The Author-God is Dead, and Roland Barthes has Killed Him
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Roland Barthes's watershed essay, "The Death of the Author," destabilizes the authority traditionally afforded to the author of a text. The responsibility of discerning textuality, that is the meaning of a given text, lies squarely with the reader who, according to Barthes, must work to create a cogent narrative. In his paper Adrien Robertson unpacks and interrogates Barthes's theory within the context of a user-generated text. Nintendo's best-selling game Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, argues Robertson, provides an ideal test case in which to consider the extent to which Barthes's theory works in a contemporary context. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the author function Robertson demonstrates the ways in which players, working in concert with a host of fans and bloggers, forge a decidedly contemporary—and complicated—interpretation of narrative unity.

-Dr. Erin Wunker

The Author-God is dead, and Roland Barthes has killed him. Seeking to decentralize the writer's authority and remove the limits biographical criticism imposes onto a text, Barthes's essay, "The Death of the Author," places interpretational power into the hands of the reader. Through Barthes's iconoclastic lens, meaning is no longer contingent upon an authorial presence: the author cannot be turned to for "an ultimate meaning" (Barthes 1258) because the author does not exist outside the text as an omnipotent entity. Consequently, they can impose no limits upon a text's possible interpretations, which are infinite in number. For Barthes, the author has no choice but to die because writing is "the black-and-white where all identity is lost" (Barthes 1256). Although not constructed as a traditionally black and white text, *Twilight Princess*, the thirteenth instalment of Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* series, is nevertheless "a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings" (Barthes 1257). Rather than being forced into the background, however, the game's writers have consciously retreated. They have encouraged players to construct their own narrative principally by creating a protagonist who is, as a character, little more than a hollow shell, an avatar representing the player within the game's simulated universe. There is some significant slippage between the signifier of the character and the signified player, what Jean Baudrillard would refer to as "pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 173). It is, however, the writers' conscious step back from their product and the player's consequent ability to step into the gap between signifier and signified that allows the player, and the surrounding fan community, to actively participate and engage with the game, creating Horkheimer and Adorno's "machinery of rejoinder" (Horkheimer 41). Furthermore, the writer's conscious removal of their own presence in Twilight Princess and the *Legend of Zelda* series as a whole, makes them "founders of discursivity," i.e., they have "produced … the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (Foucault 114) based on the *Legend of Zelda* universe. Communities have emerged on the Internet to exchange information, theories and fan-produced fiction about *Twilight Princess.* The players, therefore, are active, engaged and critically thinking about the text, becoming Barthes's interpretative readers and stepping into the game to construct the narrative, meaning, and intertextual understanding of Twilight Princess.

Twilight Princess is an interactive action-adventure game, and one of countless similar games on the market. Unlike other action-adventure titles available, the protagonist controlled by

the player has been designed to act as a visual link between the player, existing in the physically present universe and the game's digitalized world, called Hyrule. Canonically, this character has been named Link to emphasize his role as the avatar linking the player into the world of the game, but at the start of *Twilight Princess* the player has the choice to insert their own name instead of going through the game as 'Link.' The dialogue from this point onward will directly addresses the player, with supporting characters addressing them either as "you" or the name entered at the beginning of the game. In addition, Link's back story–who he was before the game begins–is never explained. Link also never speaks; any moments of dialogue that would require his voice are pauses on the screen, and the player must consciously fill in the silences with their own idea of what Link would say. The result is a character whose history, voice, and personality must be filled in by the person playing the game, which is especially facilitated by the naming process above. If 'you' are Link, then it is not Link who is wandering around Hyrule, but 'you.' From the player's perspective, it is not 'Link' riding 'his' horse, but 'I' am riding 'my' horse. Each time *Twilight Princess* is played, another version of Link is created; another player is reading and using Link as a representation of their personal self. There is thus no definitive version of Link, no essential character being controlled whose history and personality are products of the game's creators. During a conference in 2005, one of the game's producers remarked, "what [they] really want is for the user to get the feeling that … *I've* got to hurry, and to provide [the player] with that impetus and that motivation" (IGN, emphasis added). Implied in this statement is the producers conscious pursuit to draw the player into the world of the game through the avatar, exchanging the player's identity for Link's. The void left in the characterization of Link is stepped into by the player, who becomes the character- and is free to construct their own narrative, dialogue, and characterization, leading to innumerable versions of Link.

The circle of signification between Link and the player is a slippery slope; to say Link represents "I" is to assume that an essential "I" not only exists, but that it can also be signified. If there is no "I" at the core of identity to be signified and the cycle of signification, Link—representing the player who represents the 'you' who is Link, etc.—is nothing but "an uninterrupted circuit without reference" (Baudrillard 173). This does not mean the text is destined to be without meaning. Rather, if "I" does not exist, and there is no essential identity to begin with, then signifiers become easier to exchange because of their slippery nature. Link can more easily represent the player since there is nothing saying he cannot; even if the player is not blond, male, and dressed in green (Link's archetypal features throughout the *Legend of Zelda* series), a player can nevertheless use him as an avatar because they lose nothing essential by transferring their identity into the virtual avatar that is Link. The ease with which the player can step into Link's role means that the potentially negative, meaningless gap between signifier and signified leads to a more engaged playing/reading of the game/text because it is what allows the player to construct their experience in the first place.

This is not to imply *Twilight Princess* is a player's free-for-all because Link can easily adapt whatever characterization the player imposes on him: the player's interpretational power remains bound by confines of the gaming hardware. A player cannot, for instance, skip to the end of *Twilight Princess* and declare the narrative prematurely complete (as is possible with a bound novel). The game's creators limit the possibilities of the text, and in this sense, they are almost absent, god-like figures that have created the world of Hyrule. They have also, however,

abandoned it–or, perhaps more generously, gifted it—to the players. Consequently, there is no author present "to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of text" (Foucault 111). If the creators did leave a "message when [they] made this world, [they] did not wait around for our understanding or reply" (Gass 347). While *Twilight Princess* is their product, it is the player who is responsible for the unity of the text when "the space left empty by the author's disappearance" (Foucault 105) is engaged with.

There are many such spaces. *Twilight Princess* is part of a much larger series. References to other games are scattered throughout *Twilight Princess*: symbols that became recognizable amongst the Zelda fan-base in a previous title, Ocarina of Time, appear throughout Twilight Princess. The player's recognition of these symbols and their ability to recognize what they signify–something beyond the game, an extrinsic meaning that recalls the game's history and previous titles–is, at a base level, an act of shared meaning-making (between the creators and the players, or between players within a fan-base) that creates a cultural level of awareness. Players of Twilight Princess are given recognizable symbols, situations, characters, and tropes that create the foundation for a shared experience and community. The game's primary antagonist, Ganondorf, is also a throwback to previous titles: Ganondorf was the villain who threatened the game's universe in Ocarina as well as Twilight. Problematically, Ocarina of Time ended with a time paradox (Butler). Determining Twilight Princess' chronological place relative to other titles in the series is an issue that has sparked much debate among players (Butler), and the game's creators have not stepped forward to definitively state Hyrule's history. While the creators have dictated the game's structures and limits, they do not–will not—provide "a certain unity of writing" (Foucault 111) as traditional authors, according to Foucault, would. While Twilight Princess is their product, it is the players who are responsible for the game's unity.

The creators are, therefore, not authors, in the sense that they do not serve the author function described by Foucault, and do not act as a closing force on the text like Barthes's figure of the "Author- God." They can, perhaps, be seen as Barthes's scriptors, born at the same time the game is turned on and interacted with, but this seems limiting considering the extensive relationship fan communities have created with the text. By inviting players to construct Link as an avatar of themselves, and to critically engage with Twilight Princess in order to understand the game's intertextual positioning, the creators are better thought of as "founders of discursivity" who, because of their distancing, have "produced … the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (Foucault 111). Players of Twilight Princess have turned to the production of their own texts as extensions of their own interpretations of the game. Readers do not "simply comprise the public" (Gass 359) who consume and require the presence of an author to impose limits onto a text. *Twilight Princess* has been able to "take care of itself" (349) through a fan-based community creating their own fiction, art, and even games based on *Twilight Princess*. This "knowledge community" (Jenkins 2556-71) is comprised of people who are "active, critically aware, and discriminating" (2572-90). They do not merely consume, but participate. If the creators will not answer their questions, then they seek answers themselves.

Henry Jenkins states, "every reader [is] understood to be a potential writer" (2622-36), and this has been the case with Twilight Princess. Within these communities, fans collect information, debate interpretations, circulate potential meanings (ibid) and produce fictional stories that either continue *Twilight Princess'* narrative as they interpret it, or fill in the gaps left

by the creators' distance. The audience is not passively absorbing information, but consciously create a community that functions as a "machinery of rejoinder" (Horkheimer 41). That is, they can reply to the text as well as absorb it. The many variations of Link created by many players are visible in fan fiction, where Link's identity varies between authors. Some depict Link as a homosexual, others as in love with Princess Zelda, and others still as a post-traumatic stress riddled nomad (Epiphantasy). The history of Hyrule, the overarching narrative holding individual titles in the series together, is debated much more heatedly, with no definitive answer ever provided by Nintendo. Rumours abound online about a top-secret document in their headquarters that details where each title fits within the chronology, an especially difficult task given that the titles are not released in chronological order and that *Ocarina of Time* ended with a time paradox to potentially feed into two parallel histories, but none of this is definitive. Shigeru Miyamoto, involved with the Zelda series from its conception, has only said for fans to "be careful" (Butler) when attempting to sort out Hyrule's history. Interestingly, it is not uncommon for authors to attempt to forbid their fans from writing fan fiction: Anne Rice, of the Vampire Chronicles fame, and Diana Gabaldon (Meadows), author of the Outlander series, have both attempted to forbid their audiences from engaging with their works to the point of writing their own fiction derived from the originals. There has been a precedent set for writers to attempt to stop their fan-base from writing a continuation of the original story; that Nintendo has refrained can be seen as a sign of encouragement to continue engaging with the text. Their refusal to limit the text, just like their refusal to flesh out Link as a character, invites their audience to fill in the gaps. Here it is not only Barthes's author who is dead, but readers themselves that are born as writers.

Foucault calls for "a form of culture in which fiction would… be put at the disposal of everyone" (Foucault 119). While he also believes this is a purely romantic notion, the Internet has become the medium for the proliferation of cultural content. Barthes's death of the author has been followed not only by a reader who can unify the meaning of a text, but also a reader who can become a writer. The authors of *Twilight Princess* committed conscious and calculated suicide by removing their presence from the text. At the same time, they made it possible for a player to fill their shoes. Barthes's "Death of the Author" need not be applied so much as found. By creating a playable character who can act as an empty avatar to signify the player's activity within the game, the player can step into a completely different world. Replete with its own symbols and signifiers that gesture toward a much larger, but ultimately obscure intertexual framework, fans come together on the Internet to debate, discuss, and even create their own interpretations or stories from *Twilight Princess*. The author may be dead, and Roland Barthes may have killed him, but his shoes are readily filled by interactive writers, bloggers, and players who, not daunted by the contradictions and gaps in the text, unite them to construct their own meaning and understanding. Fandom may be "the loss of control" (Jenkins 2795-810) over a text, but it is also a sign of critical, active engagement, proof that interactive texts like *Twilight Princess* are not empty signifiers, and a sign that the death of the author is not the death of all meaning.

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