The Legend of Zelda in the Anthropocene

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The Legend of Zelda in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The Legend of Zelda (1986), for the original Nintendo Entertainment System, posited an immediately familiar fantasy milieu: a sleeping princess, an evil king, magical helpers, ancient artifacts of intense power, the rise of a hero. Players guide that hero, Link, through a series of increasingly difficult dungeons, accumulating tools and expanding their abilities in a linear narrative of personal development until they are finally able to defeat Ganon, rescue Zelda, and save the beleaguered kingdom of Hyrule. The end. But subsequent entries in the series cannot adhere to this narrative of linear progress and individual triumph, developing instead an increasingly convoluted meta-narrative in which Hyrule is beset by a recurring, multi-generational curse that cannot ever be expiated or broken, only (at best) temporarily delayed. As with other long-running SF/F franchises (Star Wars, Star Trek, Harry Potter, D.C. and Marvel comics, and others), therefore, entries in the Zelda series since the original take place in an increasingly tragic universe, in which the reincarnations of the original Link and Zelda are reborn over and over again to defeat an unkillable Ganon. This entropic logic reaches its greatest expression in the transcendent Breath of the Wild (2017) for the Nintendo Switch, an immense open-world game that takes place in a ruined Hyrule which Link and Zelda had failed to save. Suspending Link in a techno-organic cocoon that puts him to sleep for a thousand years—itself the remnant of an advanced ancient civilization that had fallen into ruin millennia before their time—Zelda magically freezes herself and Ganon in time just moments before Ganon’s victory in order to prevent his final ascension, and thus allowing Link sufficient time to recuperate and gain the new powers necessary to win this time. The game’s breathtaking vistas and acclaimed sandbox gameplay are thus part and parcel of its dyspeptic vision of the Anthropocene—Wild’s Hyrule is a depopulated and (multiply) destroyed civilization, whose always-already ruined future can only be mitigated against, not prevented or saved.

The Legend of Zelda (Japan 1986 / US 1987), for the original Nintendo Entertainment System, posits an immediately familiar fantasy milieu: a sleeping princess, an evil ruler, magical helpers, ancient artifacts of
intense power, the rise of a hero. Players guide the game’s protagonist and hero, Link, through a series of increasingly difficult dungeons, accumulating tools and expanding their abilities in a linear narrative of personal development until they are finally able to defeat the demonic dark wizard Ganon, rescue Zelda, and save the beleaguered kingdom of Hyrule. But subsequent games in the franchise—no doubt out of the necessity of justifying continuing entries in an ongoing series after the restoration of proper social order was complete at the end of the first game—found themselves unable to adhere to this fairy-tale logic of linear progress and individual triumph, developing instead an increasingly convoluted meta-narrative for the franchise in which Hyrule is beset by a recurring multi-generational curse that cannot ever be expiated or broken, only (at best) temporarily delayed. Now Link, Zelda, and Ganon are mythic archetypes who continually reincarnate within their storyworld, battling each other again and again for all eternity, unable to ever break out of a hyperviolent cycle of advance and retreat that permanently ensnares all three. As with other long-running SF/F franchise fictions in the contemporary era (Star Wars, Star Trek, Harry Potter, Doctor Who, D.C. and Marvel comics, and others), therefore, entries in the Zelda series since the original take place in an increasingly tragic universe, as the endless requirement for new content prevents their story from ever reaching final catharsis; instead, Link and Zelda must be reborn over and over again to attempt to defeat an unkillable Ganon (however partially and temporarily), seemingly doing a worse job each time.

At the start of *Breath of the Wild* (Switch/Wii 2017), the most recent entry in the now extremely-long-running video game franchise, we see the entropic logic governing the franchise reach its most transcendentally ambitious expression to date. The player controls the latest incarnation of Link as he awakens with amnesia in some sort of techno-organic cocoon in an isolated cave, somewhere in the Kingdom of Hyrule. The player guides Link out of the cave to a gorgeous mountain vista overlooking a truly gigantic playable storyworld; an open-world, sandbox-style game, *Breath of the Wild* allows the character the freedom to explore whatever distant landmark they become interested in, with temperate, tropic, Arctic, desert, and volcanic microclimates available at different parts of the map. In this iteration, Link seeks both to recover his own lost memories and accrue the necessary power to once again protect Hyrule from his nemesis, Ganon.

¹ See my “From ‘A New Hope’ to no hope at all: Star Wars, Tolkien and the sinister and depressing reality of expanded universes,” as well as my short thinkpieces on the Marvel Cinematic Universe at *frieze*; I take up these questions in a somewhat more scholarly register in my article for the *Extrapolation* special issue on “Mere Genre,” “Hokey Religions: Star Wars and Star Trek in the Age of Reboots.”
Anything you can see, you can walk to: the immense scale of Breath of the Wild (2017).

But something is amiss; in *Breath of the Wild* we discover that this is not actually *this* Link’s first time fighting *this* Ganon; rather, we learn he has fought Ganon once before one hundred years ago and was defeated, barely escaping the battle with his life before securing himself in the magical cocoon from which he awoke at the beginning of this game to try and regain his strength. Princess Zelda—no mere damsel in distress or shrinking violet this time around, but fully Link’s equal, and indeed the incredibly powerful enchantress-leader of his current band of adventurers—has magically frozen both herself and Ganon in time moments before his victory to prevent his ascension to divinity on the site of what used to be Hyrule Castle, suspending them until Link can return to save both her and the kingdom.

In *Breath of the Wild*—as with the earlier, similarly apocalyptic *The Wind Waker* (GameCube 2002)—Hyrule is thus already a ruin, even before the game has begun and before the player has been allowed to succeed or fail at anything. Mostly depopulated and devoid of any complex social organization larger than the scale of the small village, *Breath of the Wild*’s Hyrule is littered with the detritus of two separate golden ages that have both been irrevocably lost, as well as infected by a poisonous magical fluid reminiscent of radioactive toxic waste that pollutes and corrupts anything it touches. Nothing the player can do within the game can avert or undo a disastrous defeat that was permanent before the *Wild* was first turned on. The game’s breathtaking visuals and acclaimed open-world gameplay are thus part and parcel of what I will argue here is its sourly dyspeptic vision of climate crisis in the
Anthropocene—befitting the larger trend in *The Legend of Zelda* series’ slow, decades-long revision of its original fantasy milieu, Wild’s Hyrule is no longer a site for wish-fulfillment and juvenile power fantasies but a grim premeditation of a depopulated and (multiply) destroyed civilization, whose inevitable, always-already ruined future can only be partially and provisionally mitigated, not prevented or saved. In a twisted version of Jameson’s famous “nostalgia for the present” (279 and *passim*), then, we therefore see registered within Hyrule’s collapse our culture’s anticipation of its own coming disruption by the climate crisis. The intergenerational transfer of the Zelda franchise from a parental generation of NES or SNES players to children playing *Breath of the Wild* on the Switch or the Wii is now interrupted by a cosmic pessimism that sees Ganon (in this current version properly understood for our moment as an avatar of imminent, apocalyptic climate change) always already victorious, and restoration of the “proper” course of progressive history by the player-hero is impossible to achieve. The pleasure of the game—and despite its pathos it is a tremendously fun entry in the franchise, a joy to play—thus becomes completely divorced from its main narrative, its thematic content, or the teleological drive to “beat” it once and for all. Instead, one finds, the game’s deepest pleasures are in its middle period, between tutorial and final battle, in which the player simply inhabits and interacts with a vast, mostly posthuman natural landscape—a joyous encounter with a simulated version of the natural world that escapes the overawing pessimism of the main plot to which I will return in my conclusion.

I borrow the concept of premeditation from Richard Grusin, who in his *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* discusses this sort of deliberate rehearsal for the future (primarily in a national security context). As Grusin notes, “premeditation works to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack” (2). I argue here and elsewhere that contemporary mass media culture takes much the same attitude towards the environment, displacing specific discussion about the possible futures to be generated by climate change and mass extinction in favor of constant anticipations of nightmarish necrofutures across every conceivable media product, from video games to SF spectacles like *The Walking Dead* and *Avengers: Endgame* to even the realist television series *The Affair*, which unexpectedly relocates the narrative focus of its final season to a post-collapse U.S. set decades after the main storyline of the show.
Although the concept has gained increasing acceptance in the scientific community, the Anthropocene was originally formulated as much a provocation and warning as a scientific proposition. Itself a kind of premediation, the intent was to use the rhetoric of stratigraphy strategically to shock scientists into recognizing the full extent of humankind’s effect on the global climate and to goad it into taking action that is was otherwise loath to take. The conclusion of Paul Crutzen’s 2002 article “Geology of Mankind” in Nature, which did much to popularize the concept, captures well both the extremity of the crisis of the Anthropocene, the uncertainty and confusion inherent to this moment, and the lengths to which responses to the Anthropocene will dominate humanity’s future:

Unless there is a global catastrophe—a meteorite impact, a world war or a pandemic—mankind will remain a major environmental force for many millennia. A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behaviour at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to “optimize” climate. At this stage, however, we are still largely treading on terra incognita. (23)

In this we see the Anthropocene revealed not simply as some objective, neutral analysis of the scientific facts at hand, but as a political proposition necessarily carrying with it a grim affective register: a sort of overriding melancholic dread about the irreversibility of mankind’s changes to the stability of the global climate, against which our ability to intervene is both dubious and highly tentative. The assertion of the Anthropocene is thus always also an apocalyptic formulation, both in the original Biblical sense of the revelation of the true consequences of humankind’s activities and in the more contemporary sense of prefiguring an incoming, near-future era of climate disaster and widespread deprivation.

It is this consequent permanent loss of the “normal” cycle of life and death in favor of a period that Ziauddin Sardar has designated, with startling and terrible insight, as the “postnormal”:

Welcome to postnormal times. It’s a time when little out there can be trusted or gives us confidence. The espiritu del tiempo, the spirit of our age, is characterised by uncertainty, rapid change, realignment of power, upheaval and chaotic behaviour. We live
in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense. Ours is a transitional age, a time without the confidence that we can return to any past we have known and with no confidence in any path to a desirable, attainable or sustainable future. It is a time when all choices seem perilous, likely to lead to ruin, if not entirely over the edge of the abyss. (n.p.)

This all-pervading feeling of dread has been inflected in mass-media examples like the ones listed earlier through the rupturing of the intergenerational circuit between parents and children, in which the old world that the parents thought they were preparing their children for, the nostalgic recapitulation of their own lives, is not the one the children will actually grow to adulthood in.

In what follows, I discuss this at length with respect to the development of the Zelda franchise, which likewise registers the sense that the future of a child playing *The Breath of the Wild* in 2017 looks quite different from the future as envisioned by their parents playing the original *Legend of Zelda* on the NES in 1986. Although the Zelda games appear superficially to be remakes of each other, taking advantage of the technical abilities of newer and more sophisticated hardware to retell the same basic story to the next generation of gamers, the mood of the games actually charts the exhaustion of the future in the face of climate change and related modes of ecological crisis. Approaching the Zelda series as a megatext, we find that Hyrule, like our world, cannot be saved; instead, governed by an entropic logic of perpetual decline, we find instead the kingdom inevitably beset by grander and grander superhistorical disasters, in the face of which our protagonists are able to, at best, enact only the most temporary reprieves.

**The Legacy Game**

In his YouTube lecture “The Legacy Film,” a companion piece to his recent case study of franchise fiction, *Star Wars after Lucas*, Dan Golding identifies a pattern in recent blockbuster cinema that seeks to revise completed stories from an earlier moment in American culture—typically the 1980s and early 1990s, the childhood of the generation now raising the preteens and young teenagers to whom Hollywood mega-studios are attempting to extend their reach. In these films we find the return of the protagonist long after their adventures were completed—usually played by the original actors, perhaps most iconically by Harrison
Ford as Han Solo (*The Force Awakens*), Rick Deckard (*Blade Runner 2049*), and Indiana Jones (*Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*)—as their storyworld faces a new challenge that requires the rise of a new hero, to whom the old hero passes the torch. The obvious aging of the original cast of these franchises, and the sense of the passage of time it registers, Golding notes, seems impossible to disentangle from the growing futurological pessimism of the Anthropocene: the pervasive sense that there is no future for the generation that is young now because the uncontrolled and intensifying climate crisis will lay waste to the coordinates of everything we take for granted. The depression and anger of the rising generation at this bleak state of affairs is likely best represented in this moment by the teenage activist Greta Thunberg, who has started a global movement of school strikes in response to the refusal of the adult generation to address the climate crisis in any meaningful way. As is quite common in such figurations, Thunberg’s formulation inflects the climate crisis specifically through the figure of the child: “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words,” she recently raged in a speech at the United Nations. “And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” (Thunberg n.p.)

Thus these narratives typically focus on sublime visual depictions of immense civilizational ruination. To stick with Harrison Ford for a moment, consider the crashed Star Destroyers from a decades-old battle on the desert planet Jakku with which *The Force Awakens* begins; the model city destroyed in a nuclear test at the start of *Crystal Skull*, paralleled by the implosion of the Mayan ruins at its end; or the ruins of Las Vegas where Deckard now lives in hiding in *Blade Runner 2049*. Indeed, legacy films often contain explicit imagery specifically about environmental collapse, sometimes allegorical but often quite explicitly realistic (the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner 2049* has been bisected by sea walls to keep the ocean at bay, while San Diego has been transformed from a prosperous and beautiful coastal town to an immense, hyperpolluted megalopolis). Perhaps in accord with this spirit of pessimism, in a cultural moment where the continuity of human civilization seems to be in dire threat, in these films we frequently see the moment of the passing of the torch fail, both diegetically within the

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2 The solar-system-destroying “Starkiller Base” and the black holes generated by alien xenotechnology that consume the Mayan ruins would be the more allegorical counterparts for climate change in *The Force Awakens* and *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. 
terms of the storyworld (Han Solo is murdered in a moment of blighted reconciliation by his son, who has turned to the Dark Side of the Force; 2049's main protagonist K dies while the now-old Deckard lives) and nondiegetically in terms of the larger political economy of blockbuster cinema (both Crystal Skull and Blade Runner 2049 were disappointments for their studios, with planned extensions of the franchises not moving forward as a result).

The Legend of Zelda series, as a mass-market transmedia franchise with an immense storyworld developed over decades and by many authors under what seeks to be, but rarely is, a singular creative vision, shares many of the same thematic and structural problems as the legacy film, albeit inflected through games rather than cinema. Typically attributed auteur-style to its original producer, Shigeru Miyamoto, though in reality reflecting the profit-seeking and product development needs of the Nintendo corporation, The Legend of Zelda is now itself legacy media, nostalgically preoccupied with its own sense of generational time, with all the attendant melancholy that that form typically entails. And, like other legacy media, it too is Anthropocenic in theme and tone, unable to think of the future except in terms of anti-utopian and apocalyptic futurity (often to the point of undoing its own sense of narrative catharsis), while still containing tantalizing glimmers of utopian possibility here and there at the margins. Gaming, as an immersive media form, complicates the work of the legacy film by staging a different, more intense engagement with the Anthropocene than more passive traditional media, which we see marked among other places by the hundreds of hours of gameplay required to fully explore Breath of the Wild's storyworld. If the Anthropocene is a grim accounting of the costs of the technologically fueled progress made over the twentieth century, whose bill has now unhappily come due, it may be only in a game like Breath of the Wild that we can fully come to psychic terms with the immensity of the crisis we now collectively face, and the full costs of ecological devastation that will be borne not by today's parents or grandparents but rather by its teenagers and young children.

3 In particular, Zelda games were typically an occasion for Nintendo to develop and/or promote new hardware, a expression of their design tokened by the fact that so many of them bracket development cycles (for instance being released on both the outgoing and the emerging Nintendo game systems simultaneously). The use of novel controller inputs and outputs—for instance the development of "rumble" technology as haptic feedback, or the use of the Wii's gyroscope motion scenes to mirror the swing of a sword—are frequently highlighted in each generation's Zelda game as a means of advertising the new system's capabilities; in Breath of the Wild, the character Link even acquires a technological device plainly modeled on the Switch itself, which he frequently uses to interact with his environment.
In An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture, Frans Māyrā notes Miyamoto’s status as an auteur among auteurs in video games, “virtually ... an institute in himself, gaining the status as the most successful game designer of all time” (75). Important to my argument in this article, Māyrā points to David Sheff’s discussion in Game Over—How Nintendo Conquered the World of how part of Miyamoto’s success derives precisely from his “vision and sensitivity to what is universally appealing to adults as well as children” (Māyrā 75). “They [adults] respond, Miyamoto feels, because the games bring them back to their childhoods. ‘It is a trigger to again become primitive, primal, as a way of thinking and remembering,’ Miyamoto says” (Sheff 50-1, qtd. in Māyrā 75). However, we see in the case of Breath of the Wild the game is simultaneously also a registration of the impenetrable barrier between the adult’s old childhood and the child’s current one; when “we” remember “our” childhoods in Breath of the Wild, we are encountering something we can now no longer be retrieved—something Wild is acutely aware of on the levels of both narrative and gameplay.

A Brief History of Hyrule

In the original 1986 game developed by Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka, we find The Legend of Zelda distilling the routine conventions of the high-fantasy genre down nearly to its essence; to save the kingdom, a special boy has to rescue a special girl from a demon. The game introduces a number of key mechanics that recur in different ways across the later series. The first of these we might call developmentalism: when you begin you have only three hearts and don’t even have a sword, but through development you can gain maximum power, killing with a single blow enemies who at the beginning of the game were too powerful for you to even engage at all.5

4 See also Jennifer DeWinter’s discussion of Miyamoto as author in How to Play Video Games, which discusses in part how Miyamoto’s core game mechanic of exploration is closely tied to nostalgia for his own childhood “exploring caves in Sonobe, Japan” (179).

5 As Ian Bogost notes in How to Do Things with Video Games, this “experience of weakness” at the beginning of Zelda games exists only to later be transcended, giving the player a sense of accomplishment; Bogost compares the developmental experience of a Zelda game to a genocide simulator like Darfur Is Dying, where “weakness is all the player ever gets. There is no magic to invoke, no heroic lineage to appeal to; strength adequate to survive is simply inaccessible” (19).
A second core mechanic introduced in *The Legend of Zelda* is the divide between the "overworld" and the "underworld": some limitations and narrative bottlenecks aside, the storyworld could be explored and the dungeons completed in any order, with many secrets that did not need to be unlocked at all to finish the main plot. The form of the map—as a record of progress and hider of secrets—thus becomes key to Zelda gameplay, with an attendant player focused on exploring and manipulating environments rather than seeing them as mere background or set dressing; this would be intensified by later entries in the series which would see familiar locations like Death Mountain and the Lost Woods return again and again, allowing players to construct a sense of Hyrule as a lived environment with conventions and rules, even a sort of working internal ecological logic of discrete climatological regions with water tables, rain patterns, and geographically specific prey and predator species.

*Maps of the overworld of The Legend of Zelda (1986)*

*The overworld of Breath of the Wild (2017)*
These two mechanics are somewhat in tension with each other, a tension that runs through many of the later Zelda games as well—how does a narrative of development become an open sandbox where you can do anything in any order?—even as the basic coordinates of the series rarely change in any of its sequels, with a special boy having to become powerful in order to save a special girl from a demon. Navigating this tension in audience expectations can be a struggle for the developers, who frequently discover that fans of the series found one or the other element to be imbalanced, but it can also be quite productive and pleasurable as a gaming experience. Zelda games are immensely replayable, even as the stories themselves can be quite flat. The nonlinear storytelling offers opportunities to replay the game in entirely different ways from the first run-through, either through the developer’s own scrambling of game assets to produce new gaming experiences (as with the famous “second quest” included on the original NES cartridge, which establishes from the beginning the iterative nature of Zelda games, that this same story happens over and over even as the specifics change) as well as by player- and fan-community-generated challenges (solving the story a second time by solving the dungeons in a completely different order, or adding conditions to make the game more difficult, as in “swordless” playthroughs where the player beats the first game without ever picking up Link’s weapon).

A third core mechanic contributes to this replayability as well: what we might call an interpretive opacity, which ultimately helped produce an immersive secondary storyworld co-created by developers and by fans. Especially due to limitations of the original 8-bit format, much of the backstory and explanation for the storyworld is presented only by implication, if at all, with paratexts like the manual, guides like Nintendo Power, the sequels, fan-fictional criticism on the sequels, and only quite late official Nintendo-branded merchandise filling in the large gaps of what is actually learned by the player on screen.\(^6\) The player is thus empowered to close the gaps in what is presented through their own imagination and interpretation, taking the basic named elements (Link, Zelda, Ganon, Hyrule, the Triforce of Power) and remixing them

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\(^6\) This sort of autogeneration of fan community was a key part of Zelda from the beginning of the franchise; as Jennifer DeWinter notes, despite the “solitary” nature of the gameplay, the game “compelled people to get together at school or at work and talk about the game,” not only to compare progress in the narrative but to share discoveries (180). The arbitrary nature of some of the puzzle solutions and hidden locations—not out of step with the difficulty of other computer games of the period, but still sometimes verging on the truly inscrutable—only contributed to this need on the part of the players to talk about the game with other people.
in ways that make sense to each individual player. As with much SF
and fantasy, the storyworld’s undeveloped background becomes a field
for creative play for fans, with fandoms coalescing around explication
and explanation of the game narrative. As the series went on and more
and more sequels were produced, the initial core elements became
recognizable and an essential part of any entry in the series, expanding
beyond the initial repetition of the named elements above to other
iconography that is repeated over and over: Link’s use of bombs and a
boomerang as tools, his acquisition of a powerful weapon eventually
known as the Master Sword, fairies that heal you, repeated enemies and
non-player-character helper species, reused locations and geographic
formations, and so on.

Already in the much-maligned first sequel, The Adventures of Link
(NES 1987), we see one of the core developments of this retrofitted
narrative continuity come into focus. Here we find Link—who, this
iteration is specifically the same Link from the first game—tasked
with awakening a different princess (confusingly also named Zelda),
who has been sleeping under a magical curse since time immemorial;
gathering the two Triforces from the first game (Power and Wisdom)
with a third Triforce in this one (Courage), he awakens the princess,
prevents the resurrection of Ganon, and becomes king. It’s only in
this sequel, of course, that Zelda becomes a proper franchise, with an
ongoing storyworld that is evaluated not simply by the terms of this or
that individual game but by the relationship among them all—and so a
certain obvious problem quickly emerges: how many times is this one
guy going to fight Ganon and rescue a lady named Zelda?

Various solutions to this structural narrative problem were developed
both by the development teams producing the games and by the fans
consuming them, most of them variations on the idea that the original Link
and the original Zelda from the original game are only the latest of a long,
intergenerational series of heroes and princesses (re-)enacting the same
basic story over and over again. Over the following decades, especially
after the rise of the Internet made nonlocal fan communities easier than
ever to maintain, the fan community—picking up on hints and insinuations
trickled out by Nintendo—tended to treat the Zelda franchise as if it were

7 The first sequel, produced somewhat rapidly due to the original’s smash success,
introduces some unpopular game mechanics like limited lives and side-scrolling
that would not often be used again (as well as many elements that would be, like
the mana gauge to go with the heart gauge, and storyworld elements like the Dark
Link antagonist and the notion that there are actually three Triforces). Future sequels
navigated the necessary interplay between similarity/repetition and difference/novelty
in franchise media with much more success.
unfolding out of a single, official timeline of events in the Kingdom of Hyrule, which it was the work of fans to faithfully reconstruct. And, whether or not Nintendo was ever actually working internally with such a document, it has released multiple and mutually contradictory versions of such a timeline over the years, perhaps most “officially” in the *Hyrule Historia* (*The Silmarillion* of the Zelda storyworld) in 2011.

It would be fair to say that the possibilities and constraints of this fabricated, post-hoc coherence would become a key part of development in the Zelda franchise after *The Adventures of Link: Game 3, A Link to the Past* (SNES 1991), a prequel, formalizes this notion of a longer mythopoetic “Zelda timeline” in which many different heroes have arisen in many different times of need for Hyrule, taking variations on the same archetypal positions each time; the game posits the existence of a “Dark World” (a shadow plane something on the order of the “Upside Down” of *Stranger Things*, from which the evil in Hyrule emanates).\(^6\) This interest in fictional mythic history is intensified by the time-travel mechanic in the fourth game, *The Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 64 1998), which sees a single Link traveling back and forth within his own timeline to save Zelda (even using the time-travel mechanic deliberately to solve puzzles that open new parts of the world for exploration). Link moves back and forth between his childhood, before Ganon took over Hyrule, and his adulthood, after Ganon’s victory, ultimately defeating Ganon in the adult era and then returning to his childhood to live out his life in a happier timeline where Ganon never took over Hyrule in the first place. Already in *Ocarina of Time* we see some of the darker, Anthropocenic formulations of the Zelda series taking shape, perhaps most directly in this suggestion that there is no way to defeat the crisis represented by Ganon except through magical suspension of the series’ own rules (i.e., by preventing the game from having ever happened in the first place). The sequel, *Majora’s Mask* (Nintendo 64/GameCube 2000), shifts the time travel of *Ocarina* into something more like the time-loop in *Groundhog’s Day*; here, the Child Link visits a parallel universe version of the Hyrule he knows, which is facing an impending apocalyptic collision with its moon; every time the moon crashes into Termina and the world is destroyed, Link is sent back in time to the beginning of the game to try again.

\(^6\) A sequel to *A Link to the Past, Link’s Awakening* (Game Boy 1993), recently rereleased for the Switch in 2019, takes an almost parodic attitude towards this sort of franchise self-seriousness, including without explanation sprites from the Mario and Kirby franchises before ending with a flagrant and unapologetic “it was all a dream” escape hatch. A similar attempt to escape the confines of continuity by refusing to participate in the larger Hyrule storyworld can be seen in *Majora’s Mask*. 
At this point in the development of the Zelda franchise storyworld, something very strange happens. Rather than continuing in this mold indefinitely, adding a new Link, a new Zelda, and a new game mechanic to a single diegetic timeline every time it releases a new game, Nintendo instead chooses to establish multiple timelines that proceed out of each of the different eras visited in Ocarina of Time. Majora's Mask followed a Link who was restored to his childhood after defeating Ganon (the “Child Timeline”), with the ultimate implication that this Link never actually returns to Hyrule at all—while the next major installment, Wind Waker, takes place several hundred years after Link defeated Ganon as an adult (the “Adult Timeline”) and then disappeared into the past, in a timeline that nonetheless continued on without him. Eventually, Ganon returned, but Link did not, leading to a scenario where the kingdom was permanently destroyed by a mega-flood. In still another Anthropocenic premediation of the climate crisis, the player navigates a Hyrule that is now an archipelago of tiny islands, with scattered survivors living on what was the tips of the mountains in the other games. Subsequent games in the series follow one or the other timeline, in a convoluted schema that is never explained in any game materials and can only be understood with completely extra-diegetic online research; Twilight Princess (Game Cube/Wii 2006) takes place in the Child Timeline, for instance, while Phantom Hourglass (Nintendo DS 2007) and Spirit Tracks (Wii 2009) take place in the post-flood Adult Timeline.

What had seemed like the main timeline, the series of games that had begun with the 1986 Zelda and proceeded through A Link to the Past, is now designated as a sort of dead-end timeline that takes place—or would have taken place—if the hero of Ocarina of Time had been defeated. Everything we’d seen in the original instantiations of the legends is now therefore retrospectively re-interpreted as having taken place within a post-apocalyptic milieu; we find out, years late, why Hyrule had always been so empty.
The multiple timelines of the Zelda franchise, courtesy of Wikipedia.

The last major installment in the series before Breath of the Wild, Skyward Sword (2011), is another prequel, presenting the Promethean origin of all these events as a battle with a demon whose soul is imprisoned in the Master Sword, granting it its power, and who in revenge curses all of their descendants to be constantly bedeviled by his reincarnated rage in the form of Ganon for all time, and apparently across all possible timelines. We see here the culmination of Zelda’s increasingly dour understanding of itself. In short, across the Zelda franchise, Hyrule becomes understood as simply a cursed place, where Ganon can never be defeated; he has either already won, or is about to, or he will the next time. Where early games posit dungeons, actively managed by Ganon and his minions, the later games tend to posit ruins instead, whether deep undersea (Wind Waker) or simply lost to the passage of time (Breath of the Wild). Accordingly the thrill of victory over evil that characterized the early plot resolutions in the franchise soon gives way to the thrill of “exploration” as the games develop, and even the affective character of this exploration shifts from a frontier

9 The games that don’t focus specifically on the exploration of ruins tend to generate the same sort of depressive affect in different terms: in Spirit Tracks, for instance, the network of magical railroads that connects locations in Hyrule is fading away, while by the end of Phantom Hourglass the titular device is now exhausted and empty, giving both games a similar melancholic air—and Twilight Princess sees Link himself corrupted by the dark forces inhabiting Hyrule and turned into a werewolf.
logic of expansion to a post-frontier logic of excavation and only ever partial recovery of what has been permanently lost (including, frequently, Easter Egg references to the other games, as in Wind Waker, when one is able to sail around the very top of what in the other games was “Death Mountain,” now just another tiny island in the archipelago of Hyrule).


This tendency too reaches its fullest expression in Breath of the Wild, where the sandbox form of the Zelda franchise takes center stage almost to the point of absurdity. At some point, characters are simply begging you to just defeat Ganon already, which it is possible to do shockingly early, though the typical experience of most players is to spend many dozens of hours on side quests instead— including one where you have to find 900 “Korok seeds” scattered in remote locations all over the world, an absurdly pointless achievement that ultimately earns you “Hestu’s Gift,” which has the visual appearance and textual description of a piece of poop. Part of players’ hesitation to beat the game flows out of the structural programming logic of Wild; unlike most other recent open-world games, like Super Mario Odyssey also released for the Switch in 2017, it is not possible to continue playing the game after the final boss fight in Breath of the Wild. One cannot inhabit the restored Hyrule after Ganon has been defeated, or even see it. Indeed, as I discuss below, the final cutscene admits that even Link and Zelda themselves can already see that the world has not actually been sustainably restored at all. Rather than allowing the player a victory lap, or allowing them to continue the exploration, hunting, crafting, and side-quests that have comprised the bulk of gameplay experience, the game simply ends.
As I suggest in my conclusion, I do not find that players’ general reluctance to beat the game is politically suggestive of some deferral or denial of the urgency of the real-life climate crisis (which, alas, will require significantly more effort than a single mythic battle with a vile demon). Instead, I see this reluctance as a registration of the game’s quietly powerful environmentalist aesthetics, and the immense pleasure of wandering even a virtualized natural world without a proper “goal.” In *Breath of the Wild* we see a revision of the colonizing, power-fantasy impulse of the earlier games in the franchise in another important way as well. By and large you are exploring a place that has already been fully explored, which is new only to Link because he has suffered a traumatic injury causing him to lose most of his memories, and/or because this decadent, late-stage Kingdom of Hyrule has forgotten most of its own Golden Age past. While there is undoubtedly fun to be had in uncovering each of the game’s many hidden underground shrines, the aesthetics of each of the sites remain focused on ruination and abandonment rather than real recovery or rebirth. There is thus nothing truly new to discover in *Wild’s* Hyrule; instead, what typically greets you in each new location you uncover is simply another tragic story about someone else Link failed to save the last time all this happened.

The franchise logic of the Zelda series is thus an exemplary instance of Golding’s legacy media, in which a narrative that was originally intended for children is never actually abandoned as those children age, leading to the storyworld becoming darker and darker in its themes even as it is continually introduced to a new generation of children ostensibly taking up the property for the first time. Star Wars may be the paradigmatic example of this tendency, though the Marvel Cinematic Universe has fallen into a similar pattern with *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. What began as a relatively uncomplicated power fantasy about justice and restoration becomes, over time, a grim meditation on the death of all things (*Endgame*) as well as the inevitable failure of heroes (the post-*Return-of-the-Jedi* Star Wars films, which see the fairytale defeat of the Emperor and the triumph of the Rebellion inexplicably transmogrified into a storyworld where the fascists came back, Luke Skywalker is a defeated and miserable failure, pathetically living in hiding, and Han and Leia’s child is a deeply damaged school-shooter who ultimately murders his own father as well as his classmates).

The boundary-breaking nature of this kind of legacy media can be seen in a different mode in the recent trend of bringing back situation comedies from the 1990s, most notably *Fuller House* on Netflix, which sees the children of the original *Full House* series grown up and raising their own children; *Fuller House* not only sees D.J. Tanner (Candace
Cameron-Bure) now a single parent, widowed in the precise way her own father had earlier been widowed, but sees the other children from the original series who are now lonely, divorced, and/or ostracized from the family as well. An Onion A.V. Club review of the series captures nicely the disturbing nature of returning to characters we knew as children as adults in legacy media, especially with regard to their sexualization; it calls Fuller House a “porn parody” of the original series (Alston n.p.). I would suggest this observation can be extended to the form of legacy media more generally; in legacy media, the violence of the Anthropocene is the transgressive excess—the obscene supplement—to our nostalgia, poisoning the innocence of both the original and the reboot with their unexpectedly adult reimaginings. Breath of the Wild falls into this trap both metaphorically and literally, as we will see in its last-minute sexualization of Zelda’s body, discussed in my conclusion below.

The depressive, almost perversely adult atmosphere of this sort of legacy media is further complicated and intensified in video games by the extreme usefulness of the apocalypse itself as programming strategy. In much the same way that the trope of the “desert planet” provides a usefully austere backdrop for a science fiction epic, a post-apocalyptic Hyrule provides a nicely depopulated, blank backdrop for adventures that don’t require thriving cities or lots of complicated, multidirectional interactions with complex NPCs. This of course is the true reason, outside the storyworld, why Hyrule is empty, has always been empty, and must always be empty; you can do more with your game system’s limited memory capacity when you don’t have to program any people.

Taken together, these two tendencies have the effect of a huge number of games, both inside and outside the legacy format, that in the context of the Anthropocene and the near-term unsustainability of our political and economic institutions seem easily recast as dread premeditations of a coming era of apocalypse, in which we will loot and murder our neighbors in an emptied-out and ruined America: see Fallout, The Last of Us, Fortnite, to take only two very prominent recent examples. We’re practicing for—training our children and grandchildren for—something bad we think is just around the corner.

Conclusion: Breath of The Wild and the Anthropocene

Breath of the Wild follows this larger paradigm of gaming in the Anthropocene quite closely. Retaining the developmentalist logic of the franchise, it sees Link literally wake up naked and alone, forcing the player to accrue sufficient power to survive. But we quickly discover
something is amiss; Link is amnesiac, and (as a player will soon come to expect from some of the story hints surrounding the opening), he’s not waking up at the beginning of his story but somewhere in the middle. In fact, we’re in another post-apocalyptic scenario: in the far future of the Zelda timeline, an unspecified number of centuries after all the other games, and perhaps the inevitable future of all three possible timelines, yet another incarnation of Zelda and Link arose and gathered to themselves “champions” of all the various nonhuman races introduced in all the various games¹⁰ to defeat Ganon and save Hyrule once again. Only this time the magic didn’t work: Ganon kills all the champions and destroys the kingdom. Zelda casts a spell to freeze Ganon in time in his moment of triumph, while Link limps away to be hidden in time for a hundred years when they’ll have another chance. Diegetically, this is revealed with the game is seen as only one in a series of apocalyptic battles with Ganon; across his journeys Link finds traces of the full history of The Legend of Zelda franchise and the countless times Ganon has returned only to be defeated by a Zelda and a Link, with no clear explanation provided for why this time was any different than all the others. Indeed, the techno-organic cocoon that puts Link to sleep for a hundred years and the Transformer-like robotic animals the champions use for battle are both remnants of a hyper-advanced ancient civilization that has itself long since fallen into ruin, millennia before Link’s time. These are the ruins which Link has to plunder to solve his quest; even the broken Hyrule that Link and Zelda seek to restore is thus simply a pale imitation of the full heights of power and prosperity it once achieved but cannot reach any longer. In true Anthropocene fashion, too, we see the malice of this technology alongside its transformative possibilities; periodically the ruined “Guardian” automatons one encounters in the fields of Hyrule, an ancient automation technology from the lost Hyrulean Golden Age corrupted by Ganon’s malice, will suddenly awake and attack you with superweapons, and for most of the game your only option is to run away before the robot’s laser is able to lock on and kill you instantly.

In Breath of the Wild you thus once again wander a desolate Hyrule, largely emptied of people, though here you’re presented with a novel storyworld reason why this should be so, and confronted over and over again with a logic of preemptive failure, including the vile traces of Canon’s victory that have rendered much of the landscape itself toxic.

¹⁰ These are the bird people (the Rito), the mermaid people (the Zora), the rock people (the Goron), and, reflecting the masculinist preconceptions of the franchise, a group of desert thieves and bandits whose primary deviation from “the human” seems to be that they are all women (the Gerudo).
In the end, though, Link is able to excavate all the shrines necessary to regain his full power, gather new champions to himself, gain all the weapons he needs from the ruins of the first golden age shrine’s (including the extra ones included in the special DLC), free Zelda, and defeat Ganon for real this time. The end! (At least until Breath of the Wild 2, of course, currently scheduled for release in 2020 or 2021.)

While Ganon is ostensibly defeated, the overall mood of Breath of the Wild remains mournful and defeatist, as the clearest token of the player’s growing power is the recovery of the robot-animals once piloted by his dead compatriots (whose ghosts all sadly reappear to say a final goodbye at the completion of each mini-quest). Indeed, the character who Link encounters in the initial “training” sequence turns out to be the ghost of Zelda’s father, the rightful king, who likewise dematerializes forever once the player is ready to proceed. This initial, funereal encounter with irrecoverable loss colors everything that follows. Nearly all the gear Link finds in the game are the rusted and broken remnants of the army defeated by Ganon during his rise to power, left by the soldiers’ unburied bodies in the fields, or else plundered from the ruins of the defiled, wrecked Hyrule Castle. Unlike previous entries in the franchise, these weapons constantly break on the player, a game mechanic which forces them to constantly seek out new weapons caches and gravesites to loot. Hyrule in this formulation is thus both multiply haunted by an overawing mood of defeat that the perfunctory victory sequence at the end of the game cannot hope to exorcise (and indeed cannot ever “stick,” by the game’s own programming structure—because the player is not able to save the game or continue playing after Ganon’s defeat, in gameplay terms the final victory is necessarily always forestalled). An optional side quest tasks Link with helping to build a new settlement, which becomes a thriving town if followed through to completion—but despite this there is precious little in the game to suggest that Hyrule can ever return to its former glory, or that it has the replacement population necessary to survive even another few decades (one sees half a dozen children in the game at most).

In all this pessimism it would be a stretch to suggest there is anything politically radical or salutary about the main plot of Breath of the Wild. But the game’s allegorized focus on environmental and societal collapse does make it highly relevant for the contemporary moment of climate crisis, and its interest in female characters (long neglected and ill-used by the series) does feel like a significant update to an outdated mythos. Mipha, one of the original champions, is among the most uncomplicatedly noble heroes of the story, and the Gerudo society of all women is the last space of functional urban human civilization anywhere in the world,
secured in part by the absolute refusal to allow any men to enter their city (to get in at all you have to embark on an unexpected crossdressing side quest). The fairies in this game, too, go from tiny in the previous entries in the franchise to gargantuan in *Wild*, suggesting reserves of untold power. We even come to understand that the core game mechanic of recovering Link’s memories—an optional side quest that can be somewhat difficult to complete—was really only ever about recovering his memory of Zelda’s power and her initial lack of confidence, which she ultimately overcomes. In a real sense it is Zelda, not Link, who is the central hero of the game, a turn that is counter in some sense to the spirit of the entire franchise and something Miyamoto has essentially vowed never to allow to occur on-screen.† (Zelda has never been a playable character in any mainline *Legend of Zelda* game, though she is playable in spinoffs like *Hyrule Warriors* and in ancillary, noncanonical materials like *Super Smash Brothers*.) If, as Kate Lewis Hood has written, “feminist critiques of the ‘abstract masculinity, triumphant whiteness, and hegemonic able-bodiedness’ that implicitly constitute a unitary ‘human’ subject need to be amplified rather than abandoned in the Anthropocene” (Hood n.p., summarizing and quoting Rosi Braidotti), then *Breath of the Wild* offers a tantalizingly cosmopolitan, even utopian view of what this sort of Anthropocene feminism‡ might eventually look like: heroism massively distributed across multiple subject positions, cutting across race, gender, class, and disability lines, organized under female rather than male leadership, in the service of restoring a world doomed by the failures of its previous generations.

But unfortunately the game cannot sustain even this slim gesture. In the game’s “true ending”—the secret ending unlocked when one has acquired all of Link’s lost memories, consisting of an after-the-credits sequence reminiscent of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films—we see the exuberance of their victory already fading. There is immediately a renewed threat; the magic robot-animals they unlocked to defeat Ganon have already mysteriously begun to fail, and there are reports of other trouble in the outlands. Zelda announces that the kingdom has been saved and that they can restore Hyrule to its “former glory” (and “perhaps...

† See Eddie Makuch’s “Link Will Always Be Hero of Main Zelda Games, Miyamoto Says”: “…If we have princess Zelda as the main character who fights, then what is Link going to do?” [Zelda producer Eiji Aonuma] said. “Taking into account that, and also the idea of the balance of the Triforce, we thought it best to come back to this [original] makeup” (Makuch n.p.).

‡ This term was coined by Richard Grusin, Rebekah Sheldon, Dehlia Hannah, and Emily Clark, the title of an edited collection on the subject that Hood is reviewing in her piece.
even beyond"), but in a sort of sad frontier optimism even she seems not quite to believe in—and in any event she's a queen with no subjects and no kingdom to rule. Third, her power—the power she'd just used to defeat Ganon once and for all—is already diminishing, making her available to be saved in the next one just like always; this is accompanied by a decision to suddenly focus on the curves of her backside in the game's final cutscene, tokening her renewed availability as a sexual object for Link (and for the assumed-to-be-male player controlling him), rather than as co-protagonist or even rightful leader.

"Link and Zelda are victorious, but their work has only begun, and they have "so many painful memories that [they] must bear."

Breath of the Wild.

Despite the game's surface interrogation of the Hyrule fantasy, then, in the unlocked "true" ending to Breath of the Wild we see the foundational tension inherent in the difference between "legacy" and "franchise" already reemerging, and registering once more the larger crisis of the Anthropocene: We remain trapped in a story whose bad ending we think we already know, and know we don't want, but can't figure any possible way to change. Wild's Hyrule is a broken place, always on the edge of destruction, with ruins built on top of ruins, and where nothing works or lasts—any material you salvage from the ruins, even the best swords and shields, last for only a few battles at most. In this final sense its most radical gesture may be in its refusal of narrative telos altogether; with Ganon reachable from nearly the start of the game and relatively easy to defeat, nearly the entire game is optional, and as noted above most players spend far more time simply wandering the storyworld at leisure.
than making a serious effort to end the story in a dedicated fashion. Traveling Hyrule—not using the game’s in-built fast-travel teleportation mechanic, but simply walking across it, or riding on horseback across its vast plains and beautiful forests—is immensely pleasurable. In such moments the game essentially becomes a walking simulator, as the player is exposed to multiple environments and weather systems as they cross the continent from one side to the other and back again.

In this way Breath of the Wild is an Anthropocene game in form as well as in theme, in terms that need not be exclusively negative. Remarkably for a console game typically played indoors, it forces the player to reflect on their relationship to everything outside. Indeed, one of the chief franchise mechanics it brings back is the series’ focus on nonhuman life, not only its monsters or its rabbits, squirrels, birds, and wolves but especially its horses, which one must not only tame but “bond with” to ride successfully. Hyrule, in its total ruination, is now very much a horse society, linked by a network of stables that are one of the few institutions still functioning after the collapse—and players will likely find themselves very attached to their horses, with a new “horse fairy” game mechanic even existing to resurrect a horse who has died (and who will brutally punish the player if the player murdered the horse). The last portion of the player’s climactic battle against Ganon, in his “final form,” even has one of your horses appear seemingly out of nowhere to help you defeat him, further showing the central importance of the horses to the player experience in Wild. In its quiet, contemplative moments of lonely travel—often with no particular direction in mind, with only your horse as a companion—Wild reveals itself as a different sort of preparation for the Anthropocene than the sort of looting-and-murder simulator discussed above: a celebration of nature and the nonhuman in its wonderful and irreducible strangeness; a computerized model of the soul-nourishing work of companionship and care, both within and across species; and even, perhaps, a necessary act of preemptive collective grief for a world we can all feel disappearing beneath our feet.

The game also brings back cuccos, a chicken-like species introduced in A Link to the Past whose powers of flight the player can exploit—and, in an echo of the horse fairy’s vengeance against horse-killing players, as in previous incarnations of the franchise the cuccos will brutally swarm and attack Link if you do harm to any of their number.
Works Cited


