} Chang, "Exploring the Significance of 'Japaneseness,'" 184.
- ^{xxiii} Cathy Camper, "Essay: 'Yaoi' 101: Girls Love 'Boys' Love'," *The Women's Review of Books* 23, no. 3 (2006): 24-25.
- ^{xxiv} Galbraith, "Fujoshi," 213-214.
- ^{xxv} For more on clothing, fictional characters, and a lack of gender in certain sexual encounters, see Jack Halberstam's "Queer Creatures," *On Our Backs*, Nov/Dec 1992.
- ^{xxvi} Lindsay and Boyle, "The conceptual penis as a social construct," *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3 (April 2017), 2.
- ^{xxvii} Jennifer Malkowski and Treandrea Russworm, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 21.
- ^{xxviii} Lindsay and Boyle, "The conceptual penis," 3.
- ^{xxix} Amit, "On the Structure of Contemporary Japanese," 177.
- ^{xxx} Jungmin Kwon, "Girl Fans Queered," in *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 36.
- ^{xxxi} See the official site: <https://thehawkeyeinitiative.com/>.
- ^{xxxii} Hanna Brady, "Building a Queer Mythology," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 68.

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