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Review Article

**Jonathan L. Walls (Ed.), *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*
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Games do unexpected things. One of those things, as it turns out, is building a bridge to an experience of divinity. Games have evolved from religious ritual (as with, say, collegiate lacrosse), been adopted into ritual (as with, say, dreidel), or simply kept company long enough with religious traditions that it's hard to discern a sacred or mundane provenance. Once you have an eye for them, holy games begin to pop up everywhere.

For some traditions, they're indeed hard to miss. The ancient Greeks offer an exuberant case study. Wagers and contests cast long shadows in the gods' histories, and games played an outsized role in ritual life. A citizen of the fifth century B.C.E. might watch the beauty contests in the temple of Aphrodite; Euripides and Socrates fighting for prizes at the festival of Dionysus; carding and craft contests in the name of Athena; funeral games to honour prominent politicians; and, of course, the Olympic and other Panhellenic games, the high mark of a sacramental calendar of games. For the polytheistic and democratic Greeks, perhaps such contests reflected

their ethos in miniature: the cosmos is a place where many forces, human and divine, vie for an afternoon's laurel crown.

Contrast this with the monotheistic faiths that eventually came to define the West, and you'll note an abrupt shift. In *De Spectaculis* (~200AD), Tertullian implores his fellow Christians to avoid games and theatre like the devil himself. They stir up a 'passionate excitement' which is poison to a Christian temperament, says the old scold. The tussling confrontation of the games is hardly in line with the harmony that the Scriptures enjoin, and 'is it right to look on what it is disgraceful to do?' And while Tertullian might have rested his case after citing that unfortunate 'to the lions!' cameo that Christians had come to play in the Colosseum, his greater beef was deeper yet. Games were pagan, inextricably pagan, and offered a temptation to backslide away from the early Church. The Greeks and Romans had exalted the holy game; the Christian would need to pivot almost 180 degrees away from them.

For the rest of the world, the ritual use of games has been less fraught. Some exist up to the present. Consider Japan, and the \$100 million a year industry of sumo wrestling. Shinto priests consecrate the ring and officiate over matches, top-ranked *yokozuna* (wrestlers) wear a variant of the *shimenawa* (rice straw rope) to denote that they have been touched by divinity. Clapping, stomping and the ritual tossing of salt into the ring are all ancient gestures to the spirit world, reaffirming the ancient tradition that sumo is first and foremost an entertainment for the *kami* (spirits).

Why that bit of history and context? It's helpful in evaluating *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*, a puckish and thoughtful anthology of essays further exploring this long and fraught relationship between gods and games. In one corner, a clever team of Christian theologians raised on video games. Facing them, the much-loved Zelda series developed in non-Christian Japan. Editor Jonathan L. Walls asked his contributors 'to look at Zelda though the lens of Christianity, and see what shape it begins to take' (p14).

No works are more ripe for critique in the nascent field of game studies than the Zelda titles, and at first blush they might seem like a nice fit for Christian study. An epic hero strives for righteousness. His world, Hylia, is ruled by the Triforce – the Trinity-like token which wields ultimate power. Link battles the powers of darkness, and always emerges victorious.

But – and it's a camel-and-the-needle's-eye sort of but – the authors in this anthology must first face down some obstacles of their own.

JESUS OR GOSHINBOKU?

For those unfamiliar with Zelda, let me provide a crash course. Pick up the joystick and you assume the role of Link, a plucky elf in a trademark green tunic. Within minutes, you're on your way to rescue the princess Zelda from Ganondorf, the Prince of Thieves. To do that, you'll be sitting in front of the console for weeks, even months, grinding through puzzles and building your battle skills. The franchise pioneered these long narratives, the so-called “immersive RPG” genre. You'll be in good company. Something like 70 million units have been sold. They consistently top console fans' best-game-ever lists.

It is worth stressing that, while Hylia is emphatically a fantasy universe, with creatures never seen anywhere else, it is also the first encounter for most westerners with a Japanese epic. *Zelda* comes to the American market via Nintendo and the mind of Shigeru Miyamoto, the master designer perhaps most famous for inventing a plumber named Mario. Miyamoto has overseen the *Zelda* franchise with Nintendo for more than 25 years.

The first obstacle for our theologians would be that non-western provenance. While Miyamoto and the Nintendo team were at pains to neutralize uniquely Japanese references, even changing the names of religious figures in the first episodes, the soil of its homeland suffuses the work. Take *Ocarina of Time* (1998), one of the most beloved *Zelda* games. It opens with a spiritual crisis, the death of the Great Deku Tree, the protector deity of the Kokiri ('children of the forest'). The tree has been cursed to wither by the evil Gannondorf. Link must venture out to stop the corruption that spreads across the land. He is gifted with a magical ocarina, whose music can influence time and the elements. His goal: to restore harmony.

You don't need to know much about Shintoism (I don't) to draw neat parallels. There's the primal confrontation of corruption with purification. There's a very literal power in music, the kind offered up at seasonal *kagura* dances. Nature and its balances are of primary concern. In the Great Deku tree, you need hardly squint to see the *goshinboku*, ancient trees around Japan revered as resting places of local protector *kami*.

Where should a Christian reading of such a narrative begin? The Bible holds no magical songs, and no forest spirits. Trees don't arouse much concern one way or another in the synoptic Gospels, where they are only mentioned four times. In the first, Jesus curses a fig tree and causes it to wither – an action which, in the *Zelda* universe, puts him in very, very bad company.

Throughout the franchise, Hylia shimmers with a sense of the supernatural which draws deeply from Japan's traditions. Players meet spirits and other immanent divinities who gleefully intervene in their destinies. There's the Wind Fish and Sun Fish of *Link's Awakening*; the Great Deku Tree, Lord Jabu-Jabu, and the Goddess of the Sand of *Ocarina of Time*; the Four Giants, the Giant Turtle, the Fierce Deity and the Goddess of Time of *Majora's Mask*; in the *Wind Waker*, Valoo the sky spirit, Jabun the sea spirit, Cyclos and Zephos the wind spirits; *Skyward Sword's* whale-like Levias – and of course minor fairies at every turn.

In a place so densely divine, where do you begin to look for Jesus? How is this critical ogre brought to his knees? Our clever theologians call on a wise man, early and often. C.S. Lewis, both a fantasy writer of the *Narnia* series and theologian himself, offers the license that 'all things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, the imagination not least' (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York, Harcourt), 1955, p167; quoted in Walls' Introduction to *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*, p12). If *Zelda* is read as fiction, the argument goes, that fiction reflects the workings of a Christian god. That free pass pre-dates Lewis; as contributor Kyle Blanchette points out, finding inspiration in non-Christian art and practice has been in the critical toolbox since at least the time of Justin Martyr. 'From a Christian perspective,' writes Blanchette, 'God is calling the world back into loving relationship with Himself, and He will use any means possible to

accomplish this goal, including, believe it or not, when you boot up your Nintendo Wii' (Chapter 1, p18). In the case of *Zelda*, presumably, God acts with the help of Miyamoto's holy trees and fish gods.

For those of us spoiling for a round of comparative theology, this is not the book. With copious references to Lewis, the authors quickly dispatch the possibility of a native *Zelda* spirituality to be teased out, and the ogre is dispatched.

But let's give him a moment of silence. With religious attendance sharply down in Europe and North America, and game playing sharply up in neat inverse, getting to the bottom of the religious experience implicit in games couldn't be more important. What exactly do we experience when we boot up *Zelda*, *Okami*, *Final Fantasy* – these new and interactive classics beautifully infused with non-Abrahamic gods? They represent a new mythical space, transpacific and as interactive as any ritual. When the young imagination engages with stories of cosmogenesis, morality, and hidden forces, what seeds take root?

QUEST AND SYMBOL

That said, even *Zelda* taken as raw poetry serves up thick slices of theological reflection for its authors. They largely take one of two approaches. In the first, a character or bit of narrative from the game is used as a jumping off point for a kind of homiletic exploration. The second approach pans the camera back, and allows the gameplay to raise larger cosmic questions.

Jonathan Walls, for instance, uses villainous episodes from *Ocarina of Time* to tease out an exposition on Christian definitions of evil, sin and impersonal disaster (Chapter 2). Josh and Rachel Rasmussen use Link's destiny, as the hero of the Triforce, to parse Christian views on free will (Chapter 4). An open-world, single narrative role-playing game (RPG) like *Zelda* offers such an excellent blueprint – God as game designer – that it would be a sin *not* to see this essay in theological textbooks for the gaming generation.

An intriguing essay by Jeremy Smith examines questions of choice and power in *A Link to the Past* (Chapter 9). He looks at the question of side quests in the *Zelda* game, a distinguishing factor in the franchise. You can choose at many points to stop chasing Gannondorf and chase chickens, catch fish or help villagers instead. If Link's journey is to become a paragon of courage, power and wisdom, asks Smith, then what does it mean to accept or deny these quests? Can a true Hero ignore life's little evils? This leads him into clever meditation on the role of Christ, and the use of his power, using several of the games characters as points of reference.

D.M. Burke's ambitious essay finishes the collection on a rousing, sermonising note (Chapter 10). The epic RPG is put simply as a story of good triumphing over evil. What then defines good and evil, in Link's world and in our own? Burke's answer: a loving relationship is key to the Christian God's ideal of good. The *Zelda* games, sadly, can't be said to hold up their end of the equation. The game's couple rarely spends more than a few minutes on screen together, and then it's off for more slicing and smashing.

When the authors overlay Christian logic more specifically onto game events, the results raise more questions than answers. *Majora's Mask* is one of the odder Zelda games because it takes place in a time loop, which lets players toggle the before and afters of the characters that they meet. Two key episodes involve helping characters after their deaths, the Dora Mikau and the Goron Darmani. In these, and in the game world itself, Josh Corman sees the paradigm of purgatory, that period after death when the soul is engaged in sanctification - and shows that in both instances each 'suffers the trial so that he might be improved' (Chapter 6, p108).

That redemption narrative, absent any understanding of Japanese afterlives, misses a world of nuance. The yurei and onryo ghosts of Japan aren't headed for heaven, nor are their goals towards their 'soul's growth and perfection.' In one of Japan's most famous ghost stories, *Yotsuya Kaidan*, the angry ghost of a woman seeks vengeance on the man who caused her to be scarred and die. She finds peace through a bloodbath – the death of her romantic rival, her rival's grandfather and the insanity of her lover. This is the happy ending. A meditation on Purgatory is certainly welcome, but the world of Zelda feels a far cry from there.

Many authors acknowledge that distance. Justus Hunter makes a valiant attempt to map the virtues of the Triforce against those of Augustine and Aquinas (Chapter 7). The exposition of this theological lineage is thorough and elegant, and to the reader's delight he extends the same serious inquiry to the three virtues in Hylia: power, wisdom and courage. Are these virtues solely acquired through habit, or are they conferred? If conferred, do they come from the gods or from the pieces of the Triforce?

Hunter concludes that the virtues are acquired by habit. Link becomes a hero largely because he rehearses the virtues, and slowly becomes better at them. This raises a delightful broader question about the enterprise of playing games. Players start in an alien world, and slowly get better at mastering their surroundings. As the game narrative takes hold, they get better and better at spotting clues, and responding to situations in a way that will move them towards their goal.

Hunter leads us to ask ourselves another question. Can playing a video game be considered ‘practising’ virtue? If, as Aquinas argues, a man becomes wise and bold because he practices making wise and bold decisions, can those decisions be made in virtual space?

GAMES QUA GAMES

The most dangerous chapter in the collection — the one this reviewer found most impish and compelling — was Philip Tallon's meditation on Tolkien and his ‘On Faerie Stories’ (Chapter 3). Tolkien makes the argument that alternate worlds (easily extended to video games, one assumes) are necessary to us for at least three reasons: 1) they allow us to imaginatively ‘alchemize the world,’ switching this for that, and thereby participate in the great act of creation; 2) alternate worlds also allow us to escape, and that this escape improves and emboldens us; and 3) that escape is structured in a way to give us a taste of joy, of the ‘eucatastrophe’ where good triumphs and evil falls. Neatly closing the circuit between theology and the modern RPG, Tolkien wrote that the Christian story – the eucatastrophe of the incarnation and the resurrection – is the great narrative of this genre.

This argument, and vivid descriptions from Tallon about *The Legend of Zelda*, make for a compelling case that playing a video game can indeed lead us to that complete experience of alchemy and eucatastrophe. If Tolkien's argument holds, then games may offer the *greatest* opportunity for such an experience. However, isn't Tolkien's equation dangerous, for a generation raised on console gaming as its primary text? If the Christ story is the Platonic type of the great fantasy adventures, what does it mean when our taste in fantasy adventures shifts – or takes a turn for the dark side? While the eucatastrophe of resurrection is plausibly seen in Link defeating Gannondorf, what about zombie slasher games or post-apocalyptic gore fests?

Tallon's chapter also neatly marries these thoughts with a clever gameplay device, whereby readers may 'choose' how to read the essay by hopping from section to section according to Tallon's prompts. It's a refreshing reminder of the text under study. It is tempting to read *Zelda* as a narrative, a story that unfolds. However, narrative is seldom the central defining quality of a game. While a good game might be enhanced by a good story, it is seldom dependent on one.

This raises a common dichotomy in game critique. "Narratological" approaches, which look at a game's characters and story, have a much longer history and larger critical vocabulary than "ludological" approaches, which look to game mechanics to consider what clues to experience and procedural rhetoric they might offer. Gonzolo Frasca in 'Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology' (Frasca 2003, in M. Wolf and B. Perron (eds), *Video/Game/Theory*, Abingdon: Routledge) makes a good case for at least three levels of rules that make up any game: the logic of the game world; the abilities of the player; and the different ways in which the gameworld coaxes behaviours.

The authors do make inroads on this ludological dimension. In his essay on transcendence in *The Wind Waker*, Mark Hayse notes the progress towards self-transcendence in the hero's journey, and shows that this is mirrored also in the player's growing skills on the controller (Chapter 5). Hayse also points to another essay, 'Ultima IV, Simulating the Religious Quest', in which he unpacks an intriguing idea alluded to here, that the unfolding process of discovery in an open-world RPG is a kind of unfolding revelation. While intriguing, does this hold true for every RPG? Does a player in, say, *Grand Theft Auto IV* achieve the same revelation and self-transcendence, discovering a world of junkies and gaining skills while robbing prostitutes?

Another essay by Benjamin B. DeVan points out a procedural critique of in-game virtue (Chapter 8). Link's moral behaviour has spawned fan parodies, because of actions the game forces him to take. Here is a hero upon whom the whole world depends. Yet all along his journey, he is stymied for the most pedestrian reasons: he's a few rupees short at the store, or needs to round up a farmer's stray chicken. Why does he put up with it? DeVan argues that he is guided by an implacable in-game logic, outlined by Miyamoto and his team. In much the same way, humans are driven morally by a similar in-game logic outlined by a Programmer, which sets up moral parameters.

SOMEONE JOINS YOUR PARTY

The authors are careful to represent all of the major instalments of the *Zelda* franchise over ten chapters, not an easy feat considering the ambitious critical agendas of its authors (and, to be frank, the uneven quality of the games). In fact their breadth of approaches – with touches of

introspection, homily and apologetics by turns – go a long way in arguing what's so valuable, in the end, about *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*. In a field as new as games studies, critical perspectives have come from every corner of the academic map. The field has not yet come into its own rhetoric, but benefits from a free-for-all of academic ecumenism. On that front, the varied theological thinkers and their array of viewpoints – and, let's face it, the delightful fact that theologians are digging into Zelda at all – point out what's so exciting right now about game critique.

Beyond that, the real win in the book – and the reason to explore it slowly – is far simpler. The authors are full of joy in their task. Time and again, essays are punctuated by a memory of the thrill and awe that came over them when they booted up that first shiny gold Nintendo cartridge. Each essay is the result of someone taking that raw, beautiful experience of playing a game and trying to place it in their own divine cosmology. Throughout the book, there's a nerdiness for games, and a nerdiness for God, in earnest and equal measures. The apex of this may well be the table of contents, which editor Jonathan L. Walls has marked up with pieces of the Triforce, showing what “difficulty” level each essay is pegged at. It's a detail only a fanboy could love.

Game theorists, game designers, seminarians and the curious would do well to pick up *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*. Its authors can proudly list their names on the leaderboard of those minds exploring the intersections of games and religion in the 21st century.

Biography

Jason Anthony is a journalist and game designer based in New York City. He works extensively at the intersection of games and religion. His games include a fully-gamed seminary chapel service (In the Cards), an athletic exploration of the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat Put!), and an SMS-game of freeze tag exploring the call to prayer as digital secular ritual (The Hush). He is an editor at Time Inc., and his stories and essays have appeared in the Washington Post, Religion News Service, Boston Review, Christian Century and elsewhere. *Playing with Religion in Video Games* (Indiana University Press), which contains Anthony's chapter on a history and typology of holy games, will be published in late 2013.