Zelda 64 and Video Game Fans

A Walkthrough of Games, Intertextuality, and Narrative

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This article argues that to better understand and theorize video games and game playing, it is necessary to study the activities of gamers themselves. This research examines game fans' construction of walkthroughs, which guide other players through the action and story of the game. It is argued that these walkthroughs function as narratives for gamers, which are read intertextually by game fans. Further, gamers should be considered active creators of meaning regarding games, as they exhibit many of the characteristics of traditional media fans, including active reading of the media text, construction of media texts to share with other fans, and knowledge of intertextual relations between various media forms.

Keywords: *video games; computer games; fans; intertextuality; media studies; walkthroughs; narrative; game players*

"As Link traveled slowly through a misty forest, two mischievous fairies watched his progress with interest. Tael and his older sister, Tatl, were friends with a forest imp named Skull Kid, who had recently waylaid the Happy Mask Vendor and stolen the powerful and cursed Majora's Mask. Skull Kid and his two fairy friends had had much fun making mischief in Hyrule and beyond."

—*The Legends of Zelda*

"A rouge imp named Stalkid jumps in and searches Link for valuables. He finds the ocarina of time and rides off with Epona just as Link comes to."

—*Zelda Power*

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Video games have become an important form of mass media, yet they remain understudied and misunderstood. Last year, U.S. entertainment software sales totaled $6 billion, and game rentals grossed more than $918 million (Interactive Digital Software Association 2002). It has been estimated that about sixty percent of all Americans play or have played video/computer games. Individual games have become multimillion-dollar enterprises, produced by large media corporations working with other businesses to produce "synergies" for their products through licensing character images, crossover movie deals, and in some cases television shows. Games (including computer games, console games, and arcade games) are here to stay; yet, little academic attention has been paid to them.

Early research on games focused on their impact on children, mainly from a psychological or social-psychological perspective (Greenfield 1984; Loftus and Loftus 1983). This research examined games in light of fear of game "addiction" and game violence, as well as the fear that they were a new (and even worse) substitute for television, the infamous "plug-in drug" for kids. Researchers also examined how games were working themselves into kids' media culture, and they scrutinized gender and its representation in games (Kinder 1991). More recently, as gamers have grown up and as games have become more sophisticated in terms of graphics, sound, plot, and marketing, the focus of research is shifting as well. Academics have studied the politics of the girl games movement (Brunner, Bennett, and Honey 1998; Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Kafai 1998; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1998), and some have moved away from a focus on children and their development to consider narrative and its role in games and game play (Fuller and Jenkins 1995; Herz 1997; Juul 1998, 2000; Murray 1999; Poole 2000). My research interest regards narrative but also how gamers themselves see narrative and its role in games. Although my focus on narrative is not new, my attention to (older and/or adult) gamers as active meaning makers is, especially as I examine their online published writings about narrative and game play and use this evidence in arguing for the importance of some form of narrative in games.

What is narrative exactly? In his examination of narrative, history, and social theory, Alex Callinicos quotes Lawrence Stone's definition of narrative: "the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots" (1995, 45). This definition is very broad but is useful for thinking about video games. When describing a game's plot, for example, most people would describe events that occurred and put them in the order that they happened, in order for the listener to make better sense of them. Extraneous material is likely filtered out, leaving the most relevant information as the narrative. Narratives offer beginnings and endings, and games do as well. But what have researchers of games said about narrative?

Perhaps because of the relative newness of the research area, most researchers' knowledge of games (especially in the area of narrative theory) comes from their own experiences or those of their children. There has been little, if any, research that systematically explores how gamers themselves think about narrative, and more important, how gamers see games as part of their larger lives or menu of media interests. This article begins this exploration by suggesting that we view gamers as fans and active audiences rather than as children easily influenced by violence and sexism, in particular.[1] Second, if we consider their activities beyond gaming, new ideas about narrative and its place and importance in games will emerge. Before moving to a focus on gamers, however, I first review current theorizing concerning games and narrative and demonstrate where gaps in the analysis are present.

Narrative Theory and Its Relationship to Gaming

In a dialogue published in the original version of *Cybersociety*, Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins (1995) discussed similarities between video games played on a Nintendo system and travel diaries or narratives. Their argument can be stated simply:

> Nintendo's [or any game console's] central feature is its constant presentation of spectacular spaces (or "worlds," to use the game parlance). Its landscapes dwarf characters who serve, in turn, primarily as vehicles for players to move through these remarkable places. Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool, or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough to move between levels, to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen. (P. 61)

Whereas Fuller and Jenkins agree that some sort of narrative occurs in games, their central argument is that such narratives are much more about spatial progression or exploration rather than story telling. They compare games to old-world travel diaries, such as explorations of "strange new lands" undertaken by European men. Thus, video games that allow players to explore new and visually pleasing (but dangerous) levels are similar in some ways to travel diaries that document a long and difficult voyage to a new land, where the traveler must overcome hardships to prevail in their quest (finding a trade route to the Orient, for example) and return home triumphant. Their theorizing has influenced the writing of other researchers, such as Janet Murray (1999) and J. C. Herz (1997), who also argue that game play is generally better at giving players engaging action rather than richly developed stories.

Herz (1997), a journalist and game fan, lays out the central issues involved in the "interactive narrative" problem. She believes that the

inclusion of a narrative focusing on a complex story usually interferes with "good" gaming. This is because of two main reasons: the limitations of the medium and the fundamental differences between traditional narrative and interactive gaming. First, the current technical limits of games (in arcade, computer, and console versions) preclude extensive use of "choose your own adventure"–style gaming. If players were presented with choices for their actions every few minutes and each new option led to a new situation with more choices, the branching paths of the potential story lines would quickly become unmanageable technologically and financially. Thus, some constraints on gamers' control over the story line and characters' actions remain necessary.

This leads to the second problem, where traditional narrative is in conflict with the basic tenets of gaming. Simply put, a good narrative takes a reader/viewer on an adventure, loosely defined, where events happen along the way that are irrevocable and thus usually laden with meaning. For example, the film *Steel Magnolias* gains much of its meaning and emotional impact because a central character dies, and her friends and family must react to and make sense of the event. If the death were optional, the film could not produce the powerful emotions that are associated with Shelby's death. Her death may elicit dislike of the film for some, but because the event is unchangeable, the story maintains its integrity and viewers must deal with the story on its own terms—not theirs. Because games are interactive and repeatable, few if any actions are truly irrevocable (you can always replay the game and avoid the second tunnel). Thus, some of the "drama" arising from traditional narrative is lost in the gaming world. Some games attempt to include a detailed story within game play, usually by including prerecorded live-action or animated sequences. These sequences however, if too frequent, can lead to complaints that games are interactive only in the sense that the player must keep pushing a button to advance a story she cannot control.

Used sparingly, however, these prerecorded sequences can advance a story, or more likely explain the back-story to the game's current dilemma. However, is this true narrative? Poole (2000) argues that in this scenario, games are not truly narrative because what gamers are doing is spending their time moving around spatially (usually solving puzzles) and finding clues or pieces of the back-story that is gradually revealed to them in full by the end of the game. Thus, a narrative is present but not part of real-time game play, and not one that gamers can actually control or change. *Myst* is the best example of this phenomenon, as the game player solves puzzles and travels through a beautiful world to solve a mystery—piecing together the story as they progress.

Murray (1999), on the other hand, takes a more optimistic view toward games and narrative when she suggests that these limitations can eventually

be overcome through the development of more sophisticated technology. She also argues that games do work as narratives that are *compressed*—she suggests that they are ministories or myths that are no less powerful for their simplicity (a hero on a quest to overcome adversity and save the world from evil, for example) or for their difference in form from novels or the theater.

Finally, some game theorists suggest that the best way to deal with the problems of narrative and interactive narrative is simply to discard the terms and theories altogether. Jesper Juul (1998, 2000) is perhaps the leading voice in this regard, calling instead for game theorists to try alternative approaches to understanding games. His suggestion is to look at the concept of time in games and how different types of time exist and affect each other and the player (the time of the back-story, elapsed time of game play, etc.). His suggestion gets around the problems of narrative largely by dismissing them. Although his ideas are new and not well developed currently, they do hold promise for future ways to understand gaming.

Yet, I think it is premature to give up on the idea of narrative in games and its place in helping us understand games and gamers. This view is based on evidence that some gamers' understandings or use of narrative may differ from these theoretical understandings, and it is important to take them into account. As stated earlier, most discussions of narrative in games are based on the researchers' own experiences or those of their families. What do other gamers think of the idea of narrative? Do gamers have alternative ways of thinking about game play? How do gamers' other activities, or use of other media, indicate how they may think differently about narrative? This research explores these questions by examining web pages produced by gamers. These web sites are dedicated to the game *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*.[2] Gamers who produce web sites about a particular game obviously have a strong interest in the game and want to offer other gamers various things—their views of the game, "secret" information about the game or game play, and spaces to talk about the game with other fans. Why was *Majora's Mask*, a role-playing game, chosen as a place to start this analysis of narrative and games?

Narrowing the Focus: Role-Playing Games

This research project narrowed the scope of investigation to help better understand the subject of games. When discussing narrative and its role, very different things can be said, for example, about first-person shooter (FPS) games such as *Doom* (with a very simple story: shoot everything) and role-playing games (RPGs) that span 40-plus hours of game play and involve multiple plots and characters, such as the *Zelda 64* and *Final Fantasy* series. Currently, the top selling game genre (for the year 2000) is strategy/

RPG, with twenty-one percent of the market share (Interactive Digital Software Association 2002). For these reasons—popularity and investment in storytelling over a long game/time period—the focus of this investigation is limited to RPG games, and one game in particular: *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. The game, released for the Nintendo 64 console in 2000, is the latest in a series of Zelda-themed games following the adventures of its main character, Link. Link goes on various quests, and in *Majora's Mask* Link must save the world from destruction in three days' time, as the world is moving in *Groundhog Day* style—being reset every three days.

RPGs as a genre are generally long-form games, requiring many hours to complete. This means that gamers usually invest quite a bit of time in game play and usually develop affinities for the story, characters, and game-play style that is common across the genre and various series. Many of these games are similar in tone or theme to their paper predecessor—Dungeons & Dragons—in which individuals created characters that they adventured with through various worlds, exploring and advancing along the way. Although groups usually play paper Dungeons & Dragons games, commitment to character and story usually remain the same in both mediums.

However, gamers also share affinities with other media users—in particular, fans of various television programs, such as *Star Trek*. Through their time commitment to individual games and game series, and their more active role in playing a game, gamers are akin to the active television viewers—and fans—studied and theorized by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (1992) and John Fiske in *Television Culture* (1987).

Both of these theorists argue that when individuals engage with media products, they do not do so passively, unquestioningly accepting whatever they see and/or hear. Instead, many (if not most) audience members engage in processes of careful reading or scrutiny of media texts, with greater and lesser degrees of acceptance of the views, ideas, and images put forth. Additionally, Jenkins (1992) argues that fans take popular culture materials and read them in sophisticated ways, deconstructing and reconstructing the plots and character motivations by using the history of the show and/or outside knowledge of the show's production history as a basis for connection with other people. Fans can make connections between media content and larger social, cultural, and political issues not directly referenced, and they also enjoy creating their own media content responding to, complementing, or even challenging their initial media consumption. Thus, active audience members, fans in particular, challenge media researchers to look not only at their consumption of the primary object of interest (for example, watching an episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*) but also at how fans interact with other fans, how they make sense of their interests, how their interest is sustained through intertextual means, and how they go beyond mere consumption to active production of media of their own that

comment on, praise, and critique the media products that so interest them. In looking at how fans of television and active audiences are constructed, it becomes easier to see how they are similar to avid gamers in certain respects. Their similarities may include

- strong interest in a show/game/series,
- creating web sites or fan fiction about the object of interest,
- talking with others who share the same interest,
- desire to learn more about the producers and product of interest,

and perhaps most important here:

- sophisticated understanding of the "text" and its place in the greater media marketplace (intertextuality).

The Game Fan: What Is She or He Doing?

When I was growing up in the 1980s, if a friend enjoyed playing *Pac Man*, they could talk about the game with their friends, possibly buy a strategy book that showed the correct sequence to take through the mazes to win, and perhaps buy a t-shirt with a cartoon Pac Man on it, but this was likely the limit of their engagement with the game. Today, however, game players excited about specific games such as *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* can jump on the internet, where they engage in chat, read newsgroups, hang out on Internet Relay Chat, and create and surf web sites devoted to their game of choice.[3] Although games have official sites produced by their creators, there are also numerous sites devoted to games that are created by players of the game who have become fans of the individual game or various game series.

What's on these fan sites? Many sites offer screen shots of the various levels in a game, hints about strategy, background of the characters, details of weapons beneficial to advance and win, quizzes to test knowledge of the game, and sometimes chat rooms where gamers can gather and discuss the game in question, or socialize generally. These sites range in their production value and content categories from the rudimentary (with multiple misspellings, broken links, only a few pictures, or multiple banner ads) to the near professional (with a regular update column, free e-mail accounts for users of the site, chat rooms, multimedia files, and so on) in presentation and substance.

In particular, there is one element that some game fans include on their sites—walkthroughs—that I focus on for this analysis. Walkthroughs are detailed guides to how a player should play a game sequentially to find all of the hidden bonuses and surprises, how to avoid certain death, and how to advance past difficult puzzles or trouble spots to best play and win the

game. Although not all game fans create walkthroughs, their prevalence on the web deserves attention and analysis. The presence of these walkthroughs suggest that game fans are invested in some sort of narrative in games, and some will go to great lengths to create or maintain narrative integrity or cohesiveness. To begin then, let's examine game fan creation of walkthroughs.

Walkthroughs: Virtual Tour Guides Promise the Most Fun, and All Secrets Revealed!

Walkthroughs, as mentioned above, are detailed descriptions of where to go and what to do—in sequential order—to get through a game successfully. Walkthroughs are not completely a fan creation; for the past several years, at least, video game developers have granted licenses to individuals or companies to create "strategy guides" for their games that are released as soon as the game goes on the market, and are sometimes packaged with the game and sold as a bundle. Strategy guides are much more than straightforward walkthroughs, offering character information, back story, multiple screen shots of game play, and hints and possibly "cheat codes" to help players advance quickly, or sometimes to add "unofficial" enjoyment to the game (for example, in the game *Age of Empires*, if you type in the command "pepperoni pizza" you gain a thousand food units, and if you type in various combinations of commands, a catapult launches cows instead of boulders).

The fact that game companies license and encourage the use of walkthroughs suggests that they realize that game players may need help in playing a certain game. (The ethics of this activity, and whether it is cheating or not, is the subject of a future research project.) This is for different reasons: sometimes game designers are not as successful as they could be, and end up designing levels that are too hard for the average gamer or contain flaws or bugs that prevent obvious advancement. Further, as game play increases in length and complexity (as it does especially in RPGs), the potential for players' becoming stuck at various levels increases, just as in very detailed worlds, the fear that a player might miss an enjoyable but not critical experience escalates as well. Thus, strategy guides, especially walkthroughs, were devised as a method to ensure that players did not become needlessly stuck or miss fun parts of the gaming experience.

What is relevant for this study is the number of gamers that have created walkthroughs of their own for other gamers to read. Most of these walkthroughs are dozens of pages in length, with minute levels of detail included. Gamers must play a game multiple times to find and record all of this information, and then must spend additional time writing and organizing it for presentation on a web page. Although results can vary by fan,

the level of work involved and the dedication to the activity, which is usually not paid, can be tremendous.

Some walkthroughs can be very utilitarian in nature, instructing the reader very precisely:

> You can now control Deku Scrub Link. Run over and open the door. Walk through and run down through the hallway till you reach the very end. You should be standing on a ledge with a Deku flower. Jump on top of it and hold down the A button. (Nintendoholic n.d.)

However, other gamers go beyond simple instruction and inject drama or detail into their walkthroughs, making them more interesting to read and sometimes turning them into adventure stories in their own right. For example, one gamer does not call his summaries walkthroughs but "storylines" instead, and rather than refer to various "levels" in the game, he has "chapters" to note different parts. He uses many details and an engaging style to keep the reader interested at the same time they are looking for clues on how to proceed:

> As Skull Kid escaped into an open door, Tatl rammed into Link to keep him back. Unfortunately, when the door closed behind Skull Kid, the poor fairy was left behind with Link. Offering a brief (and insincere) apology for her previous conduct, Tatl offered to join Link and help him find Skull Kid. Using Deku Flowers to float through caves, Link found his way to a dirty building filled with moving gears and gadgets. Above he could faintly hear the ticking of a clock. Suddenly, the Happy Mask Vendor of Hyrule emerged from the shadows and revealed that he had been following Link. (The Legends of Zelda web site n.d.)

Compare this passage with a more straightforward account:

> Open the large door and run to the end of the hall, where you will be introduced to your Faerie companion for this game, Tatl. After you two team up, she will explain how Link (as the Deku) can use the flowers that are on the ground to glide across large gaps. Glide over to the door on the other side of the room, and enter it to access a large canyon with many platforms. Dive into the first flower and glide over to the platform in front on you. Once there use the flower to get to the platform to your left, where you will find a treasure chest containing a Deku Nut. (Zelda 2000 web site n.d.)

Or even more plainly stated:

> One of his fairy pals will get left behind and decide to help you catch up with Stalkid again. Follow that path some more, and get used to using the flowers as launch pads with Deku Link, because you will need to use them a lot dur-

> ing your quest. Eventually you should see the mask collector guy, and a huge door. (Zelda Power web site n.d.)

All walkthroughs guide the player through this particular piece of the game, using greater or lesser amounts of detail. Although the first account is more invested in describing scenes and ascribing motivations to characters, the other accounts prefer to focus on activities, with Zelda 2000 telling the gamer explicitly how to move along the flowers, and the last account from Zelda Power giving the minimum amount of detail necessary to help the gamer move along.

Walkthroughs as a whole tend to follow these patterns—giving the reader information she needs to play the game, with different amounts of detail and varying levels of storytelling style. Another way that walkthroughs differ is in how they address the reader. Traditional stories construct a position for the reader as interested bystander, hearing about past events from another observer, or perhaps watching the action unfold but not being a central participant. This is the approach chosen by the writer of The Legends of Zelda pages—keeping the reader an interested observer of the story:

> When Link awoke a few seconds later, he somehow *felt* different—weak, small, wooden. He looked down at a pool of water in front of him, and screamed in horror. What came out was only a shrill squeak, for Skull Kid had turned Link into a helpless little Deku Shrub! (The Legends of Zelda web site n.d., emphasis in original)

This sort of storytelling keeps the reader interested in the action, but mainly as a passive observer. What is more common in walkthroughs is a story told in the second person:

> Go up the steps and through the huge door. When you begin, turn right and go up the ramps you see until you find a small park-like area. Talk to Tingle the elf there, and select the first choice to get a map, if you have 10 Rupees. (KyleShi n.d.)

By addressing the reader directly, the walkthrough keeps the reader focused on the task at hand, whatever it might be at that particular moment:

> Head back to where you bought the map from, go left, then follow the ramp up to the fairy's cave, and return the fairy. The huge fairy will appear and grant Deku Link the ability to spit bubbles. Leave the cave and find the balloon nearby that is floating in the air. (Zelda Power web site n.d.)

Notice that in addition to addressing the reader as 'you,' explicitly and implicitly at varying moments, there are also times when the character that the gamer is controlling is mentioned as well—in this case, Link. This likely occurs to help the reader keep straight which character is supposed to be doing what, but it also helps in another way.

By alternating use of "you" and "Link," the writer of the walkthrough allows a slippage to occur, where the reader is invited to identify as the central character of the story. This is to be expected, because in the game, the player is actively controlling the character Link—this is the identity that the player assumes or role plays in the story for the duration. Although some games do allow gamers to shift their point of view between different characters, many tell the story from one central perspective, and the player is invited to identify with that perspective above all others. The player, in the game and in the walkthrough, is then drawn into the story through these techniques. They are inserted into the adventure, and just as in cinema or novels, the players' identification with the main character allows them entry into a story and makes it more likely that players will see themselves as involved in the game.

Gamers' creation of these walkthroughs, then, can serve as an aid to creating a story line to a game. In positing a beginning, middle, and ending to the game, a basic framework for the game as basic narrative is established. The use of details keeps the reader interested and following along, and the use of more traditional techniques of narrative (either putting the reader in the third-person position or doubly addressing the reader as a central part of the story) work to construct a position or role for the reader in the narrative of the game.

This construction of games as narrative is underscored by comments of gamers themselves, who often remark on the relative merits of stories in games, often praising RPGs in particular for their interesting, extended, and grand story lines. Yet, this is not actual game play but a rehashing of game play. This is something the creator puts together after working through the game and that the reader consumes prior to beginning a game, or more likely consults while pausing the game at a particularly troubling point. If this activity is undertaken aside from the game, can it really be said that games are narrative?

Games are not played in a vacuum. Gamers consult walkthroughs, often playing the game in question while the walkthrough is balancing on one knee. They also talk to friends about the game and troublesome areas or about ways to find all of the secret treasures hidden in the various worlds. They do not, just as television fans do not, discard knowledge of all other media while engaging with a primary text. Rather, they approach all of

these media intertextually, with knowledge of all informing all of their actions. If walkthroughs construct the game as a narrative, then gamers who consult these walkthroughs are likely to view the game the same way. Thus, the narratives of walkthroughs can apply to actual game play.

Conclusions

My intent in this article has been to demonstrate *not* that games are a source of lush and intricate narrative but rather that to dismiss the idea of traditional narrative as it applies to games is premature. Although there is definite merit to seeing game narratives as spatial encounters, or considering how time is a central component of games, there are also merits to seeing the more traditional narrative components as occurring in games. Gamers themselves are aware of this and often remark on the "wonderful stories" that some games tell, also complaining about the "horrible" or "absent" plot lines that mark others. But this does not mean that all games must follow the same standards or that gamers are interested *only* in narrative. There are other elements crucial to good game play which may deserve more attention. However, I argue that we must keep researching the views of many more gamers to see how these elements come together for them. And in doing so, we must keep in mind how multiple media forms come together to create understandings of media content. Gamers who create wonderful narratives of games in walkthroughs often likely see the game that way when playing it or thinking about it. Players of *Majora's Mask* who create walkthroughs are creating basic forms of narrative, which are then applied to the game itself. Their use of details, suspense, character development, and reader identification with the main character all help make the walkthrough/narrative a helpful device for readers as well as a good story.

Finally, positioning gamers as fans or active audience members is an important and significant move. Children and adults alike now play games, and both groups are becoming quite sophisticated in their game playing as well as in their general media consumption. We need to continue to consider how gamers make sense of games by asking and observing them—rather than wonder what games are doing to them as they passively consume them. Games are fundamentally more active than television viewing, and gamers' intertextual use of media forms demands that researchers consider more than just pixels on the screen when considering video games. This research is one step in that direction.

Notes

1. The view of all or most gamers as children is also becoming factually inaccurate. According to industry figures, the average age of an interactive game player in the United States is twenty-eight (Interactive Digital Software Association 2002).

2. To identify fan sites for *Majora's Mask*, I first performed a Sherlock search on a Mac G3 using the terms *Zelda 64 fan sites*. The initial search produced seventy hits, many of which were identical or broken. The first twenty were visited, and all active, relevant sites were downloaded and analyzed. Further, in this search, a web ring for "Zelda and Link" fans was identified, and the first thirty of its web sites (that were still active and relevant) were downloaded and analyzed. Not all sites contained walkthroughs and/or fan fiction, although almost every site promised a walkthrough at some point in time.

3. I acknowledge that easy access to the internet is not possible for all game players (or all citizens), but for this project I focus on those gamers with internet access and at least the rudimentary skills of web page construction to find my evidence.

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