Dreams of the Japanese Self in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

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Abstract

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017) was published in the year that would be dubbed the 'renaissance' of Japanese videogames by critics and Japanese game designers. Its release followed a period of commercial and creative decline, mimicry of Western conventions and adherence to *mukokuseki* game design. Concurrently, Iwabuchi (2015, 2019) has signaled out that, in the wake of the 'Cool Japan' policies in the 2010s, the Japanese pop culture mediamix has now become a governmental resource for commercialized nation branding. Departing from the nationalistic rhetoric observed in Nintendo's recent marketing strategy, this paper critically examines the identity politics of *Breath of the Wild*. On the surface, the game reads as consistent with its convention of offering a normative Occidental power fantasy whose identity hinges upon a binary Oriental Other. However, the introduction of 'Japanese' signifying elements complicates the internal power distribution between the Occident, Orient, and the Japanese Self. Understood through Hall's (1989) notion of representation as cultural dreamwork, the game emerges as a discursive object whose representations negotiate unresolved cultural, social and political frictions in the Japanese social imaginary.

Keywords: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, mukokuseki, nation branding, Orientalism, Cool Japan

Introduction

When *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017, hereafter *BotW*) was released, it was met with global praise for its fresh, open-world take and overhaul of conventions. At the Game Developers Conference 2017, the lead designers gave a detailed account of how they had gone about introducing the change. When art director Satoru Takizawa took the stage, he made an off-hand remark, stating:

> "what supported our belief that we [the Japanese] are good at this type of art creation is the difference in the evolution of painting between the West and Japan." (Takizawa 2017)

Behind him, a PowerPoint slide illustrated the art histories he evoked: *ukiyo-e* imagery for Japan, Renaissance art for the West. This too marked an overhaul of tradition, as Nintendo has long been considered a company that caters to the global market by presenting its products as 'culturally odorless' (Iwabuchi 2007, 157).

From a strictly art historical point of view, the comment might readily be dismissed as a naive statement about untouched native traditions and binary art histories. As many (art) historians will assert, Japanese and Western artists have influenced each other's formal language, colors and perspective since the Dutch first established trade on Dejima in 1641.[1] However, the preparedness of the slide indicates Takizawa's comment was actually scripted, and must therefore be considered an intentional and premeditated effort by Nintendo's branding strategy. The remark implies a historical narrative postulated on notions of absolute difference between 'Japan' and 'the West' within an all too familiar binary discourse of Self and Other.

Departing from Takizawa's comment, this paper will explore *BotW* as a cultural artifact that traffics in identity

[1] On the impact of Japan on the West, see Impey (1977), and conversely on Western influence on Japan, Screech (2018).

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politics through its playable representations. After situating the game in its franchise's history and within the larger Japanese game- and culture industries, I will analyze the racial dynamics within the game as a site where ideologies pertaining to Orientalism/Occidentalism, colonizer/colonized and Self/Other are both reproduced and challenged. This paper aims to add to the growing body of scholarly work on the critical analysis of videogames at the intersections of visual- and cultural studies, postcolonial theory and Japanese studies. While much has been written about the Zelda series in general, there is a comparative lack of analysis about the Japanese discourses in which it traffics. This may in part be explained by the franchise's assimilation to Western image conventions. This paper will hopefully reveal that, upon closer observation, these representations are not as clear-cut as they appear.

The *Mukokuseki* history of Zelda

The nationalistic undertone in art director Takizawa's comment is a remarkable deviation from Nintendo's usual marketing strategy. In order to demonstrate its significance, I will begin with a concurrent discussion of the franchise's marketing history, developments in the Japanese videogame industry, and the historical context of Japan's internal identity construction, before arriving at the contemporary cultural moment from which *BotW* emerges.

In 2001, Nintendo showed off the technical capacities of their newly released GameCube console by debuting a Zelda demo with realistic graphics. Mia Consalvo recounts that the new style was enthusiastically received by overseas fans, yet subsequently these same fans were dismayed when Nintendo released *The Wind Waker* (2002) in a toon-like *chibi* style.[2] Parts of the Western audience assigned the game the derisive name 'Celda', referencing the Japanese cel-animation the aesthetics were based on, which they considered to be too childish (Consalvo 2016, 265). Its successor *Twilight Princess* (2006) was consequently developed along the aesthetic lines of the demo, with a more mature Link model and monster designs leaning closer to horror imagery. Its graphics were rendered in the style of the major Western games of the year like *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* (Bethesda 2006) and *Shadow of the Colossus* (SIE 2006). DeWinter notes that Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of the series and executive producer of *The Wind Waker,* stepped down midway through production of *Twilight Princess* in favor of Eiji Aonuma (DeWinter 2015, 95). Taking this into consideration, it is no stretch to imagine that Nintendo's shareholders pushed the designers to mimic popular Western game aesthetics in order to appeal to the global market.

Their efforts to adhere to Western aesthetics continued with *Skyward Sword* (2012), which retained the realistic shaders while combining it with the physiognomy of *anime*. However, in the promotion of the game, *anime* was never mentioned. Rather, Nintendo's representatives labored to establish a link between the game and Western art history, claiming that it had incorporated the palette of the impressionists into its design. During a 2010 E3 presentation, Miyamoto referred to the graphics as resembling "a moving painting", and later at a roundtable mentioned that he was a fan of the "soft, warm colors and wayward brush strokes of Cézanne's artwork" (Plunkett, 2010).[3]

Throughout the 2000s, the Zelda franchise appealed to the global market by assimilating to its conventions, downplaying 'Japanese' elements in favor of connections to Western art history and game aesthetics. This tendency could be observed throughout the Japanese videogame industry. In the documentary *Ebb and Flow: Conversations on the Momentum of Japanese Games* (Archipel 2018), lead designers of several major Japanese videogame companies confirm that, as Square Enix's Yoko Taro notes, "we had to sell games to the global market, so we mimicked titles developed in the West". SIE's Keiichiro Toyama is shown with a sheepish smile when he says "our games were, how should I put it, not so great". The documentary argues that the first decade of the 21st century was experienced as an industry-wide identity crisis because of the financial dependence on the global markets and their associated Western conventions.

Cultural debates surrounding the mimicry of Western conventions as a Japanese practice long predate the Zelda franchise. They are part of a larger narrative termed *dōka,* the notion that Japan presumably holds the unique capability of being able to successfully mimic- and adapt to foreign influence without losing their Japanese core identity (Martin, 575).[4] Herein arises a central point of tension for the construction of the Japanese subjectivity, which has vexed Japanese intellectuals since the Meiji period and the birth of the Japanese state (Koschmann

[2] *Chibi* is a genre within *anime* aesthetics that is characterized by extremely deformed anatomy.

[3] This comment is technically incorrect, as Paul Cézanne is considered a post-impressionist, not an impressionist. The namedrop however demonstrates that the aesthetic references said less about the actual graphics of the game, and all the more about the marketing appeal via Western-scented image traditions.

[4] For further discussion of *dōka*, see, for example: Iwabuchi (2002), Oguma (2002), Yoshino (1992)

2006, quoted in Martin 2018, 571). As Okabe points out, throughout the Meiji period (1868–1912) the mimicry of Western art and culture was seen as both a way to rise in the world (*risshin shusse*) and as a Western infection (*seiyō kabure*) (2019, 42).[5] In other words, while the West was seen as a model to borrow from, it also inspired a sense of inferiority, competition and desire to "preserve national and cultural difference" (Silver 2008, 132). According to Hutchinson, this cultural ambivalence led to an identity crisis that influenced much of the cultural production of both the Meiji and Taishō (1912-1926) era (2001, 177).[6]

After the Second World War, Japan's identity became predominantly articulated through its subordinate position to the United States (Iwabuchi 2002, 56). While their status as a leading economic power grew, Japan acquired a positive self-image as an assimilator. They considered themselves "successfully Westernized" (1998, 172), and prided themselves on their ability to indigenize, something they considered a, "uniquely Japanese quality" (2002, 57). At the same time, an obsession grew with the discourse surrounding *nihonjinron*, theories about the supposed unique identity of the Japanese.[7] Iwabuchi writes that in its post-war position, Japan became, "obsessed with claiming its racial purity and homogeneity through the binary opposition of two culturally organic entities, 'Japan' and the 'West'" (56). He further notes, through this nationalistic obsession, Japan was also able to conveniently forget its own pre-war colonial aggression in the region (ibid).[8]

In his historic overview of the Japanese game industry, Picard observes that this competitive interaction between Japanese and Western industries lies at the heart of the birth of the Japanese game (*geemu*). Rather than passively importing Western games, Japanese producers felt determined to actively mimic, clone, and enhance Western products in order to compete (2013, np).[9] While this suggests an empowered competitive position, Iwabuchi points out that Japanese products were only able to go global because of their historical know-how with regards to 'Western' assimilation, pointing out the 'culturally odorless' nature of Japanese export products in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (1998, 166). He argues that in contrast to American export icons like Coca Cola, Japanese icons like its *anime* figures and Nintendo characters are defined by their *mukokuseki* ('stateless') design. These products consciously erase "racial or ethnic characteristics and any context that would embed the characters in a particular culture or country" (167). In other words, while Picard points to assimilative tactics as a Japanese quality, Iwabuchi maintains that Japan's economic power could only be achieved through active self-erasure.

In the *Ebb & Flow* documentary, Fumihiko Yasuda of *Nioh* (Koei Tecmo 2017) pulls a grim face as he recalls the period of mimicry, noting that it, "really hindered any creativity we may have had". In the larger argument that the documentary makes, the necessity of mimicry is painted not as Japanese quality but rather an oppressive assimilation which recalls the historic sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the West. The documentary argues that with the release of games like *Persona V* (Atlus 2016), *NieR: Automata* (Square Enix 2017) and *Breath of the Wild,* Japanese videogame production is now experiencing a renewed momentum. Critics have similarly described the year 2017 as marking the "renaissance" (Lennon 2017) or "comeback" (Webster, 2017) of Japanese video games in the West, and the "year Japanese RPGs caught up to Western RPGs" (Leack 2017). Within this momentum, it is suggested that Japanese games have found renewed freedom to express 'their' identity after being oppressed by the economic forces of globalization that favored hegemonic Western conventions. This same jubilant rhetoric also undergirds Takizawa's commentary about the inherent 'Japaneseness' of *BotW*, marking a significant shift in the recent history of both the franchise and the industry at large.

The discursive construction of 'Japan'

[5] Both Saitō (2012) and Silver (2008) write extensively on the contradictions faced by Japan during this period, as it sought to shape a modern nation that was both legitimized by the Western powers, while simultaneously preserving national and cultural difference from these same powers.

[6] Hutchinson (2001) has argued that the works of Meiji writers like Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, Nagai Kafū and Shimazaki, address pressing questions about Japan's changing identity in the modern world via images of both West and Orient as defining Others for the Japanese Self (11).

[7] While these narratives have been criticized as racist, xenophobic and essentialist, Hutchinson argues that they indicated anxiety and a need for "certainty and reassurance that Japan was still significant, a source of pride and security" (Hutchinson 2019a, 84). For further reading on *nihonjinron*, see: Dale (1986), Mouer and Sugimoto (1986, 1995) and Befu (2002, 2008).

[8] The debate surrounding Japanese identity as either essentially homogeneous or 'mixed' in nature, due to the country's historic annexation and territorial expansions, has been researched extensively. Eiji Oguma (2002) in particular has shown the diverse range of perspectives that have shaped ideas of Japanese identity, while Morris-Suzuki (1998) has pointed out how Japan's foreign policy has been influenced by its self-image *vis-à-vis* Asia throughout the twentieth century to the present (Morris-Suzuki 1998). See also: Dower (1986), Mouer and Sugimoto (1986), Yoshino (1992), Iwabuchi (1994, 2002), Lie (2001), and Weiner (2009).

[9] Picard cites the example of *Pong* (Atari 1972), which was quickly cloned by both Sega and Taito. As a result of the 'cloning strategy', Japanese companies were able to gain commercial success to the point where they could develop their own games, leading to the eventual creation of major commercial successes like Taito's *Space Invaders* (1978) and the formation of some of Japan's contemporary leading videogame producers.

Takizawa and the documentary recall the historical anxieties pertaining to the construction of Japanese subjectivity in cultural production. In their comments, the notion of what constitutes their games' sense of 'Japaneseness' is discursively produced in a twofold manner. First, through binary contrast: Yoko Taro notes, "considering art forms like *anime* and even *ukiyo-e,* the Japanese people have never really focused on realistic portrayals. I think we prefer this kind of surreal and unclear world, and personally I think this is a really big difference between Japan and the West" (Archipel 2018). Essential characteristics are ascribed to two stabilized entities – the realism-loving 'West' and surreal 'Japan'. [10] As a discursive construction, 'Japan' as a nation and 'Japaneseness' as an identity, rely on clearly demarcated boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Iwabuchi 2019, 6).[11]

Second, the game designers suggest a transhistorical link between their products and Japanese artistic heritage, specifically *ukiyo-e.* This narrative is perpetuated by other Japanese cultural producers as well, such as the renowned artist Takashi Murakami and art historian Tsuji Nobuo.[12] The notion that the artistic heritage of *ukiyo-e* ought to be considered the predecessor of contemporary *anime* has been contested by critics like Sharon Kinsella and Adam Kern, who argue instead that *anime* is a product shaped by the transnational flows of contemporary globalized popular culture, and that the notion that it can be traced back to an eighteenth-century artform must be understood predominantly as an effort to legitimize a cultural form (Kinsella 2000, 19) (Kern 2006, 132).

Moreover, Daliot-Bul writes, "using Japanese tradition as a means to add uncontested respectability to recently invented cultural products is a well-known tactic in modern Japan" (Daliot-Bul 2009, 253).[13] The tactics used by the Japanese videogame producers are part of a discursive- and performative framework which does more than simply brand their own products. Rather, they do the work of what Iwabuchi calls 'pop-culture diplomacy' (2015, 420). He observes that in Japan's postwar era, the country has increasingly come to rely on nation branding through its cultural output in order to internationally enhance its image. While assimilative *mukokuseki* strategies seemingly erase Japanese cultural odor, its success abroad has simultaneously drawn the attention policy makers (419). Since the turn of the century, the Japanese government has begun to implement cultural diplomacy policies, widely known under the umbrella term 'Cool Japan'. [14] The Japanese the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) now publishes annual Intellectual Property Strategic Programs in which tactics for conveying the attractiveness of Japan are detailed (422-3). These policies, and significant allocated budgets alongside them, are an exercise in soft power (Nye 1990) aimed at enhancing the image of Japanese culture abroad via the globalizing Japanese mediamix of *anime, manga* and *geemu*.

In a 2017 Guardian article, Samanth Subramanian signaled out that nation branding is now a booming business through which nations seek to construct a more distinctive version of their country's Self (19). Cultural branding and diplomacy herein serve to discursively reproduce the boundary of 'us' and 'them'. Moreover, the pop culture mediamix has become not only, "one of the main governmental resources of brand nationalism, but also the perceptual frame through which 'Japan' is popularized both internally as well as externally" (Miyake 2015, 94). The commentary made by cultural producers like the Japanese videogame designers is grounded within these identity politics. From this understanding arises the question of how their videogames are reflecting and perpetuating these discourses. As the fields of postcolonial studies and cultural analysis have long established, representational media like painting, literature, and film traffic in social discourses on race, gender and colonial structures. [15] So too do videogames. [16] Hutchinson notes

[10] The 'surreal' quality plays into what Hutchinson (2019a) detects as a common online trope that arose in the 1990s, where reviewers would link Japanese culture and cultural products to a sense of the 'bizarre' that "only Japan could come up with" (Hutchinson, 23). She dismisses it as an Orientalist and essentialist notion.

[11] On the definition of the Japanese 'Self' as defined via its Others, see: Gluck (1985), Tanaka (1993), Morris-Suzuki (1998), Clammer (2001), Oguma (2002), and Hutchinson (2011).

[12] Nobuo and Murakami have collaborated on exhibitions and publications that aim to transhistorically link Murakami's *anime*-inspired paintings to those of *Edo* artists. Upon viewing them, Murakami exclaimed, "it's like meeting my father! Oh, this is my DNA!" (Nishimura 2018, 135). Nobuo traces contemporary manga aesthetics back to of *kibyōshi, ukiyo-e,* and *emakimono*. He writes of the famous Frolicking Animals scroll *Chōjū-Jinbutsu-Giga*: "there is a shared use of pictorial techniques, trans-historical conventions, to which the modern manga illustrator may (deliberately) hark back" (Nobuo 2001, 64). Takizawa's GDC 2017 PowerPoint shows the same scroll, suggesting that he indeed views the game as a successor to the heritage of *Chōjū-Giga.*

[13] The Intellectual Property Strategic Program of 2005 displays this rhetoric clearly when it states its purpose is to, "promoting the creation of a new Japan Brand with the objective of spreading a Japan brand to the world, by the end of FY2005, the GOJ will arrange public-private discussion on the ideal form of a new Japan brand, which will be applied to designs, functions, contents created based on Japanese traditional culture and adjusted to the contemporary lifestyle, e.g. Neo-Japanesque, and will work toward establishing such a brand" (38).

[14] For further reading on 'Cool Japan', see Daliot-Bul (2009), deWinter (2017) and McLelland (2017).

[15] For a broad overview of cultural analysis, see: Storey (1996, 2010), Grossberg (1997, 2010), Bal (2003), McRobbie (2005), During (2005), Ryan and Musiol (2008) and Rodman (2014).

[16] In the field of game studies, significant work on representation as a site of meaning-making has been done by King and Kryzwinska (2006), Flanagan (2009), Shaw (2010), Nakamura (2017) and Murray (2018).

that, "the relationship between the game world and real world is one of blurred boundaries where ideology and representation interconnect" (2016, 155). As a discursive practice, the constructed world of videogames reinforces particular social ideologies, which in the case of *BotW* must be understood in the historically and culturally situated context of Cool Japan and discourses on 'Japaneseness'.

Hutchinson echoes Stuart Hall's understanding of culture as myth-making when she writes, "how we portray ourselves and others in games provides a useful window into the process of identity construction" (2016, 155). According to Hall, representation implies not a reflection of a pre-existing world, but rather the active producing of myths for and by the culture from which it emerges. As such, they can "tell us about the 'dream life' of a culture" (1989, quoted in Murray 2018). Playing videogames is a means to engage with these myths in a playable form, created by "a constituency whose access, agency and ability to wield the technology allows them to communicate their wishes, fears, dreams – and even identity politics – through a form of interactive entertainment" (Murray 2018, 19).[17] In other words, as a Japanese production, this paper presumes *BotW* dreams ludic dreams (and nightmares) about Japan and its Others. Thus, what follows is a discursive analysis of that representation, understood to be laboring within the complex Japanese socio-economic historical context of mimicry, assimilation, cultural hegemonic flows and nation branding efforts.

Occidental Hegemony

At first glance, *BotW*'s Hyrule is a rich space filled with different cultures, architectures and beings to discover. Amongst the seven major races that populate the land, diverse representations of body size and phenotype can be discerned. There are four non-humanoid races, based on elemental essences: the aquatic Zora, volcano-dwelling Goron, avian Rito and forest spirit Korok. Additionally, there are three humanoid races based on broad ethnic stereotypes: the Anglo-medieval Hylians, the Oriental Gerudo and the Japanese Sheikah.

On the surface of the representation, the power balance in the world of *BotW* seems to favor the Hylians. They are considered the divine race of Hyrule, chosen by and named for the goddess Hylia. The protagonists of the franchise, Zelda and Link, reincarnate time and again into the Hylian race, and for this reason it is always a Hylian family who rules the kingdom. Their culture is implied to be hegemonic within Hyrule, as their architecture and language are the only ones to spread beyond their immediate biome.[18] The other races echo this power structure, with the local chief leaders answering to the Hylian royal family.

The Hylians correspond to stereotypes of Anglo-medieval farming folk. While *BotW* is the first Zelda game to render a plurality of skin colors within its races, the significant Hylians, Zelda and Link, remain Caucasian characters with anglophone names even in the Japanese version. The franchise's core narrative draws upon Anglo-medieval iconography: the sword-wielding knight, the Rapunzel-like princess, a castle tower serving as her prison. Notably, the majority of dark-skinned Hylians are centered around Lurelin village, the town considered the least integral to the game. Key Hylian words resemble the English language. 'Hyrule' for example derives from 'high rule'. From these instances it can be concluded that the Hylians are to be read as analogous to the 'West'. They are a representation of Occidentalism, which Miyake defines as, "a cumulative constellation of discourses, emotions, practices, and institutions based upon the idea of the so-called 'West'" (95). The notion of the 'West', as opposed by the Othered 'Rest', has been "one of the most effective in inscribing the whole world and humanity along hierarchic and fluid lines of inclusion and exclusion" (ibid). Considering the Hylian hegemony, this also seems to be the case in Hyrule.

On the narrative level, *BotW* revolves around the story of an apocalypse. A hundred years before the events of the game, the demon king Ganon wiped out civilization, turning Hyrule into wilderness. In the game's present timeline, survivors from the seven races set out into Hyrule for trade and communication, being careful not to get caught by Ganon's free-roaming monsters. On the visual level, however, while the other races have a few token travelers, it is only the Hylians that can be found abundantly on the roads, camping in the bushes and sleeping in the stables. They are granted a spatial privilege the other races are not. Moreover, observant play leads to the conclusion that Hylians are the only race that can be found being ambushed by Ganon's monsters, the Bokoblin.[19] These goblin-like creatures are the staple enemy of the series, but their design has been significantly altered for *BotW*: while

[17] For further reading on videogames as discursive objects, see: McAllister (2004), Voorhees (2012) and Paul (2012).

[18] The compendium book *Creating a Champion* (2018) notes that all kinds of vestiges throughout Hyrule are classified as ancient Hylian cultural relics (412).

[19] In *Observant play: colonial readings in Breath of the Wild* (2019b), Hutchinson argues that through observant play of *BotW,* subtle counter-messaging about the assumed 'barbarism' of the monsters and 'civilization' of the kingdom can be observed. For example, she points out that the other stock monster of the game, the carnivorous Lizalfos, can be observed worshipping fruit, suggesting both sentience and complexity (2).

in *Twilight Princess* they looked like aging imps, and like pirates in *Skyward Sword, BotW* is the first to render them as stereotypical primitive savages, with hairy, dark bodies, claw-like hands and feet. In lieu of clothing they don loincloths and accessories of bone. Their iconography, and the procedural design only programmed to show them attacking Hylians, draws up a particularly colonial image of wild savages attacking innocent white travelers in need of Link's saving.

Jenkins & Fuller observed comparatively early on in the study of games that Nintendo's approach to its landscapes painted a colonial picture (Jenkins & Fuller 1995). *BotW* in particular can be read as analogous to a Manifest Destiny narrative where Link, a white Caucasian man, wakes up in *terra incognita* wilderness after having journeyed there from a technologically advanced society (namely pre-wilderness Hyrule). As he wakes, a divine voice speaks of his destiny to save the land from a usurping evil codified as a bestiality, whose equally bestial primitive creatures roam the lands. Benign exotic species inhabit the land as well, eagerly awaiting Link's rescue from the primitive evil forces that hold them and their princesses captive. As Jenkins and Fuller point out, the rescue plot only serves as the excuse for the true point of the colonial logic: the pleasure of exploration and consumption in the name of benign saviorism (ibid).[20] On first impression, *BotW*'s racial dynamics thus suggest affinities with a power fantasy pertaining to Occidental hegemony, one that hinges upon a colonial logic of white man's burden.[21]

The Oriental Other

The analysis of *BotW* as an Occidental and colonial power fantasy fits a pattern identified in both postcolonial game studies and by scholars of the fantasy genre. Monson argues that high fantasy narratives continually draw upon the iconography of an idealized medieval Europe to represent its benign hegemonic fantasy cultures, whilst Muslim and Jewish stereotypes are often employed for the malignant border races (Monson 2012, 54). That same pattern has long been a convention of the Zelda franchise. In *Ocarina of Time* (1998), the Gerudo were introduced as the principal enemy race, a fierce 'savage' people from arid southern lands, from whom the demon Ganon originated. The original Japanese version of *Ocarina of Time* featured the Gerudo's symbol resembling the crescent moon of Islam and Arabic chanting (Lee 2014). Kimball notes that *Ocarina*'s representation of the Anglo-Christian Hylians at war with Middle Eastern-inspired Gerudo's reinforces a colonial power fantasy, writing: "This ideology serves not only to utilize non-Western and Orient cultures as a visual shorthand for evilness or Otherness but to position Western European culture as that of a civilized savior, acting to perpetuate its own interests and ideologies" (2018, 10).

In the events of *BotW*, the Gerudo are no longer hostile. Rather, they are now a benign clan who are resentful towards Ganon.[22] On the aesthetic level however, there is a clear continuation from *Ocarina of Time*'s Ganon implied in the Gerudo's large noses, red hair and bulky physiques. Moreover, at the time of writing, the recently released trailer for the sequel to *BotW* has revealed Link and Zelda approaching a monstrous mummified body with red hair and the mark of the Gerudo. It is therefore likely that the sequel will cast the Gerudo Ganon as its main enemy, retracting the Gerudo to their earlier demonic status.

In Gerudo town, the designers re-employ images drawn from Orientalist paintings: Byzantine-like architecture with small windows, large entry halls littered with carpets and patterned cloth hung in the small alleyways to provide shade. People sit on the ground, some merchants, some just lounging. As Tromans writes, "[in Orientalist paintings], the figures would be shown doing 'typical' Oriental things, or rather *not* doing them, for typical Oriental pastimes were understood to be sitting around languorously." (Tromans 2008, 157). In *Reel Bad Arabs* (2003), Shaheen deconstructs the representation of the Arabian cultural Other, pointing to features such as the 'hooked-nose' Arab (175). Gerudo women boast many of these characteristics: the hooked nose is their defining facial feature, the scantily-dressed belly-dancer outfits complete with golden jewelry their dress, and their town is a female-only space of secrecy that Link must sneak into.

The image production presented through the Gerudo suggests a reinforcement of Orientalism, the body of discourses pertaining to the imagined 'East'. Edward Said has maintained that the binary Manichean logic of 'East' and 'West', where one represents the civilized and the other

[20] While it is outside the scope of the present paper to fully develop Link's position as a white colonial savior, significant work on postcolonial games studies has been done by Shoshana Magnet (2006), Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009), Souvik Mukherjee (2017), Soraya Murray (2018), Sybille Lammes (2010) and, especially within the Japanese context, Paul Martin (2018).

[21] Hemmann (2017) has pointed out that *Twilight Princess* also holds up a colonial logic in which Ganondorf is codified as an abject bestiality. She counter-argues that Ganon can be read as a site of resistance to Hyrule's imperial rule. *BotW*'s Calamity Ganon is not given any narrative complexity, but he is the reincarnation of all previous Ganons. He is similarly presented as an uncivilized bestiality that must be tamed, recalling uncomfortable historical colonial narratives.

[22] This history is recalled in *BotW* by Urbosa, a proud leader who expresses desire for revenge at her connection to Ganon: "*It was written that Calamity Ganon once adopted the form of a Gerudo. And that... will make this victory all the more satisfying.*"

must be saved or defeated, is a particular power fantasy that enabled the definition of Europe's Self by contrast (Said 1978, 31). The Gerudo are rendered Other through absolute difference. On the level of language, all humanoid races have their own. However, while the designers fully developed the Sheikah language to include an alphabet and hidden messages for players to decrypt, the Gerudo language does not extend beyond a few token words. One of the Gerudo merchants has been modelled to say '*willcome*', emphasizing how the hegemonic Hylian tongue is not native to them. On the level of religion, while no longer linked to Islamic imagery, the Gerudo are still construed as religiously deviant, which is emphasized through the crumbled Goddess statue found in a back alley.

Their Otherness is also expressed through their physique. The Gerudo are noticeably larger than the Hylians and Sheikah, and they are more physically mature. Their clothing is revealing, their poses and expressions daring; if Link spends the night at Gerudo Town's inn, moaning and giggling is heard during the cut scene, implying a Gerudo woman visits him. Despite still being a child, the Gerudo princess Riju is sexualized, gazing down at Link from her throne, one arm resting on her throne, her head cocked to the side and an eyebrow raised. Troublingly so, her outfit has even been modelled to allow peeping at her underwear.[23] Tromans notes that, "it was a European or Western assumption that the gaze must be free to wander anywhere there is work to be done" (ibid, 164). This is certainly true of the Gerudo. Theirs is a society structured upon secrecy and catering to the pleasure of forbidden peeping.

If *BotW*'s racial representation adheres to an Occidental power fantasy, this emerges not just from its white rulers and colonial savior, but also from its reliance on long-established Oriental bodies of imagery and practices re-employed in the Gerudo. As Miyake writes, Orientalism, "as a process of contrastive and explicit othering, has contributed in the modern age to shape, by binary opposition, Euro-American identity, enabling the very idea of 'West' to remain in many cases implicit or unmarked as the universal norm" (2015, 97).

Japanese Orientalism

The binary Oriental-Occidental image production in *BotW* suggests the continuation of a discourse of empire that empowers an Occidental gaze and indicates Western-coded colonial ideology is woven into the ludic fabric of a Japanese production. This might be explained as another form of *mukokuseki*, an assimilation to the universal 'neutral' gaze which is white and male in order to adhere to the global market. Yet such an interpretation would be reductive to the complexity and specificity of the Japanese context. As Martin eloquently puts it in his analysis of *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2009), "the cultural baggage of Western discourses of race and colonialism becomes interleaved with a Japanese social imaginary [...] the game tells us little about Africa and not much more about European colonialism. What *does* resonate throughout the game are aspects of the Japanese social imaginary in the first decade of the 21st century" (emphasis in original, Martin 2018, 570).

Said already noted himself that, "to speak of Orientalism is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise" (1978, 33).[24] What then of a Japanese enterprise? As touched on briefly before, Japan has historically struggled with what Hutchinson calls its '*Tōyō* Paradox'. On the one hand, Japan could identify with 'East/Orient/Asia' (*tōyō*) in contrast to the 'West' (s*eiyō*), while on the other, it felt the anxiety of establishing itself as a distinct (island) identity unto itself (*shimaguni)* (Hutchinson 2016, 169). Moreover, Japan's experience with colonialism involved both the Western colonial presence in Asia and Japan, as well as the Japanese colonial presence in Asia (ibid). Japan can therefore be positioned simultaneously as a colonizer and as a 'colonized' nation (Okabe 2013, 55). As a result, the Japanese have historically not only distinguished their Self *vis-à-vis* the 'West', but also versus other Asian countries through their own particular Orientalism.[25]

Taking the *SoulCalibur* (Bandai Namco) franchise as her object of study, Hutchinson has analyzed how Japanese videogames inherit and reproduce these racial discourses. She writes: "characters in *SoulCalibur* play on the Meiji paradox of Japanese identity, with Japan trying to separate from mainland Asia whilst simultaneously drawing on Asian cultural heritage for a sense of non-Western Self" (2016, 168). She observes, for example, that all non-Japanese Asian characters in the game have red hair. She postulates this is a marker of pure Otherness that finds its

[23] While it is outside of the scope of this paper to analyze the complexity of the character Riju, it must be noted that her design is made up of 'Oriental' aspects as well as conventions drawn from *anime* aesthetics pertaining to the Lolita/lolicon trope. The ability to peep at underwear is a well-known element of 'fan service' in certain genres of *anime.* See: Kinsella (2006) and Galbraith (2011) .

[24] The application of Said's framework to the Japanese context has been called into question by Eiji Oguma (2002), who criticizes Japanese scholars for applying it to the Japanese framework without taking the ambivalent double colonizer-colonized position into account.

[25] On Japanese Orientalism, see also: Ito (1991), Lamarre (2005) and Hutchinson (2011, 2017).

roots in feudal Japan.[26] This is also the case for the Gerudo, whose red hair has been their defining feature since *Ocarina of Time* and links them back to the demon Ganon as a pure sense of Otherness. Moreover, in the *Creating a Champion* (2018, hereafter *CoC*) compendium book, lead artist Hirohito Shinoda writes that he drew on Indian and Chinese culture for the Gerudo design (137). This is significant, as it not only seems to draw attention away from the aforementioned Arabian-Oriental iconography, but also grounds the Gerudo as not *any* exotic, vaguely Middle-Eastern race, but a distinctly Asian-coded Other through the visual referents to China and India.

Whereas the Gerudo of previous Zelda games served as the Othered vessel in an Islamic-Christian-scented dichotomy, in *BotW* the Gerudo are constructed out of pieces drawn from both Western Oriental imaginaries and particular Japanese Oriental imaginaries of the non-Japanese Asian Other. Grounded within the historical complexities surrounding Japan's desire to at once align with- and be separate from the West, the Gerudo thus emerge as something of an *über-Other*, an amalgamation of Orientalisms in which the Western and Japanese gaze unite.

Japanese Occidentalism

In the sections above, I have argued that upon first glance, *BotW* seems to present an Occidental power fantasy posited upon a predictable Occident-Orient binary. Upon closer examination however, the discursive practice of representing the Gerudo as an amalgamation of Western and Japanese Orientalism reveals its constructing Japanese hand. This implies that in the Japanese social imaginary there lives the anxiety to be aligned with the 'Western' gaze. From this follows that, since the Occidental Hylians are equally part of the Japanese discursive representation, it warrants taking a closer look at them as well. Chen points out that in imagining the 'West', the 'East' is empowered to gaze back and to, "participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others" (2002, 4-5).

Re-assessing the Occidental Hylians beyond their hegemony, the sense emerges that the divine race is perhaps not all it proclaims to be. The physiognomy of certain Hylians is crude to the point of ridicule, such as the farm boy Manny who stands outside the inn in Hateno Village hoping to woo the local shop girl. His beady, too-close-together eyes and rounded face recall stereotypes of medieval smallfolk more than they do the idea of a divine race.[27] The Hylians also display racism and feelings of superiority. For instance, a Hylian farmer stops Link from entering Hateno until he realizes he too is a Hylian, noting, *"Hylians are generally good folk, so…"*. Within the Hylian village Hateno, a corrupted goddess statue can be found that allows manipulative Faustian deals to be made, implying Hateno's villagers have a particular greed to them. In the *CoC* compendium, it is moreover explicated how Hyrule came to its demise: a Hylian king of the past began to fear the technological prowess of the Sheikah, exiling them and ordering the abolishment of their research facilities (101). As a result, knowledge of the technology gradually faded to the point where, when threats of Ganon's return became apparent, the Hyruleans no longer knew how any of the technology worked. Because the knowledge was lost, Ganon was able to infect the Guardians and Divine Beasts easily and provoke mass extinction. It is in these particularities that a parody of the Occidental race via the 'indigenous creativity' of the Japanese construing hand might be detected.

The Japanese Self

Identification with the Hylians as the normative Self has been a staple of the Zelda franchise. While a subtle criticism of the Hylians can be detected in the instances above, it does not significantly challenge their noted hegemonic status. However, *BotW* is the first game to introduce a new humanoid race into its established East-West binary. As I will argue below, it is through the Sheikah that the game establishes its Japanese sense of Self, and it is here where the identity politics in which it traffics most clearly emerge.

While the Sheikah were mentioned in earlier games as a mysterious race that served as the right hand of the royal family, *BotW* is the first to flesh them out as a deeply sophisticated race that draws strongly upon traditional Japanese iconography. They wear robes kept together by belts knotted at waist, reminiscent of *kimono* garb. Their town, Kakariko, is made up of buildings in the *shinmei-zukuri* style, with paths marked by *torii* and *shimenawa* strings. The ancient Sheikah technology too draws its inspiration from Japanese art history, specifically the *Jōmon* period of Japanese history (10,000 BCE), using the upside-down shape of the vases for the Guardians and

[26] The first European foreigners that arrived in Japan were the Dutch on Dejima, who were known for their ginger-blonde hair. They came to be known subsequently as the red-haired barbarians (ketō). See also: Tsuruta (1989).

[27] Throughout Hyrule, Hylians with warped physiognomy can be found. Observant fans have made it a sport to find, and share, the 'ugliest' they could find. See: https://www.reddit.com/r/Breath_of_the_Wild/comments/5zxcvc/challenge_find_the_ugliest_npc_in_botw/

shrines and the intricate rope design on the tech.[28] The *CoC* compendium notes that the Sheikah were once Hyrule's lead scientists, assassins, and artists, before their grandeur led the greedy Hylian king to exile them (101). Most of the Sheikah loyally obeyed, casting off their technology and turning to feudal farming life whilst secretly passing on their noble fighting techniques.

The Sheikah find their counterpart in the Yiga clan, a shadow organization born out of rebel Sheikah that declared war on the Hylians after being exiled and joining Ganon's cause. The Yiga evoke the shinobi/ninja archetype, likely named for the *Iga* and *Kōga* clans.[29] They fight with sickles, teleport via hand mudras and are able to disguise themselves before attacking Link. The Sheikah outfit that Link can purchase in Kakariko evokes the shinobi style too, but on the whole, the Sheikah themselves rather recall the noble samurai archetype. Barrett points out that in the representation of archetypes in Japanese film, the samurai figure was marked by his honorable loyalty (1989, 34). This *bushidō* mindset can, for example, be observed in the Sheikah Steen and Olkin, who teach Link their noble fighting techniques, which contrast the guerilla tactics of the Yiga ninjas.

The Sheikah evoke two types of Japanese Orientalism: on the one hand, they are the quintessence of nostalgic traditional Japanese culture, while on the other they evoke Techno-Orientalism (Ueno 1999) through their technological prowess. As a Japanese representation, they thus play into a self-Orientalizing discourse. While these stereotypes cater to exoticizing fantasies, Miyake argues that, "this kind of cultural self-orientalism [...] would not have been possible without its own strategic advantages" (2015, 102). Indeed, as Hutchinson points out in the *SoulCalibur* franchise, the Japanese archetypes are privileged by the game as normative *vis-à-vis* the Asian-Oriental Others, who are reduced to (red-haired) bodily signifiers (2016, 168). This same division is created in *BotW*, where the Sheikah and Gerudo both evoke 'Oriental' stereotypes. Crucially different however is how the Gerudo are rendered absolutely Other through their dependency on of Link's Occidental power, while the Sheikah are afforded their own unique power position within the Japan-Asia-West triad.

That is to say, upon closer observation, it emerges that Link is in fact highly dependent upon the Sheikah's traditional culture and high technology. At the start of the game, Link wakes in a Sheikah resurrection bath that has kept him alive for a century. Here, he finds a Sheikah slate that will be his guiding force throughout the game. The player is told to find Impa, the Sheikah elder who will act as Link's spiritual guide throughout the game. From there, the game instructs the player to find the Sheikah Purah in the Hylian town Hateno, and to receive additional Sheikah tech to use in the Sheikah shrines. Here, ancient mummified Sheikah monks wait for Link to prove his worth to them, before awarding him their power.[30] Put bluntly, Link is fully dependent on the Sheikah's wisdom, power and aesthetics for his survival, whereas his own people provide little in terms of empowerment.[31]

While invoking a self-Orientalizing image of Japan, the technology and tradition of the Sheikah empowers them to be rendered equal to, if not more important and complex than, the Occidental Hylians. Both races are privileged as normative in a way that the other races are not. This is particularly striking from a cartographic point of view: all the non-Hylian/Sheikah towns have no names beyond stating the race to which it belongs ('Rito village', 'Goron City', 'Gerudo Town', 'Korok Forest', 'Zora's Domain'), whilst the Hylian and Sheikah have multiple towns, all of which have poetic names that they presumably gave to themselves ('Lurelin Village', 'Kakariko Village', 'Hateno Town'). It is also a Sheikah town first and a Hylian town second that the player is told to visit within the tutorial phase before true open exploration begins. Moreover, the Othered races are all under direct attack by Ganon Blights, while the Hylians and Sheikah are not. As such, the Hylians and Sheikah seem to make up two parts of a conjoined Hyrulean Self. Considering their real-world cultural counterparts, this suggests an implied convergence between Japan and West *vis-à-vis* the other races that is politically embedded within the representation.

[28] Art director Takizawa says their use of *Jōmon* was because "it is relatively unknown to much of the world. It has a nuance of mystery and wonder that we found really appealing" (Nintendo 2017). Nicole Rousmanière, curator of Japanese Art at the British Museum, notes conversely that, "there has been a reanimation of the *Jōmon* identity as Japanese identity. These figures are booming" (Kleinman 2017). Here too, the commentary seeks to enhance the sense of uniqueness through the appropriation of Japanese art history, connecting heritage to Japanese identity.

[29] While the Yiga are likely named after the Iga clan, the Yiga's leader is called 'Kohga'. The Iga and Koga clan were two of Japan's most well-known shinobi warriors. Interestingly, just like the Sheikah and Yiga, the Iga and Koga were once allied, before a war drove them apart. See: Souyri (2010).

[30] These monks visually reference *sokushinbutsu*, an ancient Buddhist practice of self-mummification wherein the monks slowly starve themselves in such a way that their body does not decay. Presumably, these monks have waited for Link's reincarnation for up to 100,000 years, emphasizing the Sheikah's spiritual depth.

[31] A notable exception to this is King Rhoam, the Hylian king who guides Link through the beginning of the game. However, as a deceased spirit, his power is significantly limited, and he is never seen again after the tutorial phase ends.

Japanese superiority

I have argued that the world that *BotW* renders is suggested to be an Occidental hegemony, but it is equally a world wherein the Occident repressing a technologically powerful race, a metaphor for Japan, leads to apocalyptic destruction. The only way to save it is by having Link be fully dependent upon that which is visually coded as 'Japanese': their people, their technology, their spirituality and their aesthetics. Above, it was suggested that Link, as the white Occidental savior, holds Hyrule under colonial subjugation. However, upon further observation, many other elements in *BotW* that signify a sense of 'Japaneseness' exist independently of that power. For example, three dragons roam Hyrule, their iconography recalling Shōhaku's dragon.[32] [33] They are fleeting and ungraspable, unable to be killed or subjected by Link. Comparable is the Lord of the Mountain, a deer-like creature that recalls the deer god in Ghibli's *Mononoke-Hime* (2000). Similarly fleeting, the Lord is the most powerful steed in the game, yet unlike the horses cannot be caught and subjected.[34] Also present are the Korok, a race based on the Shinto concept of *kami* who are reminiscent of kodama in *Mononoke-Hime.* Like the Sheikah, they serve the purpose of granting Link power, but only after he proves himself to them. They are never in any danger from Ganon Blights, either. They are the only race shown capable of killing Link if he mis-steps in their forest, implying their superiority in the power balance. Link's control over the land is further undone every so often by the Blood Moon, which resets the slain monsters and consumed resources.[35] Though procedurally necessary to replenish resources for the player, it aesthetically resonates with the beliefs of Shinto: that nature is spirited and sacred, as well as the necessity of purification of human error during particular moments in the lunar calendar (Yamakage 2010, n.p.). Finally, and perhaps most remarkably in a game franchise defined by its safe-the-princess rescue plot, the Sheikah heiress Paya is never directly threatened by Ganon. These elements, all drawn from aesthetics pertaining to a sense of 'Japaneseness' in the form of Ghibli, Shinto and Japanese art history, are all decidedly placed outside and above Link's control.

Through the Sheikah, 'Japan' is represented (and represents itself) as culturally unique in a binary opposition to the Othered Asian-Oriental Gerudo. It also represents itself as both aligned with and independent of the Occidental Hylians. Iwabuchi notes, "while Japan's construction of its national identity through an unambiguous comparison of itself with 'the West' is a historically embedded project, Japan's modern national identity has, I would argue, always been imagined in an asymmetrical totalizing triad between 'Asia,' 'the West,' and 'Japan.'" (2002, 7). Put differently, by strategically positioning itself between the two essentialized poles of 'West' and 'East', Japan emerges as unique, powerful and independent (Miyake 2015, 102). If videogames "represent powerful invocations of the lived world in playable form, which offer insights into the core fears, fantasies, hopes and anxieties of a given culture in a specific cultural context" (Murray 2018, 18), it is in this particular power triad that we can see the distinctly Japanese dreams that *BotW* dreams.

Conclusion

I have argued that on surface, *BotW* presents a continuation of the franchise's convention: an Occidental power fantasy in which the white-coded Hylians rule over a set of exotic and Oriental Others. This normative representation is consistent with the previous Zelda games and their *mukokuseki* design philosophy. However, prompted by the nationalistic tone in the branding rhetoric of the game's art director Satoru Takizawa, a closer look at the game's racial representation has revealed distinct alterations. The Gerudo reflects both a Western and specifically Japanese Orientalism, and the traditional Occidental-Oriental binary of earlier Zelda games has been complicated through the addition of a third humanoid race which evokes Japanese archetypes. The Japanese Sheikah and Occidental Hylian races are privileged over the Othered race. Within the internal racial power matrix however, the Sheikah are represented as independent of and superior to Link's colonial powers. In other words, the Japanese Self is excluded from the Occidental grasp, and the Occident is made to be dependent on 'Japanese'-coded power.

[32] Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781) was a Japanese Edo period artist. His famous 'Dragon and Clouds', whose design forms the inspiration for *BotW*'s dragon design, is in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. See: https://collections.mfa.org/objects/26118.

[33] Interestingly, the dragon design of *BotW* is based on a much more traditional serpentine Japanese iconography, whereas *Skyward Sword, Twilight Princess* and *The Wind Waker* all had dragon designs whose physique was based on the European Wyvern iconography, characterized by a large belly. This change signifies the conscious increase in 'Japanese' signifiers in the franchise.

[34] For further reading on the horses in *BotW,* see Seraphine (2018).

[35] Hemmann (2019) examines the cultural background of the Zelda franchise. She relates the cycle of rebirth that continually renews Hyrule to Buddhist eschatology, suggesting that the franchise follows not a Judeo-Christian "Western configuration of time as linear and progressive", but rather a Buddhist-informed cyclical temporality.

I argue that the pro-Japanese shifts that occur within *BotW* (and in its designers' rhetoric) must be understood in relation to larger cultural phenomena like 'Cool Japan', through which the culture industries have become tasked to enhance Japan's image abroad. Iwabuchi argues that in the age of globalization, there has been a significant return to nationalistic rhetoric (2019, 3). This is achieved through commercialized nation branding via the culture industries play a significant role. Media culture is driven by the globalized exercise of soft power via nation branding, which means the nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation (Fan 2010, 101). Games herein play a significant role, as they access the public imagination and fulfill a persuasive function (Murray, 32).

Rather than simply recycling an American New World myth in order to cater to the global markets, *BotW* thus emerges as a site where significant identity politics are being negotiated, which must also be understood within the specificity of Japanese history and culture. The privileging of 'Japanese' elements *vis à vis* Asian and Western Others reproduces a discursive power matrix which Japan has historically employed for its subject formation as a unique entity within the asymmetrical totalizing triad between 'Asia,' 'the West,' and 'Japan.' (Iwabuchi 2002, 7). *BotW* inherits the discourses pertaining to Japan's specific ambivalent historical position as both a colonizer and a colonized nation, marked by anxieties of inferiority and desires to be both alike and different to both the 'West' and other Asian countries. *Breath of the Wild* conjures dreams and nightmares of the Japanese social imagery through its Occidental, Oriental and Self-Oriental representation, and as such, emerges as a fractured cultural dream of unsettled ambivalence and resistance, a site where unresolved cultural, social and political frictions are being negotiated.

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