

THESIS

GENDER DOMINANT INTERACTION DESIGN IN *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ECHOES  
OF WISDOM*

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### GENDER DOMINANT INTERACTION DESIGN IN *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ECHOES OF WISDOM*

Interaction Design (IxD) implements rhetorical concerns in the design of digital interfaces, usually used to consider how websites are designed to improve user experience. This thesis applies this concept to the design of interactions in video games, specifically concerning how IxD is engineered to convey gendered experiences. The work with IxD done in this thesis uses Sano-Franchini's concept of Feminist Interaction Design (F-IxD) as a starting point for conceptualizing other ways in which gender impacts IxD and user experience. Specifically, the research question addresses how game design imposes gender and gender ideologies through various interactions and how that impacts player experience through *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom* (2024). This research was conducted through an exploratory case study, using qualitative coding analysis to identify how the larger community experiences the game within the r/echoesofwisdom subreddit, and using close reading analysis to identify how my positionality impacts my gendered experience through gameplay video capture and field notes. Through this research, it was found that *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom* demonstrates shifts in game design that appear to be connected to the implementation of a female protagonist. This thesis (1) problematizes existing research, illustrating that not only is the field viewing gender in video games at a visual surface level, but would also benefit from specific definitions of key terms, such as passive gameplay, and (2) proposes the implementation of Costanza-Chock's existing design justice principles to mitigate existing and future gendered IxD paradigms.

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## DEDICATION

To my mom, for always believing in me and supporting me. Thank you for being my soft place to fall.

To the Game Theory YouTube channel, for teaching my much younger self that video games are phenomenal starting points for engaging with deeper learning opportunities.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, video games have been operationalized as a vast digital network to facilitate mass communication, to foster digital literacy within its players, and as a means of presenting nuanced issues and polarizing ideas in accessible ways through narrative conventions. With this, however, there is the continuation, and often exacerbation, of social issues among communities of players that are harmful for inclusion and diversity purposes, ultimately sabotaging the capabilities of video games as a uniquely viable rhetorical tool for good. This is a result of social spaces being transferred from the real world to the digital one with no critical awareness of what frameworks are operating to systemically impact marginalized populations in the non-digital world that are then being imposed upon digital spaces. Most infamously, this presents itself as misogynist ideologies often identified in video game communities. However, it is not the video game genre itself that causes its players to engage with and agree with misogynist ideas, rather, something about the video game's implicit rhetorical delivery makes it more desirable for misogynists to build communities around these video games. When larger communities of gamers express misogynist viewpoints within a video game network, including other players, game developers, and fictional characters, it reinforces the strict gender binary that is operationalized to continue traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, and disregards those who do not adhere to the traditional gender binary.

While video game developers themselves may or may not abhor misogynist views, it appears that some video games may reflect patriarchal and misogynist ideologies that are dominant within society. The implementation of these ideologies in video games is highly outdated and does not align with the audience that video games garner. Demographically, the

reported gender of gamers is nearly equally split between men and women, with nonbinary individuals representing a smaller group. Specifically, it was found that 53% of gamers identified as male, 46% identified as female, and 1% identified as non-binary (Entertainment Software Association, 2024). Considering that digital spaces often reiterate systemic issues present in society, in tandem with the fact that some video games more outwardly allow for patriarchal and misogynist ideologies, game developers must put in the extra work to ensure that video games are designed with critical awareness of gendered leanings in their design practices. Without this critical awareness concerning game design, video games may continue to demonstrate harmful depictions of diversity in the future.

These design aspects are most clearly observable in the harmful characterizations of women that video game narratives continue to maintain. While there is some diversity in mainstream gaming, this is more of an exception, and there are often problematic themes still present in the narrative and game design. To properly assess this aspect of game design, a rhetorical approach is not only enlightening, but necessary to properly prioritize audience interpretations and approaches. Interaction Design (IxD) is the application of digital rhetorical theory and practice upon digital interactive experiences. Typically, this principle is used to assess the design of websites and social media with a critical, audience-oriented approach. Considering that the video game genre cannot be experienced without player input, IxD principles must be taken into account, especially as video game narratives can portray a microcosm of social issues through the unique ability to position the player in a role that is directly impacted by the given social issue, triggering a sense of empathy through the subconscious player and avatar connection. Therefore, to consider how players are impacted by the ways in which game design is gendered, it must be approached through an IxD framework.

While many scholars address feminist issues in video games by looking at the social and participatory game network to determine how communities perpetuate traditional gender binary as an act of enforcing misogyny at large, I take a different approach, focusing on what the game itself is doing in the narrative and game design that is perpetuating set ideas of gender binary and misogyny through its gendered design aspects. Specifically, I am focusing on IxD as it operates within a digital culture of strict gender binary to perpetuate harmful perceptions of women and gender as a whole. To analyze this phenomenon, I consider what the player avatar character physically looks like, how the player avatar is treated by non-playable characters (NPCs) through dialogue and game interaction, and what gender-based tropes are being implemented and enforced throughout the narrative and the design of the game. Thinking of design as the ability to control a user's actions, as a particular digital design can only be used for certain purposes, I also question the limitations that IxD imposes upon the players, how much agency it truly grants them, and how this agency is operationalized by the player.

Through analyzing *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom* (2024), I will address how each aforementioned aspect presents itself through the gameplay. This game was chosen because it is a highly contemporary representation of how gender is depicted in the modern context. Not only that, but the Zelda series in its nearly 40-year history has continuously delivered the damsel in distress storyline with little to no variation, and *Echoes of Wisdom* is the first game in the series to feature Princess Zelda, the damsel in question, as the protagonist. This alone proves to be a rather salient example of how gender is handled in modern gaming contexts. Given this, I will also examine how gender plays a role in IxD, and how the game's IxD enforces gender through certain design aspects. Through an exploratory case study including qualitative coding analysis and close reading analysis, I seek to provide an additional perspective that contributes to

a larger question: How can game designers work towards building gender-inclusive interactions that support equity and diversity within video games?

### **Why Video Games? Why Now?**

When entering a space such as this, it is important to acknowledge and consider the positionality, power, and privilege (3Ps) that I have as a researcher in this space. As stated by Walton, Moore, and Jones, “an awareness of how the 3Ps are articulated and inscribed in our work is a necessary step toward increasing the inclusivity of our research and practice” (p. 2). This is done to create a more inclusive environment within research and academic environments, which results in the furthering of inclusion practices within scholarly conversations. Therefore, it is important to disclose how my own positionalities situate me as a researcher within this issue.

Video games were a natural segue from devouring chapter books and novels in early childhood. Playing video games gave me a sense of being a direct contributor to a fictional story, rather than just reading about a fictional world and its characters without having that same active participation within the narrative. As a kid, I was always attached to fictional characters that looked like me or acted like me, whether it was in books, movies, or toys I would play with. Naturally, I did the same when I would play a video game, especially because video game narratives are designed to directly involve the player in the enactment of the story. If the opportunity was given to choose my gender, I would pick the female option. If I could customize my character, I'd be promptly looking for the red hair option. In this way, representation of self is highly important for children to reaffirm the idea that the child's identity is valued in a space and allowed to do certain things. Representation acts as a form of rhetoric that reinforces or pushes back against stereotypes concerning professions and ability among various marginalized groups. Very simply, this can be equated to Mattel's Barbie slogan “You can be anything” and how

Barbie, beginning as a toy designed for girls that represents girlhood and femininity, is becoming much more representative of diversity through the representation of race, culture, disability, gender, and more. In theory, anyone can find a Barbie doll that looks like them. The exact same principle occurs when a player is prompted to design a character in a video game or other digital space, as this is the digital representation of the self, and they can be permitted to push against pervasive exclusionary rhetorics through the creation of the digital self.

One of the first video games I ever played was *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (2006) at my Aunt and Uncle's house before I had a Wii of my own, and I fell in love with the landscape and the world of Hyrule, even only being able to get through the tutorial in the time I was there. This moment began my journey through the Zelda series and made a strong impression on me that has lasted throughout the years, throughout the progression of the series. This game in particular creates a narrative in which the characters that impact the narrative the most are women, specifically Princess Zelda and Midna, Link's companion from the twilight realm. Even so, these two characters, and other women in this particular game, are in some kind of victimized role within the narrative or in their backstories. However, my childhood self, who was so used to seeing princesses being saved by heroic men in other narratives, was delighted at seeing that, while I still had to save Princess Zelda and Midna at points throughout the story, they still had powers of their own that did not leave them completely defenseless, and their choices dictated the story. Further, I was ultimately the one empowered to do the saving, even though I looked like Link in this digital realm.

When I was in late elementary and early middle school, I was introduced to *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (2008). Being good at this game was almost a symbol of social status among the kids at my school, and luckily for me, I found this game to be a lot of fun. The premise of this

game is to compete in fighting tournaments against friends, or computerized opponents, and the players can choose to play as a variety of iconic Nintendo characters. The character select screen has a vast number of options, but I immediately noticed Princess Peach and Zelda as playable options, obviously choosing Zelda because of my prior love for the game. Playing as Zelda was fun, especially because she could put on another fighter form where she looked like a ninja, who I learned was called Sheik. As I started to play with others and get more competitive, I began branching out to try different characters. This was because I began to realize that, even though I had the option to play as Zelda, I could not get used to her combat style, which was more suited for long-range combat. My approach to video game combat, now and growing up, is a brute-force mentality. I'm much more likely to immediately engage in close combat with an enemy, with the thought process that it cannot hit me if I hit it first. In the process of finding my play style through this game, I found myself beginning to play as Snake from Metal Gear because it was easier for me to engage in close combat. To win, I had to sacrifice the digital representation of myself.

Video games have always been a very prevalent form of entertainment in my life. Even to this day, I'm always very happy when I see a character who looks like me, especially when this character is the game's protagonist. In the last few years, female game protagonists have slowly entered the mainstream. However, it is disappointing to play a female-led game only to have the game made easier than normal, sexualize the female characters, or to discover that the female protagonist is universally hated by male gamers. Additionally, when women are given roles of empowerment in video games, even though that empowerment is often with the condition of being sexualized and otherwise designed for a male-gaze, they are nearly exclusively white women, with the occasional representation of intersectional diversity being lesser known in the

mainstream. Through the process of identifying how video games can be designed to limit how gender impacts IxD, these methods will also open doors for inclusive practices within intersectional diversity using feminist approaches as the starting point.

What ultimately brought me to the issue of focus in this thesis is being directly confronted with gender being implemented into game design in a way that directly impacted my own enjoyment of a game. In March 2024, *Princess Peach: Showtime* was released for the Nintendo Switch. I was so excited to play this game. It was marketed as a Mario game with Peach as the game's protagonist, where she had a variety of powers that would change depending on the costume she wore, including a swordfighter, a detective, and a superhero. When playing this game, it became clear that it was designed to be much easier, shorter, and with lower stakes than a traditional Mario game. Further, the unlockable designs of Peach's dresses that she would wear when out of her powerup costumes, which were achievable within levels as secret collectables, were thoughtlessly designed, essentially being identical to one another and reiterative of her classic dress design. Concerning the costumes that gave her abilities, only half of them were combat-oriented, the rest being powers that fit scenarios focused on meeting a set of other requirements, such as the chef costume where the player must decorate a cake well enough to complete the level. My disappointment with this game was immense, to say the least, and only a few months after this, Nintendo announced *Echoes of Wisdom*, featuring Zelda as the game's protagonist. My excitement was simultaneously met with worry that Nintendo would repeat the mistakes made in *Princess Peach: Showtime*, and I desperately hoped that Zelda would not receive the same treatment as Peach did only a few months prior. More importantly, if it did occur again, it is important to analyze why this trend is happening in contemporary female-leading games.

Ultimately, it is important to recognize what exactly is causing video games as a genre to fail when it comes to the gendered ways in which games are designed for interactivity and the ways in which women are visually designed as caricatures of femininity via sexualization or otherwise. Further, it is important to make progress towards fixing this problem in order to make this method of entering digital spaces and gaining gateway digital literacies accessible and equitable for everyone regardless of positionality. That being said, this research is highly important to scholars in game design in order to create more inclusive video games, particularly in how the implicit gendered designs yield explicitly harmful visual and narrative design. It is also important for scholars within computers and writing studies to acknowledge the power of video games as a valuable tool for promoting gateway digital literacies, both functional and critical, and how these literacies then contribute to how these players will then participate in digital rhetorical spaces. Additionally, understanding the unique rhetorical ability of this medium of digital composition, which can be used to promote or demote certain social issues and influence perceptions of them through the positioning of the audience within the experience and creation of the text, is highly important concerning how rhetoric impacts digital spaces.

### **Evolution of Women in Video Games**

Compared to when video games were first created and distributed, video games have seen an improvement when it comes to diversity, but it is not as much change as expected compared to how our society has progressed in the past 50 years or so. In the beginning of video games becoming mainstream and popular forms of entertainment, women were often put into the role of the clichéd damsel in distress archetype, seen in games as old as *Donkey Kong* (1981). While this is a less common trope now, the remnants of it are still present, as many recent video game narratives still reiterate some sort of storyline where the player must take action to save someone.

While the video game narratives themselves are not necessarily the cause of the problem, as they reflect the classic literary form of the Hero's Journey, the placement of women in roles of passiveness and subjugation, whereas men are put in positions of power by proxy of power being given to the player, is where it becomes problematic. What is seen in these video games can be attributed to all forms of narrative media, where inclusivity is often the exception rather than the rule.

To assess how the issue of misogyny in gaming communities came to be a dire issue, the infamous GamerGate incident is largely responsible for a misogynist ripple effect that is still seen in contemporary gaming communities. In 2013, Zoe Quinn released *Depression Quest*, a visual novel video game that was lauded for its accurate representation of mental health and for bringing awareness to the experiences of those struggling with mental illness. It received backlash from some gamers, saying that the game was boring and criticizing it for centering around depression. Considering that some of the most popular games of that same year were *Grand Theft Auto V*, *The Last of Us*, and *BioShock Infinite*, all classified as action-adventure games being either first-person or third-person shooters, *Depression Quest* is certainly a change of pace from the preferences expressed by many in the larger community of gamers at the time. This interpretation of the game called into question what qualifies as a video game, which is an ongoing conversation that is still being had.

Alongside this backlash, Quinn's ex-boyfriend made a post to various sites defaming her, in doing so speaking to their entire relationship while also accusing her of cheating on him with a video game journalist as a means to get positive reviews on *Depression Quest*. The validity of this claim aside, his side of the story is rather charged with misogynist rhetoric, implying that women are incapable of making good video games, and that women must weaponize their

femininity to attain the same achievements as other male game developers. While the posts made by the ex-boyfriend were quickly taken down by website moderators, the story continued to be reposted and circulated across a multitude of sites, finding itself discussed in many communities.

This circulation is what sparked an unprecedented attack by right-wing gamers on women in the gaming industry, including gamers, game developers, video game journalists, and more, resulting in harassment and threats made upon these women simply because they were women who dared to exist in the video game digital sphere. In operationalizing their attacks and online harassment, these right-wing gamers began using the #GamerGate tag to mobilize their group effort. As asserted by Trice, GamerGate's ability to activate communities on such a massive scale is the direct result of how the movement utilized an existing ecology of social media platforms and websites to maximize its goals (2019). Because of the movement's quick and vast circulation through the internet media ecology, the direct effects made by the GamerGate movement were felt by the gaming community through 2016, and the harm it did to the community can still be seen today, most tangibly through the lack of women being represented in game development and game narratives. While GamerGate may have been a catalyst that saw a rise in misogynists in video game communities, it is not the sole cause of this phenomenon by any means. Rather, this event served as the identification of a common goal to unite previously separated gamer groups with an irrational hatred for women in what they perceived to be their space. As mentioned previously, many video games are designed in ways that prioritize male audiences, and this movement originating from the gaming community is a symptom of the more insidious problem.

GamerGate as a catalyst for the emergence of right-wing beliefs, particularly concerning diversity and inclusion practices, within the gaming community is very possibly the reason that it

took so long for female video game protagonists to be implemented in the genre. In the last few years, there has been an increase of women being featured as game protagonists in mainstream titles, but this did not emerge until after GamerGate lost a majority of its momentum. While GamerGate is less heard about, it still exists under different names, and continues to spread hate concerning diverse protagonists, not just female protagonists. Since GamerGate at its peak was largely an attack on women involved in video game related career fields, causing less women to pursue careers in game development, a lack of women in the video game industry could be a contributing factor to a lack of diversity and harmful depictions of diverse characters in video games. More simply, however, the lack of diversity could be a result of larger game development companies being more concerned with their male-audience's needs and expectations that they were afraid to take risks that might lose part of their audience, rather than thinking of implementing diversity as a way to gain new audiences.

I, along with many others in the Zelda community, have been wanting and asking for a Zelda title featuring Zelda as a playable character for at least 15 years before *Echoes of Wisdom* was announced, and I cannot help but see a correlation between the large misogynistic culture of gamers since GamerGate and the lack of women as game protagonists during that time. For a game series as significant as the Zelda series, featuring Zelda as the protagonist could have been interpreted as a risk that the game developers did not want to take before now. While there is currently a resurgence in the inclusion of female video game protagonists being featured in video games, only some are created with the personality and skillset of a game protagonist rather than being a representation of harmful stereotypes, or as a lesser counterpart to the male protagonists that usually represents the series.

After GamerGate, a few games have begun to push back against the overly sexualized portrayal of female protagonists in gaming. In 2017, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* was released as a PlayStation 4 exclusive, featuring an open-world environment to explore, a post-apocalyptic setting, realistic graphics, and Aloy, the game's female protagonist. This game received a lot of praise for how well Aloy was written and portrayed by the game's story. Aloy consistently feels like a realistic portrayal of how a hero in a post-apocalyptic world would act, rather than the feminine amalgamation of harmful stereotypes often seen in video game narratives.

In 2021, its sequel, *Horizon: Forbidden West*, was announced to be released the following year, again featuring Aloy as the game's protagonist. In response to the game's trailer, a Reddit user posted an edited version of Aloy, very clearly using a feminine filter on her existing face, titling it "Hey everyone, I decided to make a less political Aloy". However, a Twitter user then posted that Redditor's creation and compared it to the original Aloy design, praising the Redditor for their feminized edits, as seen in Figure 1.1.

Is it me or Sony be making their lead female protagonist look masculine as hell..barely no curves or rough non feminine features..Unlike the average woman. Like \*cough cough..TLOU2's Ellie...etc. Just saying [#My2cents](#)  
Pic from the game on the left, fan made on right. Hire fans lol



3:20 AM · May 30, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

344 Retweets 15.4K Quote Tweets 2,667 Likes

Figure 1.1: A Twitter user gives their opinion on Aloy's visual design

Clearly, adding makeup, filtered skin, and perfect teeth, to a woman that has solely existed in a post-apocalyptic setting is not realistic. While most people were attuned to how this edited version portrayed an unrealistic version of Aloy that draws upon feminine stereotypes, especially considering that the Horizon series strives for realism in their art design, some Twitter users agreed with the post. Even recently, negative comments on Aloy's appearance still circulate among the gaming community on Steam, Reddit, and other social platforms. This specific example of what male gamers expect from female character design has become a sort of microcosm for the condition of diverse character design, in that it must cater to a male-gaze on some level in order to be regarded as good character design by male gamers.

There is an interesting correlation between strong female characters and how much they are sexualized, which is something I have noticed being entrenched in the gaming community for much of my life. Essentially, if a female character is in some sort of leading role or is otherwise a strong character, she is usually sexualized, which in turn gives her inherent value for a specific sect of the male audience. Conversely, if a female character has a more passive role in the game, including but not limited to the damsel in distress role, she is usually not designed in a hypersexualized way. Since Aloy breaks that expectation by being a leading character with survival skills, wisdom, and combat prowess, but is not perceived as attractive by that specific sect of the male audience, this results in that sect of the male audience irrationally hating her character.

To provide an example of just how sexualized these female characters are, Figure 1.2 presents a collection of female protagonists, only including ones the player controls as the primary character. Figure 1.2 portrays the most recent design of Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider*

series (1996 – Present), Bayonetta in the *Bayonetta* series (2009 – Present), 2B in *Nier: Automata* (2017), and Eve in *Stellar Blade* (2024).



Figure 1.2: Visual comparison of character design for existing female video game protagonists

This graphic represents a large portion of female video game protagonists as, while they're becoming more common, there are still not a lot of female characters being created for the purpose of the leading role. Limiting this perspective solely to female game protagonists, not including female side characters, is rather enlightening to how little this representation is truly happening in this space. Moreover, the above figure solidifies not only the extremes to which women in video games are designed in a sexualized way, particularly with impractical posing of the body that extenuates their curves and the revealing clothing paired with it in situations that are clearly combat oriented as signified by the weapons each character has, but also the fact that this portrayal of women is what is perceived as normal for much of the video game audience. With that in mind, disassembling the gendered design features in video game spaces is a rather large undertaking.

While sexualization is not the problem that is seen in Nintendo games, particularly within *Echoes of Wisdom*, other issues can still be seen in the ways in which the gender of the avatar impacts the narrative and the gameplay, which will be explored through the research conducted

in later chapters. While the sexualization of women is a major problem, it is often the only problem explored and discussed within these conversations, and it is far more salient to analyze deeper causes and perpetuations of the pervasive ways in which characters are gendered. With that in mind, it is important to understand how Nintendo has portrayed Princess Zelda throughout the history of the series, and how her character has evolved over the years in order to contextualize the ways in which she is now represented and designed in *Echoes of Wisdom*.

### **History of Hyrule**

The Legend of Zelda series is an action-adventure game in which the player can explore a world largely influenced by the fantasy genre. Link, a boy characterized by his iconic tunic and insurmountable courage, is always granted a sword and a shield in order to dispatch the monsters he comes across on his journey, and he must always save Princess Zelda in his efforts to save the kingdom. The first game in the Zelda series was released in 1986 for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). This game features the most basic enactment of this storyline, as the player must adventure through multiple dungeons and face many fearsome foes to save Princess Zelda and the Kingdom of Hyrule by gathering the pieces of the Triforce. Within the lore of the Zelda series, the Triforce is a supernatural object created by the Goddesses of Hyrule, comprised of Courage, Wisdom, and Power. When joined, the Triforce can grant any wish. Not only is this object featured in nearly every game, but the recurring characters are representative of each aspect: Zelda being the Triforce of Wisdom, Link being the Triforce of Courage, and the game's antagonist, usually Ganondorf, being the Triforce of Power. As I continue through, it is important to remember that most Zelda games do not feature the same version of Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf, but rather, show new versions of these characters with the same names. This fact is

well known among Zelda players, but may be confusing for people who are not very familiar with the series.

Additionally, Zelda games are consistently only released as Nintendo exclusives, and Nintendo as a game company typically caters to a younger audience. While this may mean that Nintendo games do not feature graphic violence, mature themes, and other aspects that people may think of when video games are mentioned, this does not mean that Nintendo games are only for children. Many adults play Nintendo games, and because of this, the games will often feature intricate puzzles and nuanced storytelling for their games to be accessible and engaging for both audiences.

Overall, the storyline and main points are rather similar between nearly every Zelda title that has been created since the first, including 21 mainline Zelda games and 17 spinoffs. In that sense, it is unnecessary to detail every existing Zelda game in depth. However, I will be showcasing a select few that were particularly revolutionary for the genre and characterize Princess Zelda in ways that serve as turning points for her character.

*The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) is the game that brought the Zelda series out of the 2D side-scrolling perspective and depicted a 3D world that the player had more freedom to explore. It is often revered as a pinnacle moment in not only the Zelda series, but in gaming as a whole, as the 3D interactable world was very revolutionary at the time. The storyline of this game, while reflective of the traditional Zelda narrative, does have some refreshing variation in the story itself as well as the depiction of many of the iconic characters. This game features a seven-year time skip that takes place a little less than halfway through the story as a result of Ganondorf claiming the Kingdom of Hyrule and the Triforce of Power, and many characters that Link meets before the time skip return later on as older versions of themselves.

Bringing *Ocarina of Time* into the conversation is important to focus on how Zelda's characterization as the princess of Hyrule evolves as the series continues. This game's iteration of Zelda set a new standard for how involved she is in the game's narrative, and her physical design. She must go into hiding after Ganondorf takes her kingdom, and she does so by disguising herself as a member of the Sheikah Tribe, a group of spiritual people with ninja-like abilities whose main goal throughout the series is to protect the royal family and Hyrule. Her name in this disguise is Sheik, and Sheik is referred to as a man with traditional masculine pronouns until Zelda reveals herself to Link, transforming into her traditional Princess appearance. Once this happens, she is promptly captured by Ganondorf and sealed in a glass prism for Link to then save her in the process of vanquishing Ganondorf and bringing peace back to Hyrule.

This representation of Zelda is particularly interesting because it shows a trope that happens occasionally in video games, where to give a female character more depth and to bring awareness of the societal positions afforded to women as a narrative theme, the female character is unintentionally made to be more thematically reflective of a transgender man. This trope is most famously seen in the story of Mulan, and it is easy to see how these kinds of narratives are interpreted as transgender stories because they deal with themes of identity and ultimately question the societal definitions of man and woman. The visual difference between Zelda's traditional Princess attire and her form as Sheik are presented in Figure 1.3.



Figure 1.3: Visual comparison of Zelda and Sheik's character design in *Ocarina of Time*

Comparing the design of both character models, it's made clear that Sheik is more visually reflective of how masculinity would be perceived, particularly in how muscular Sheik is, how broad his shoulders are, and how much space he visually takes up compared to Zelda's traditional Princess design, even though they are supposed to be the same character. There is also the factor of Princess Zelda's attire being predominantly pink and Sheik's being predominantly blue, reflecting the Westernized association between gender identity and color. It is also worth mentioning that Sheik's skin color is a few shades darker than Zelda's.

Since then, Nintendo has put out a statement that Sheik is a woman, since she is Princess Zelda, and that any confusion was unintentional. In future designs of Sheik after *Ocarina of Time*, Sheik is designed to look more feminized compared to the original iteration of the character through the way her character is posed and designed to be slim and small rather than visibly muscular as is seen in the original design. The most recent redesign of Sheik for the spinoff game *Hyrule Warriors* (2014) can be seen in Figure 1.4.



Figure 1.4: Sheik's most recent redesign for *Hyrule Warriors*

Before continuing to the next example of Zelda's progression as a character, it is worth briefly covering what happened in between. After *Ocarina of Time*, it was common to see Zelda have some sort of role beyond just being the Princess of Hyrule that needs to be saved, even though that aspect of needing to be saved never completely went away. In *The Wind Waker* (2002) and *Phantom Hourglass* (2007), the role of Zelda exists in the game as Tetra, who is a pirate captain. Tetra is also revealed to have a form that looks more like the traditional depiction of Princess Zelda, as seen in Figure 1.5.



Figure 1.5: Visual comparison of Zelda and Tetra's character design from *The Wind Waker* and *Phantom Hourglass*

Just like the comparison between Sheik and Princess Zelda, is it interesting that the Princess form has a lighter skin tone in comparison. One potential explanation for this change is found in the Japanese culture, as the games are made by Japanese game designers, and paler skin is often representative of that person being of a higher social status, namely nobility. Another explanation could be character branding, as maintaining some kind of continuity across Zelda's design is important for branding or licensing the character. However, considering that recent depictions of Zelda vary greatly from this version, that might be less likely. Regardless of reasoning, this change of skin tone still reflects harmful ideas concerning race, as this design choice implies that only white women are worthy of higher status positions and importance. For this to be implemented in a game with an international audience that does not have the cultural context, this can be seen as poor diversity representation. Ultimately, intentionality does not matter if the outcome is harmful.

Another initiative started in *Ocarina of Time* is that Zelda now possesses some level of combat ability. In *Twilight Princess* (2006), Zelda helps Link in one of the final boss sections by riding on Link's horse with him and shooting arrows of light at Ganondorf to stun him. In *Spirit Tracks* (2009), Zelda's spirit can possess a suit of armor to assist Link. However, when Zelda has some level of power or ability in combat, she is still limited by the fact that her role is to assist Link in the fight, rather than being the primary fighter. She is consistently sidelined to a support role.

*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) is similar to *Ocarina of Time*, in the sense that both games did something new and profound that fundamentally changed how the Zelda series operates. While this was more based on game mechanics and capabilities for the latter, *Breath of the Wild* is the first truly open-world Zelda game, featuring the largest world map of

any previous Zelda title. Not only that, but this game did not feature dungeon levels in the same way as previous ones, and instead had shrines, which are smaller puzzles that players can compete to earn points that can be traded for additional health or stamina. To experience the narrative of the story, the player must complete all four divine beast missions, which are this game's version of those larger-scale dungeon levels. While completing all 120 shrines and the four divine beasts is not necessary to complete the story, it does help the player in traversing the world and understanding the narrative. Most importantly, this game is when the Zelda series began to prioritize player agency. When solving puzzles in the shrines or divine beast levels, there is an intended solution to be done. However, the intended way is not the only way, and with the many creative ways that players can use the items they have at their disposal, it became common for players in the community to share the incorrect ways that they have completed puzzles. In fact, every aspect of the game is completely optional, some gamers deciding to go fight the final boss in Hyrule Castle without completing any story-related quests or shrines.

In the narrative, the game begins when Link wakes up after 100 years of sleeping in a shrine with no memories of who he is or what happened before waking up. He is given a Sheikah Slate, which looks like a tablet, and through that he is able to access a set of powers, along with photos from the past. Instead of experiencing a direct narrative, the player can visit the locations that these photos depict to remember what happened 100 years ago. This is how the player gets access to Link's relationship with other characters and, most notably, the way that Zelda's story is told, although it is not built into the necessary requirements for completing the game.

In this game, Zelda is the most fleshed-out of any iteration seen of her so far. The player is now privy to what Zelda's personality is, which was not very present, if at all, in previous entries in the series. This contemporary Zelda is daring and rebellious against her father. She is

shown to struggle with her feelings of failure and low self-esteem, as she expresses how she does not feel like a good leader. She is jealous of Link in the way that everything is much easier for him than it is for her, which can very clearly be seen as commentary on how women have to work harder than men to achieve the same goals. She is a scholar, and many memories of her involve her conducting field research or discussing findings with other characters concerning scientific discoveries and creative ways to use technology. As far as being a thematic representation of the Triforce of Wisdom, this contemporary version of her is the most accurate depiction, as she is not just wise because she is a future ruler of Hyrule, but because she possesses knowledge and intellect in a more tangible way. Overall, this is a drastic change from previous iterations, which show Zelda as much more of a one-dimensional character that is more representative of a female archetype than of a complex character.

She is also, however, expected to awaken to a power she should receive as a member of the royal bloodline, which is becoming increasingly dire as Ganon is rumored to return and her powers would be able to seal him away once more. Since she cannot awaken to those powers, she uses the skills at her disposal to find another way of solving the problem, figuring out ways to keep Hyrule safe in the event that her powers do not awaken in time. This is a cause of tension between her and the King of Hyrule, who accuses her scholarship as being the reason for her not awakening to her powers. This itself depicts a common theme, where women are underestimated or their ideas are not considered, and they are instead measured in gender normative ways. Zelda not being able to awaken to the power that the women in her bloodline are supposed to have is representative of being defined by how well she fits into the idea of what a woman should be, rather than considering the traits she has that are not bound by the traditional definition of gender.

Once Zelda does awaken to her power after Ganon has laid siege to Hyrule in an effort to protect Link, it is too late, and Link is in a critical state after being fatally wounded. It is then that she seals Link in a shrine to sleep until he is able to fight again, and she decides to fight Ganon alone until Link comes back. Zelda keeps Ganon from destroying Hyrule for the next 100 years while Link recovers, until Link is finally ready to defeat Ganon. In the final section of this fight against Ganon, Zelda gives Link the bow of light to use against Ganon to make him weak enough to be sealed, and once Link weakens him enough, Zelda does the final step of sealing him away. Overall, *Breath of the Wild* provides an interesting and refreshing take on the damsel in distress plotline, but still ultimately stays within the confines of that plotline, as the player still takes on the role of saving and protecting Zelda, both in the game itself and in the memories the player can collect to learn more about Zelda and Link's relationship.

This game also features a more androgynous version of Link, even featuring a quest where he must dress as a woman to enter Gerudo Town, populated only by women and not allowing men to enter. The Gerudo Vai outfit Link must wear, as well as the representation of the Gerudo tribe itself, is reflective of Eastern cultures, and this specific outfit features a face covering and an exposed midriff, as seen in Figure 1.6. Players must wear the Gerudo Vai outfit to enter the town, but they may design Link however they please throughout the game, giving players the option to keep Link in this attire if they want to.



Figure 1.6: Link's Gerudo Vai outfit design in *Breath of the Wild*

With a variety of clothing to change Link's androgynous appearance, the player has the agency to change Link's gender performance in small ways by using clothing to customize Link's appearance. However, non-playable characters (NPCs) use traditionally masculine pronouns when referring to Link and, by proxy, the player. The extensive outfit customization is still a move in the right direction, because even though Link is still gendered male by the narrative and the themes, these small ways of giving the player agency are also rebelling against the traditional perspective on what masculinity means according to strict gender binary standards. Additionally, Erikson asserts that, while gender ambiguity can be useful for helping the player see themselves in a character, or even explore other masculine and feminine traits the player possesses that do not align with their gender identity, "the gender of the protagonist might be eclipsed all together by much more salient opportunities for identification: Link's mission, his station in life, his ingenuity, or his courage" (p. 17). While it is important for a character's gender identity to be fluid, it is equally as important to make the character relatable in other ways.

One factor that reveals downfalls in *Breath of the Wild* is how the races of Hyrule are represented. In this game, as well as others in the series, Hyrule is shown to be inhabited by creatures other than Hylians like Link and Zelda, which are essentially humans with elf ears. This game in particular features four tribes outside of the Hylians: Zora, who are fish people, Rito, who are bird people, Gorons, who are most similar to golems in fantasy settings, and the Gerudo, which is a tribe of women who predominantly have dark skin tones. While the narrative does a phenomenal job of solidifying the Gerudo tribe as fierce warriors, it is still concerning that the Zelda universe excludes the Gerudo from the rest of the Hylians and deems them a part of the other creature and animal inspired races. The normalization of this by the narrative is highly problematic, especially considering that the Gerudo tribe is one of the only representations of intersectional diversity in the Zelda series.

The Legend of Zelda series overall has developed with the social sphere, steadily adding onto Zelda's ability and depth as a character as more contemporary versions of Zelda are made. With the *Breath of the Wild* narrative, and its direct sequel, *Tears of the Kingdom* (2023), representing the most contemporary version of the Zelda story, this is the most aware that the series has ever been in the way that it depicts gender issues such as struggles with the patriarchy and defying gender expectations, even though it still has its downfalls with the portrayal of the Gerudo tribe. While all Zelda games deliver the same damsel in distress plotline as before, *Breath of the Wild* is done in a way where Zelda's story is the forefront of the narrative for the first time. However, this development of her character has happened solely as a side-character, implying that the needs of female characters and gamers who identify as such are still a secondary priority. It is possible that shifting her to the role of the game protagonist will show a lack of adaptability and thoughtfulness when now prioritizing a new story. Concerning the great

strides made in *Breath of the Wild*, the question is, will the Zelda series be able to maintain the good things it has done in *Echoes of Wisdom*? Moreover, will it be able to add onto the improvements it has already made?

### **The Adventure Begins**

To properly address the issue at hand, that being the ways in which video games are gendered to favor their male audience over other genders, it is imperative to consider how interactions through avatar design, game mechanics, environments, and narrative structures are designed to perpetuate certain ideologies. While this can certainly be applied to all video games, this research specifically focuses on how these are present in *Echoes of Wisdom*. Therefore, my ultimate research question is: In *Echoes of Wisdom*, how does game design impose gender and gender ideologies through various interactions, and how does that impact player experience? To attend to this question, it is important to make connections not only with feminist rhetoric and game design scholarship, but also how digital rhetoric scholarship can contribute to the conceptualization of the identified problem.

To provide an overview of what is to come, Chapter 2 contains a review of relevant literature and scholarship to game design, feminist rhetorics, and digital rhetorics, and how they inform each other to contextualize the research at hand. Chapter 3 contains an overview of the methods in which the research was conducted, as well as the results of those methodologies. Chapter 4 contains the data analysis of the Reddit data corpus consisting of posts from players experiencing *Echoes of Wisdom* and their primary concerns and topics of interest. Chapter 5 contains the analysis of my own gameplay and field notes in reference to the themes identified in the Reddit data analysis. Finally, Chapter 6 covers the implications of this research and what can

ultimately be done to ensure that future game design does not implicitly enforce harmful ideologies concerning gender expectations.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the connections between game design, feminism, and digital rhetoric, it is necessary to exemplify important voices in these respective fields, and particularly how they inform each other. By analyzing how these issues are currently being approached from the perspective of feminist scholars, this scholarship will serve to not only identify crucial phenomena occurring in the video game space, but also considering how gender as a concept is operationalized within the video game space. With this solidified, ideas from game rhetoric and digital rhetoric scholars will contextualize why current game design approaches are exclusionary and consider approaches for responding to this problem.

### **Current Approaches to Misogyny in Video Game Spaces**

It is very clear that misogyny is still present in video game communities, as is seen in how GamerGate and other coalitions of gamers are still assembled to continue their goal of making women and other marginalized groups unwelcome in the video game community. While the community aspect of this issue is the most known aspect of how misogynists operate within video game communities and indoctrinate others, it is also clear that the video game developers themselves are intentionally or unintentionally designing their video games to cater to that audience.

Considering that the enforcement of the gender binary is how misogynists mobilize their rhetoric in video game spaces, which is in turn upholds the traditional definitions of what a man and a woman is, there is clearly a connection between the caricatured depictions of gender and the maintenance of misogynist ideals in the community. To be clear, this is an issue that not only affects women and other identities along the gender spectrum, but men are impacted as well,

which results in a vicious cycle of upholding toxic masculinity to enact, circulate, and spread misogyny in the video game community. This is not just an issue that affects women, but all gender identities.

Concerning the dismantling of misogynist ideologies in video games, scholars focus on handling this by advocating for more positive female representation, but there is a lack of focus on anything outside of the characters themselves within the scholarly conversation. Even so, there is still much to be gained from the way this issue is currently being discussed. Banet-Weiser and Miltner assert that there is no cause of misogyny through video games, media, or anything else, but that misogyny is widespread and naturalized in Western culture. Further, they say that there is a belief among misogynists that women entering spaces that misogynists feel they are entitled to is seen as a feminine infiltration (2016). This phenomenon explains how groups like the ones formed in the height of GamerGate continue to spread their ideologies throughout the gaming community. It is not the nature of the video game culture that is directly causing this, rather, the Western cultural idea that video games are a hobby stereotypically assigned to men, and the presence of women in the gaming space counteracts the very specific idea of gender circulated by these groups that, when challenged, prompts the community to retaliate against the women they view as infiltrating the space they feel is made for them.

In line with the previous point, Jenson and De Castell claim that the treatment of women by male gamers is an extreme form of gender norm enforcement (2013). With misogyny comes a very specific idea of what gender is: that gender is binary, and that men and women must act in extreme portrayals of their gender identity to be a true representative of that gender. By this, I am referring to hyper feminine or masculine stereotypes, such as women being overly emotional or men being emotionless. Further, this definition of womanhood is not empowering but rather

diminishing. Masculine traits are seen as desirable, but women cannot achieve these traits because they must stay in their box of gendered characteristics. A woman entering a video game space defies what misogynists expect of women, therefore they must do what they can to excommunicate women from their space in order to enforce their idea of gender binary at all costs. This is not just hatred for women, but a reverence of the idea of gender binary.

McCullough et al. assert that stereotypical depictions of women in video games causes players to develop misogynistic beliefs regardless of gender, and they perform a study that shows that players with positive perceptions of women are more resistant to developing misogynistic beliefs. However, they state that gamers with a neutral view on feminism could fall victim to misogynistic lines of thinking, while gamers that already have misogynistic beliefs have their prejudices reinforced because of the game's lack of attentiveness to female characters (2020). Considering that gaming is a hobby that many people partake in, it's very possible that there is a level of critique that is not present when many gamers play video games, causing them to unknowingly become more susceptible to implicit misogynist ideas. This is why it is imperative to not only position the player to enter these spaces by fostering critical video game literacy (VGL), but to consider what design aspects of the game are enforcing harmful misogynist rhetorics. While part of the harmful rhetoric does include the extreme sexualization of women in character design, something more is happening that is allowing this to continue. However, the solution should not necessarily be for the player to have a more intentional, critical view of the media being engaged with, although having that critical literacy is always beneficial. To solve this, the video game media itself should be mitigated to prevent the circulation of harmful rhetorics to prevent players from subconsciously developing internalized misogyny or become misogynists themselves.

Concerning how gender, misogyny, and the sexualization of female characters intersect, Butler's stance on gender as a performance enlightens this connection rather well. On gender as a social performance, Butler writes:

“Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics” (pp. 527-528).

In short, the perception of gender binary finds its origins in the need for reproduction, and this is why gender is often perceived in reference to a binary, where the expectations of gender performance are connected to a person's sex. Considering the male-oriented audience that some game developers cater to, this contextualizes why women are often sexualized in video games. However, this does not justify the design choice. In fact, another highly important piece of Butler's statement on gender performance above is that gender is “real only to the extent that is performed”, meaning that gender in and of itself is the fabricated extension of biological traits. People naturally do not fit into the strict ideas of gender roles because they are unrealistic to maintain and, ultimately, harmful to define gender identities in such strict ways, one frequent and tangible example of that harm being the harassment of women in video game communities.

When considering how masculinity and femininity are presented societally, it is much easier to name what the stereotypical or caricatured woman might look like. Halberstam, however, asserts that masculinity as a concept is not detectable until it is contextualized outside of the white male body and placed upon women and people of color. He also uses James Bond as an example, explaining that Bond's masculine traits are more focused on the tools he carries rather than any connection to the male body (1998). This idea of tools is highly relevant to the tools available in the context of video games. For example, in Zelda games, these tools would

include a sword, bow and arrows, bombs, a shield, and countless other items used to progress through the story and solve puzzles. Therefore, the agency Link has, the actions he can perform with those tools, and the appearance of those items are more definitive of masculinity than anything else. However, within this framework, conceptualizing femininity happens in opposition to those tools, which can be represented either by a lack of those tools or through tools that perform different actions. Additionally, this concept of gender being defined by the tools and accessories a person carries can also enlighten the reasoning behind the sexualization of female characters, as sexualizing female characters could be done to visually represent that the protagonist is a woman despite her perceivably masculine-gendered accessories and tools. While this does not justify the design choice, it does show how many game design paradigms are highly concerned with upholding a more binary idea of gender than allowing it to be more fluid.

In order to contextualize how strict gender performance is harmful and how it impacts video game narratives, it is helpful to bring in a specific analysis of how it is operationalized in an existing narrative. Concerning Zelda as an iconic female character in gaming, Huntley and Goodfriend assert that Zelda's characterization throughout the series is an effect of benevolent sexism, stating that Zelda as a character is defined by being representative of positive feminine stereotypes and needing the protection of others. This influences not only how she is characterized, but also her level of agency in the narrative, as it affects the limited ways in which Zelda engages in combat: "although she engages in the final and most decisive battle of the game, the nature of her weapon appeases the game's paternalism by keeping her well out of harm's way" (p. 224). Zelda may seem like a positive representation of female characters at surface level, especially in her more recent iterations, but this telling performance of gender within sexist limitations makes it clear that even the most well-intentioned depictions of gender

can still perpetuate limiting ideas of it and operationalize it in a way that is harmful to the players' perceptions of gender, therefore affecting the performance of their own gender identity. This also explains why the damsel in distress storyline that is so common in video game narratives is inherently problematic.

To more thoroughly understand the problem presented in the concept of benevolent sexism, as mentioned in the portrayal of Zelda, it is important to think about the implications behind benevolent sexism and where it originates. Glick and Fisk define and contextualize how hostile and benevolent sexism operate in patriarchal societies:

“Hostile sexism seeks to justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men’s exploitation of women as sexual objects through derogatory characterizations of women. Benevolent sexism, in contrast, relies on kinder and gentler justifications of male dominance and prescribed gender roles; it recognizes men’s dependence on women (i.e., women’s dyadic power) and embraces a romanticized view of sexual relationships with women. Importantly, these attitudes are subjectively positive for the sexist; they encompass feelings of protectiveness and affection toward women. A woman toward whom benevolent sexism is enacted may recognize that, for instance, a man’s unsolicited help reflects an assumption that he is more competent than she. The man, on the other hand, may not be aware of the sexist assumptions implicit in his actions (indeed, he may be quite surprised and hurt when a woman deems the act to be patronizing and rejects his help).” (p. 121).

In short, benevolent sexism might not be seen as a form of sexism at surface level, but it still perpetuates the principles of such ideas. Benevolent sexism is also compared to the idea of the “White man’s burden”, which is an infamous ideology responsible for the colonization and Westernization of countless cultures around the world. While Glick and Fisk identified these principles in 1997, it is still reflective of how sexism is able to function in the current world unnoticed. Further, many video games overtly use hostile sexism when designing female characters that are hypersexualized and created solely for the male audience’s enjoyment, but video games might also use benevolent sexism to covertly participate in sexist practices, whether intentional or unintentional, most tangibly in the delivery of damsel in distress plotlines.

There is a clear recognition of how embedded misogyny is in video game culture through bringing a feminist perspective to video games examination. Furthermore, the scholarship highlighted shows a more pervasive problem of misogyny in Western culture that is more freely enacted in the video game subculture. Additionally, applying feminist concepts that contextualize further consideration for how gender is performed and how femininity and masculinity are communicated can enlighten how game design choices enforce strict, traditional definitions of binary gender roles.

### **Interaction Design as a Means of Implementing Rhetorics**

An important principle within digital rhetoric, and to the research conducted in this thesis, is the concept of Interaction Design (IXD) and how this perspective can impact design approaches. IXD concerns the use of digital interfaces to effectively communicate information to the user by being attuned to rhetorical means of engagement and persuasion. In simpler terms, IXD is primarily concerned with the audience, that being the user of the digital interface, and how well they can use the design and interact with it. IXD typically attends to how social media or websites are designed for rhetorical purposes.

IXD concerns are highly connected to those of game design, which prioritizes how the player can interact with the world in the most fluid way possible. Game design, in theory, subconsciously convinces the player that they are in the game world and can fundamentally impact the story or their environment through their actions. In video games, IXD specifically refers to four key aspects of game design: avatar design, narrative, game mechanics, and environments. These key foci will frame much of how my research analyzes IXD in game design.

Wahyurini bridges the connection between the traditional understanding of rhetoric as it relates to written text and IXD practices, stating:

“it is the way in which the user responds to the rhetorical situation that determines the success of the IxD. In IxD, there is a goal and purpose, therefore, the rhetorical situation must be able to both build users’ awareness and facilitate them to accomplish the requested task” (p. 650).

In the sense of building a user’s awareness and urging them to accomplish a task, no example is better than a video game, which is contingent on the player engaging in both of those actions to progress within the game. Additionally, the priority with IxD is how the rhetorical situation is interpreted by the audience, the audience being the user or the player.

Bridging the gap between IxD and feminist initiatives is a natural but less developed connection in rhetoric studies. On this, Sano-Franchini asserts that “feminism and IxD have much to offer one another, considering IxD’s concerns for social justice and engaging wicked problems in tandem with feminist rhetorical approaches” (p. 85). From this, Sano-Franchini proposes the concept of Feminist Interaction Design (F-IxD), which focuses on how feminist perspectives can be included in IxD frameworks. While she primarily focuses on how this can be applied to the design of social media apps, F-IxD has much to offer for IxD in video games as well.

The need that Sano-Franchini identifies for F-IxD implementation as a means of creating more equitable design practices implies that there is a larger issue occurring in existing IxD frameworks. Specifically, the need for F-IxD suggests that there are ways in which IxD is gendered overall that require a feminist perspective to properly attend to the issue. To recognize this, I am proposing that Gendered Interaction Design (G-IxD) be acknowledged as a concept to identify how gender is influencing IxD more broadly.

To put this into tangible terms, especially as it applies to game design, *Princess Peach: Showtime* is a salient example to explain how G-IxD operates. *Princess Peach: Showtime*, as mentioned in Chapter 1, features Peach as the game’s protagonist instead of Mario. One example

of G-IxD in this specific game is that the overall aesthetic of the game features more stereotypically feminine design aspects. This can be seen in the rewards for finding hidden secrets in levels being a new dress design or hairbow color, which is not the same as it is for traditional Mario games. This is one example of G-IxD because it shows how there is a gendered influence on IxD that impacts how gender is enacted and designed for. It should be noted that G-IxD can be gendered in masculine or feminine ways to various degrees, and can be seen in various video game examples.

To add to this, I propose Gender Dominant Interaction Design (GD-IxD) as a way to identify the pervasive ways in which binary gender roles and harmful ideologies are actualized through IxD. An example of this in *Princess Peach: Showtime* is that half of Peach's power-ups are non-violent, such as transforming into a chef or a mermaid, which then leads to half of the levels of the game featuring no combat. When compared to a traditional Mario game where this is not the case, this implies that Peach as a female protagonist fundamentally lacks combat ability, which will be further explored in the data analysis of *Echoes of Wisdom*. Further, this is highly indicative of GD-IxD, specifically in how the implementation of female protagonists is done within an inherent design that is built with a male gendered default and experiences notable shifts. Attempts to dismantle GD-IxD must attend to how the systems of power put groups outside of the intended design at a disadvantage. A way of addressing GD-IxD is through Sano-Franchini's F-IxD, as F-IxD uses feminist approaches to challenge the systems of power that silence diverse voices.

One way of addressing G-IxD related issues is through Costanza-Chock's design justice approach. Design justice considers if a design affordance is equally available to all people. Further, she asserts that considering design justice is imperative for digital spaces and technology

because the consequences of perpetuating systems of power are real for marginalized communities, but that this perpetuation could be unintentional: “we might say more specifically that under neoliberal multicultural capitalism, most of the time designers unintentionally reproduce the matrix of domination (white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism)” (2020). Essentially, it is very possible that designers are unaware of their implementation of GD-IxD perpetuating harmful systems and dominant ideologies because there is a lack of critical awareness concerning how marginalized communities are impacted by design. Connecting this to game design, Costanza-Chock’s design justice principles could be implemented to avoid unintentionally continuing to design games that do not take design justice principles into account. The continued implementation of GD-IxD is likely a reflection of the continued practice of making games that cater more to the desires of their male audience.

Feminism adds a valuable perspective for analyzing video game spaces, and it is something that requires immediate attention and action. On this, D’Ignazio and Klein spark exigency and propose actions for challenging how systems of power impression themselves in design and data: “Challenging power requires mobilizing data science to push back against existing and unequal power structures and to work toward more just and equitable futures” (2020). To challenge the systems of power enforced and perpetuated in digital designs, data scientists must use data analysis techniques to tangibly identify the problem and find ways to push against it. While other scholars addressing misogyny and game design focus on how misogyny is actualized in video game narratives, it is not enough to just identify the problem. Actions must be taken to prevent design injustice by addressing the design features implicitly built into the game that continue to do harm.

Identifying how IxD in video games is not inclusive through a feminist perspective can then illuminate the ways in which IxD in video games is not inclusively designed for other marginalized communities. It is crucial to make game designers aware of the implications of their design choices through concepts like F-IxD and design justice to urge game designers to be more intentional when building IxD.

### **Video Games as Rhetorical Agents**

Bogost claims that video games as a genre act as a vastly impactful rhetorical space, and that video games are underestimated when it comes to their potential for learning and improving critical thinking processes, stating:

“video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate. Game developers can learn to create games that make deliberate expressions about the world. Players can learn to read and critique these models, deliberating the implications of such claims” (pp. 119-120).

Essentially, players must be able to understand the video game world in order to participate in gameplay. Therefore, players require critical thinking processes for that interaction, encouraging thoughtfulness and meaningful engagement with the video game because it is designed to be contingent on the player’s interaction with the world. Moreover, Bogost urges game designers to learn to use their rhetorical power to their advantage when creating narratives because of the critical awareness the player has through being positioned to directly participate in that rhetorical environment.

Not only are video games generally undervalued for their rhetorical strengths and impacts, but the thought of video games purely as a method of play, play being an action that children participate in for fun, fundamentally devalues the player’s participation in the space. Bogost says that the provided definition does not accurately represent play. In actuality, the act of play allows children to get a sense of their relationship with the space in which they are

interacting (2008). Applying this more accurate definition of play to gameplay, this action of participating in the video game environment is a representation of how the child sees their relationship with the given space and how their identities fit into it. This connection supports the earlier point made by McCullough et al., in the sense that the player's engagement with the gaming space will further contextualize how their identity fits into the environment. If video games continue to pursue a less diverse representation of identities and continue to build their design to prioritize certain audiences over others, video games will continue to allow to the emergence of harmful perceptions of marginalized people, and continue to impose that systemic oppression in the video game space.

This rhetorical approach to video games grants certain affordances that can be used as a way of delivering certain rhetorics, and this should be used as a way of diversifying the video game space. To further this point, Homles and Shultz Colby state that “game procedures, their mechanics, rules, narratives, and graphics materially position players into specific ideologically laden embodied subject positions and, therefore, offer embodied critiques of these systems” (2022). With this perspective, having players act as subject positions that might not necessarily be their own is how they can engage with ideologies that directly impact people who identify with that given positionality. Designing a game to implement GD-IxD does all players a disservice because the video game does not take advantage of the specific rhetorical delivery method of video games, where a player can experience a version of what it might feel like to exist with an identity that is different from their own. This rhetorical method calls upon the player's ability to empathize with other positionalities through their experience as an identity different than their own.

Because video games have historically prioritized men as their primary audience, they are therefore oriented to favor masculine behaviors. On this, Murray writes:

“Playing with conventional game systems—oriented toward rewards, strategies, and missions—often encourages an opportunistic and exploitative form of observation. This predatory viewing is not limited to excessively masculinized displays in games like military shooters, since there are many forms of games that demand effective use of space. Already in the mid-1990s, scholars were beginning to understand the ways in which video games repeated narratives of the mastery of space, connecting play with ideologies deeply embedded within the cultural imagination” (p. 44).

In short, the interactivity of gameplay is something that is inherently interpreted as masculine behavior because of the historical ways in which men have dominated sociocultural thought.

Applying this to game narratives and design, there is a trend of the player’s masculinized agency being used as a tool for representing ideologies that support this specific representation of agency. In video games at large, it is common for the player to be put in situations where they are in complete control of the environment or have some level of freedom in what they can do in the given world. To restrict the player’s ability is not desired in video game spaces, especially when designed with more traditionally masculine behaviors in mind. Murray, through this identification of masculine behaviors being rewarded and enforced in video games, shows a need for attention to IxD in video games, and particularly how much Costanza-Chock’s design justice and Sano-Franchini’s feminist IxD have to offer to the video game space.

The lack of design justice for digital interfaces as a way of continuing systemic oppression is particularly problematic as the use of digital spaces is now mandatory to interact within society, and video games play a pivotal role in the development of digital literacy. Banks reflects on how this impacted his own experience: “it was all about games and toys at that point, just like it is for young people today whose first introductions to things digital is often through PlayStation 2 and Xbox” (p. xvii). Since video games are such an important part of literacy

building, although perhaps underestimated, there must be intentionality in how video games can be designed to foster literacy skills.

Further, Banks asserts that video games serve as a tangible allegory to understand the relationship between digital literacies and racial exclusion practices. After a brief reflection on his access to video games in childhood, he compares how the lack of access to the literacies developed through video games applies to other digital environments, depicting a situation where

“an entire group of people have been systemically denied the tools, the literacies, the experiences, the codes and assumptions behind the design choices, the chance to influence future designs and uses, and make the stakes that people’s educational success, employability and thus their incomes, roles in the society, and their political power” (p. xxi).

Throughout his book, he discusses how the digital divide has disproportionately impacted the Black community, and how that impacts digital literacy and, by proxy, how most digital spaces are designed without their input or consideration. Therefore, universal access to developing VGL as a foundational digital literacy practice is highly important to foster equity for the benefit of marginalized communities. To make VGL accessible for all, they must be designed and distributed in ways that are equitable.

To solidify the importance of VGL as it applies to digital spaces, Bogost claims that video games in particular serve as an opportunity to further digital literacy learning in the players who engage with them:

“In the context of digital media and learning, video games offer two overlapping opportunities. In one, players can learn about aspects of the world that particular games model, such as consumption in *Animal Crossing* or urban planning in *Sim City*. This is a kind of subject-centered literacy focused on examples of human practice. In the other, players can learn about procedurality itself, an inscriptive practice that will become more important only as computers continue to expand their role in society” (p. 123).

Essentially, the specific enactment of a concept in the video game space can foster critical literacy practices, and the actual act of interacting with a digital interface can increase functional

literacies. These literacy practices, once learned, can be applied to more broad environments, such as educational prowess being increased when learning specific concepts through gaming.

The translation between video game literacies and digital literacies is articulated above through Bogost's thinking, and these literacies are valuable for the digital world as it currently operates. Additionally, Selber emphasizes that, while functional digital literacies are useful, critical digital literacies are highly important when engaging in digital environments. While functional digital literacies develop as a user engages with the digital world, the user must also develop critical digital literacies to discern the rhetorical agenda of the space they are engaging with. Selber states that "technology does not create a social vacuum. Although controlling a computer is essential, so too is decoding the expectations that have been adopted in socialized network spaces" (p. 51). Essentially, users must have the critical awareness to engage with digital texts and networks, which is a direct reflection of the development of critical digital literacy. If technology is not a social vacuum, then it is a reiteration of the social issues present in the world, simply giving these rhetorics another space to operate within. Being able to critique these rhetorics in digital spaces is what exemplifies critical digital literacy, and the rhetorical affordances that video games have can position players to develop critical digital literacy.

Thinking of this in tandem with Banks's ideas, there needs to be consideration of the fact that, if digital spaces do not exist in a social vacuum, and society itself is flawed, there are systemic practices subliminally built into digital spaces that continue dominant ideologies that implicitly cause harm. It is not just physical access to technology that Banks expresses concern with, it is the access to the digital space and what systemic limitations are imposed upon marginalized people, especially considering social and participatory web spaces.

Further, the act of engaging in critical literacy practices is not as encouraged in educational contexts as it should be. Selber takes a pedagogical approach to the issue, asserting that students should be encouraged to ask questions that go against the status quo and question the information being presented. Selber expresses concern with this, stating that “This situation becomes all the more disturbing when one realizes that computers often exacerbate the very inequities that technology is so frequently supposed to ameliorate” (p. 81). If pedagogical practices do not encourage students to think critically and carefully about the information given to them, they will not have the foundation to apply critical literacy skills to the digital networks they participate in.

Player agency in visual design choices is a form of rhetoric that prioritizes a white male-oriented audience, and the freedoms granted in player avatar design should be considered when approaching IxD. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this is a form of rhetorical delivery that is highly important because of how it grants players the ability to see their identities preset in a digital space. Porter speaks on the design of the digital body as a rhetorical mode of delivery to convey aspects of gender, race, class, and more:

“when [players] make an avatar in the simulated world of Second Life [the player is] creating a bodily representation of [themselves], one that may or may not correspond to [their] lifeworld self, but one that has a virtual bodily existence. That avatar is [their] virtual bodily self that, when combined with virtual speech and behavior, results in a rhetorical performance” (p. 212).

Essentially, regardless of if the virtual representation of the self is representative of a player’s appearance, the avatar is still created with rhetorical motivations. Porter’s definition of the virtual body designates identity, such as gender and race, as an online performance that is portrayed by the virtual body’s design, including dress, gestures, likeness, and other visual characteristics (2009). Ultimately, even if an avatar does not directly represent the player, it can still portray specific identity markers. Because Porter associates avatar design choice with the rhetorical

delivery of speech and physical gestures, it can be said that avatar design has just as much rhetorical power as game dialogue and narrative. In both avatar design and dialogue choice, rhetorical delivery from the perspective of the player can be considered an act with limitations in a game space.

While Porter has important observations concerning rhetorical delivery and digital avatar design, he also considers how diverse identities are impacted in digital spaces. He goes on to say that feminist scholars

“have pointed out that the Internet is by no means a neutral space where gender is invisible. On the contrary, Internet participants often take their gender identities into digital space with them: they can approximate their lifeworld gender identities, or they can create dramatically alternative identities in those spaces” (p. 212).

From an IxD perspective, the digital world as it currently exists reflects the prejudices of the real world, and this alone impacts user experience. Regardless of the user being aware of the limitations of this system of power, their own identities will accompany them into the digital space, therefore, the systems of power at play still affect the user in complex ways, which affects the IxD of the digital platform.

The fields of game rhetoric and digital rhetoric, particularly concerning IxD and access to digital literacies, have identified an urgent problem concerning how the systems of power impacting society present themselves in digital environments. Additionally, there are proposed solutions that could be implemented to mitigate that problem. While considering these ideas alongside those presented by feminist scholars, it is important to approach this complex problem in a way that does not just identify how the problem is currently being noticed by scholars, but to identify what game design practices are specifically perpetuating harmful ideas. Specifically, it is important to identify how harmful rhetorics are transmitted through the game designs being implemented. These specific game design frameworks can be identified through IxD principles

to consider how diverse audiences are impacted by existing game design paradigms that could reflect harmful ideologies.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This chapter discusses the methods I am using to address my research question. The purpose of this study is to understand how players are impacted by game design choices that implement G-IxD. Specifically, I have chosen to examine how *Echoes of Wisdom* (2024) attends to gender through game design and narrative, and how players are impacted by these specific manifestations of G-IxD. This is a particularly salient inquiry because it is one of the first examples of how a long-standing series such as *The Legend of Zelda* handles featuring a female protagonist as a choice that breaks the tradition of playing as a male protagonist. My research question is: In *Echoes of Wisdom*, how does game design impose gender and gender ideologies through various interactions, and how does that impact player experience? To respond to this research question, I am conducting a case study to understand the relationship between game design, G-IxD, and players' experiences. Further, the identification of GD-IxD in Chapter 2 brings a new perspective to the research, addressing the forms of GD-IxD that are noticeable in game design. Because of this, I will implement Sano-Franchini's F-IxD to address the problems that arise through GD-IxD.

### **Case Study**

Case study is a method of qualitative research that considers the context in which the object of inquiry resides. Yin (2009) defines a case study as “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). The advantage that case studies have over purely quantitative methods is that a case study takes the context and environment of the phenomenon being studied into account, whereas other approaches attempt to

separate the object of inquiry from the context surrounding it. Conducting a case study in this case is most fitting, as my research question has much to do with the context of video game communities and environments as well as how the designs of *Echoes of Wisdom* compare to other games in the Zelda series. Further, Yin states that case study is not a method of data collection, but a strategy or design to study a social unit. As such, I use the case study method to understand how players experience gender through game interaction, which calls for approaching the issue from different perspectives.

The case study I am conducting can be categorized as an exploratory case study. Yin defines an exploratory case study as a method that examines an existing phenomenon that has yet to be explored (2009). The research question I used to guide this study was originally more focused on how gender in game design impacts gender-affirming gameplay through avatar design, but it became clear through the research process that there are other more salient factors impacting G-IxD in *Echoes of Wisdom*. Therefore, I broadened my original inquiry to include all game design factors that impact gender construction through IxD. This adjustment was because I had not played *Echoes of Wisdom* before conducting the research, and I did this to ensure that any prior knowledge I had about the game would not influence my initial reactions or gameplay processes. The only aspects of the game that I knew before playing it for the first time were that Zelda is the player avatar, the art style is the same as the remake of *Link's Awakening* (2019), that Zelda would use echoes to solve puzzles and summon monsters to fight for her, and that she had the option to transform into Link to use his sword fighting abilities. This information came from the original game trailer and advertisements. Fundamentally, knowing as little as possible about the object of inquiry makes my research highly exploratory.

In reference to the need for context in a case study, Spinuzzi warns against the continual inclusion of data for the sake of context: “Without explicitly defining a case, researchers may find themselves basing an investigation’s boundaries on stereotypes of work or arbitrary distinctions. And such poorly drawn case boundaries have consequences” (p. 1029). Ensuring that the boundaries created for a case study are not too broad, nor too narrow, is highly important for case study research.

Considering how Gallagher outlines boundaries within internet case studies, I make sure to set boundaries that align with the timeline and values of the research. While my case study does not only exist within a networked internet space, I still bind the case study by the same principles, focusing on Gallagher’s spatial and temporal boundaries as key features of an internet case study. These boundaries ensure that the data collected is highly relevant to the context of the IxD in *Echoes of Wisdom* and how gamers engage with it.

## **Data Collection**

Considering that Gallagher uses networked video games as an example of how to spatially bind case studies, I choose to exemplify this by binding all case study materials to *Echoes of Wisdom*. Gallagher exemplifies spatial bounds as specific activity within the video game network, specifically naming interviewing players in game and out of game (2019). However, I chose to gather this kind of data on a broader level, since *Echoes of Wisdom* has no network features built into the game itself.

### *Gameplay and Field Notes Data Collection*

The data I collected first was the video capture and field notes, which were collected simultaneously. In reference to Gallagher’s temporal binding, the data I collected through my video capture and field notes took place from December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024 to December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. The

swiftness of this was to ensure that my experience of the game stayed well contextualized within the game's world and narrative so that I could consider the game's IxD choices accurately. In reference to Gallagher's special binding, the gameplay capture is a representation of *Echoes of Wisdom*, which is the connecting focus of the spatial binding.

To collect video capture of my gameplay, I used a Razer Ripsaw Capture Card, which transmits video data from a game console through computer screen recording software, my specific program being Open Broadcaster Software (OBS), via HDMI cords that connect the console to the capture card, and the capture card to the computer. I planned to use an older model of the capture card that I purchased in 2017 with a newer desktop computer, but because the capture card was an older model, the company no longer supported the drivers for the capture card. This resulted in me having to use the old laptop I originally used the capture card with, which I have owned since 2014. Due to this, the quality of the video could only support 20 frames per second recording at a 720x1280p resolution. Other than that, and some occasional lag, there were no issues with the quality of the video capture causing gaps in gameplay video capture.

Alongside the recording of my exact gameplay, I also took field notes. My process for recording field notes was to keep a handwritten journal documenting my experiences playing *Echoes of Wisdom*. Specifically, I focused on documenting moments that I felt were particularly impactful and GD-IxD features that impacted my gameplay. I recorded my thoughts in the moment, and I organized them by date and the order in which they occurred. After each day of playing the game, I would return to my notes and, in a different color, reflect on what I had noticed or felt. In reference to Gallagher's spatial binding, this is connected to the case study through the interconnectedness of my field notes to my gameplay capture. The field notes serve

to record my exact thoughts and reactions, particularly to maintain the perception I had of the gameplay in the moment. Specifically, I did not want to change my own opinion through the research and have the new development then imposed upon my previous gameplay choices.

I felt that it was important to record my exact gameplay in combination with my field notes for quite a few reasons. As previously mentioned, I played the game knowing as little information about it as possible to record my authentic reactions about the game's narrative and game mechanics. Recording this authentic experience is highly useful for my research to accurately compare my experiences to the Reddit community's data, and to critically consider how my positionality as a woman is particularly important for identifying GD-IxD phenomena. Being able to compare my experience with the community at large through the analysis of the r/echoesofwisdom subreddit allows for the analysis of what is noticed by most players and what may have gone unnoticed or undiscussed.

### *Reddit Data Collection*

After playing the game to completion, I then collected Reddit data, consisting of posts from September 26, 2024 to December 31, 2024. I chose this date range because the game's release date was September 26, 2024, so the Reddit posts would more accurately exemplify the community's interactions with the game rather than their anticipation or theories of what it could include. I set the end date for the data for December 31, 2024 to allow for a few months of data while also setting a realistic timeline for myself. Not only would more data be strenuous for only one person to analyze, but the timeline of this research would not have allowed for the inclusion of data created in the first few months of 2025.

In reference to Gallagher's spatial binding, I decided to gather networked community perspectives through Reddit, specifically the r/echoesofwisdom subreddit, where players of the

game have formed a secondary space for the purpose of connecting with other players and sharing their perspectives. Including Reddit data in this research is particularly important because it reflects a community of gamers who are somehow connected to *Echoes of Wisdom*. Potts and Harrison (2013) state that “Reddit is a website where the delivery format, memory devices, arrangement of discussion threads and categorization, and content style all work towards building a distinct culture of sharing information” and that Reddit allows more affordances than traditional avenues like Facebook and Instagram, stating that Reddit “supports their cultural values by providing ways to for participant to make rhetorical moves” (p. 144). Essentially, the focus on Reddit is not just for the specificity found in the organization of subreddits, but because the Reddit interface provides more rhetorical agency for its users than other more mainstream social media avenues.

In reference to Gallagher’s temporal binding, I only considered Reddit posts on r/echoesofwisdom from September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024, which is the day that *Echoes of Wisdom* was released, to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024. This is to ensure that all the input received through this data collection in a reasonable period for gamers to have completed the game, therefore making more thoughtful contributions that are informed on the game’s mechanics, narrative, and character interaction. I collected the Reddit data after my completion of the game to have a full understanding of the context behind what was being said within the subreddit.

While it would have been ideal to gather a group of participants to play *Echoes of Wisdom* and record their experiences through their game capture or journals, conducting interviews, and observing the participants’ gameplay first-hand, this is simply not feasible for this research. This would require a longer research timeline, more than one researcher, and monetary means to provide the necessary gaming equipment. However, through the means I have

chosen, I have the unique opportunity to analyze the digital community this game has influenced as an external network, since this game has no integrated network capability of its own. In that sense, I can obtain the same information in a more efficient way.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the text-based data collected through the r/echoesofwisdom subreddit, I use qualitative coding and frequency analysis to understand what is being said on a community level, and make connections between what the community noticed about the game and how this fits into my research concerning G-IxD. To preserve the original text, I used the In Vivo coding method. In Vivo coding, according to Saldaña, is a better method for preserving specific terminology from subcultures (2013). Considering that there is a lot of terminology specific to video games, and even the Zelda series itself, In Vivo coding is the better choice for preserving the original intention of the various contributors. Additionally, this better preserves the emotions of the contributors, which then more accurately attends to my research question, as the emotions of the contributors reflect how players experience the game's IxD.

I conducted my coding by using Microsoft Excel, grouping data relevant to a specific code together. Through this, I can identify not only what Redditors are saying about the game's features, but also how their individual opinions mesh with the group consensus concerning the specific phenomena being coded for in the larger Reddit data corpus. In order to reduce this immense data corpus, I did not include any repeats of the same question, nor did I include any data outside of the scope of my research question. For example, any Reddit posts asking for help solving a puzzle that has been previously addressed and did not demonstrate any nuanced issues in the original post or the comments were not included. To the reverse point, if there was a repeat

of a puzzle question that did yield a particularly nuanced conversation, that would be included in the Reddit data corpus.

Having a set coding method for not only identifying what I expect to find, but also being open to recurring themes I find as I go is paramount for this case study, as the results could vary from what I expect to find. Spinuzzi introduces the use of starter codes, for things the researcher expects to find; open codes, for things the researcher finds along the way; and axial codes, for connections found across different codes (2013). Using this principle, my starting codes for the written text include gendered character mechanics, avatar customization, player agency, and easier difficulty level, which reflect aspects of game design where I anticipated GD-IxD would be most apparent in game design. Additionally, I included other starter codes to reflect common tropes in video games as a genre, which are sexualization, infantilization, and violence towards women, even though I was unsure that those codes would present in this specific game. Some open codes I discovered in the analysis process include user interface (UI) and design features, desired inclusion of the male protagonist (Link), and how NPCs are gendered by the Reddit community. These, among other open codes, account for features impacted by GD-IxD that I originally did not consider in my starter codes. In Table 3.1, I describe the starter and open codes I used within the first round of coding the corpus of Reddit posts that I collected.

Table 3.1: First Round Coding Table

Starter/Open	Code	Definition	Reddit Post Example
Starter	Easy Difficulty Level	Redditors describe gameplay as easier than a regular <i>Legend of Zelda</i> game	“the ending dungeon was pathetic. Traditionally 2d zeldas have ended with a large sprawling final dungeon combining all the puzzle styles of previous dungeons. This was just a couple simple rooms”
Starter	Player Agency	Redditors describe affordances or limitations regarding player agency to accomplish tasks in gameplay	“I adore how this game doesn't have some obvious ‘best’ option. I used boomerang boars and I could easily find something different if I ran through the game again.”
Starter	Gendered Game Mechanics	Redditors describe the differences between how Zelda is able to interact with the game world compared to how Link historically interacts with the world	“Zelda makes an additional movement/pose with her wand”
Starter	Avatar Customization	Redditors describe how players express their identities or interests through their visual customization of their Zelda avatar	“I’m obsessed with the kitty outfit 😄😄 I feel so fabulous walking around in it”
Open	Gendered NPCs	Redditors gender NPCs through implicit and explicit perceptions	“Tri is soooo adorable, i love him! We need a plushie of Tri”
Open	User Interface (UI) & Design Features	Redditors describe the UI and/or game design impacting player experience	“The Echoes Listing UI was pretty awful, but the rest of the UI was great, IMO”

In Table 3.1, I identify if the code is a starter or open code, I name the code, define the code, and provide an example, directly quoting the original Reddit post, of what was included in that coding category. Within Easy Difficulty Level, I coded for instances where Redditors feel that the difficulty level is much easier compared to previous *Legend of Zelda* games. Within Player Agency, I coded for instances that Redditors were afforded or limited freedom in the ways that they can complete in-game tasks, such as different ways to use echoes, engage in combat, solve puzzles, and explore the game world. Within Gendered Game Mechanics, I coded for Redditors identifying differences between their abilities playing as Zelda versus how they have historically played as Link, such as Zelda's ability to spin as a replacement for Link's famous rolling or dashing mechanic. Within Avatar Customization, I coded for Redditors discussing the different costuming options for Zelda, and how this costuming reflects the Redditors' priorities when it comes to customization, such as if the costume grants a benefit while wearing it, or if they chose the costume based on what it looks like. Within Gendered NPCs, I coded for Redditors gendering NPCs in implicit and explicit ways, such as what pronouns they're using for genderless NPCs, and if they are stereotyping NPCs based on that NPC's perceived gender identity. Within UI & Design Features, I coded for Redditors describing how the UI impacted their gameplay experience, concerning the convenience of the item menu, how echo selection is arranged, and how their experiences of the UI are impacted by their self-disclosed neurodivergence.

For the second round of coding, I again used Saldaña as a resource to identify the specific method of second round coding I would follow. I chose to use focused coding, which is done to identify emerging subcategories within the larger code definitions from the first round. According to Saldaña, focused coding is the best for following In Vivo first round coding, and it

develops the most prominent categories within the data corpus. Additionally, Saldaña states “The goal of this method is to develop categories without distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions” (p. 213). This coding method is not concerned with hard boundaries between codes or degrees of belonging, which makes it an ideal coding method for the Reddit data corpus because, with it, I can refine the broad categories I coded for in the first round.

In the process of second round coding, themes began emerging within the codes of the Reddit data corpus. Saldaña differentiates codes and themes by stating that “A theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 14). In Table 3.2, I describe the focused codes I identified through the second round of coding the corpus of Reddit posts I collected, and detail which first round code it originally came from.

Table 3.2: Themes Emerging from Codes

Code	Theme	Definition	Reddit Post Example
Easy Difficulty Level	Passive Gameplay	Descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how players felt unable to contribute to combat; or when they perceived the contribution was inessential to level progression	“I spent a lot of time upgrading and prepping for a boss fight that I was a ‘helper’ in”
Easy Difficulty Level	Video Game Literacy (VGL)	Descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how the player’s gameplay is impacted by their literacy with video games, or lack thereof	“As an OG Zelda player, I knew exactly what to do. My 14-year old daughter, however, struggled and asked for hints.”
Player Agency	Echo Techniques	Descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how players use the echo mechanic as a method of accomplishing in-game tasks in various ways	“Pretty clever with using a higher cost echo to vanish both tables simultaneously”
Gendered Game Mechanics	Swordfighter Form	Descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how players used swordfighter form, if they used it, and how it impacted their gameplay experience	“I was really, really disappointed when I realized that almost every boss is designed to be beat ‘Link's way’, not ‘Zelda's way’”

In Table 3.2, I identify the theme that emerged from a specific code. Then, I name the theme, define the theme, and provide an example datum from the Reddit data corpus. Within Passive Gameplay, I identified instances where the Redditors expressed that their role as the player was diminished or unimportant. Within Echo Techniques, I identified instances where Redditors discuss the various uses of the echo mechanic in gameplay. Within VGL, I identified instances where Redditors referenced VGL, or lack thereof, as it pertained to their gameplay

experience. Within Swordfighter Form, I identified instances where Redditors discussed what this game mechanic added to the overall experience of the game.

Of the 623 Reddit posts and comments in the data corpus, there were 112 instances of the Passive Gameplay theme, 103 instances of the Echo Techniques theme, 60 instances of the VGL theme, and 54 instances of the Swordfighter Form theme. I only included the four most frequently mentioned themes in Table 3.2, ordered from most to least frequent. To support this choice, scholars have used frequency analysis for data sets gathered from social media as a way to amplify the voices of the community. Dang-Anh and Rüdiger assert that frequency analysis is valuable for social media data corpus analysis through how users assign relevance through frequency:

“In Twitter, salience emerges from the frequent and perceivable communicative practice of ascribing relevance by retweeting. From such a user-centered perspective, the formerly blurred genesis of relevance becomes clearly identifiable, and even distinctively traceable, through the analysis of retweet frequencies” (p. 61).

In Reddit, the analog for Twitter’s retweet function would be upvoting and downvoting, which is mentioned through my analysis of specific datum in Chapter 4. Dang-Anh and Rüdiger show that there is a sense of relevancy through frequency of themes in social media networks. While Saldaña warns that frequency does not necessarily mean that the theme is the most relevant (2013), I use frequency analysis to limit my own biases as the researcher. Since I played *Echoes of Wisdom* before collecting Reddit data and conducting coding analysis, it is only natural that I would feel more strongly about certain themes. Therefore, quantifying this data for the purpose of frequency analysis was done to identify what the most important aspects of *Echoes of Wisdom* are according to the Reddit community.

On that note, while the Reddit community data does yield valuable information by exemplifying a subcommunity of *Echoes of Wisdom* players and I use that data to guide my

analysis, I am not saying that this data is reflective of the community at large. In fact, a key limitation of this study is that the Reddit community decided that certain topics are more important than others, specifically through the social ethos of the Redditors and the website's engagement algorithm dictating rhetorical velocity. Therefore, posts with higher rhetorical velocity could see more engagement, which leads to a higher quantity of that subcategory in the coding data. Other communities of gamers could have discussed similar or different topics concerning *Echoes of Wisdom* and would have also been impacted by the social ethos of individual contributors and the platform's algorithmic priorities. Despite this, the moments identified by the Reddit community are still worth attending to for further analysis.

For analyzing my own gameplay, I chose three narrative moments to talk through using the themes identified in the second round of coding the Reddit data corpus to create greater coherence between my different methods of data analysis. Those gameplay moments include Zelda obtaining the swordfighter form ability, Zelda saving Link towards the end of the game, and the final boss battle of the game. Within each of these moments, I identify how they exemplify themes from the Reddit data corpus, and how each theme reflects the GD-IxD happening in the various gameplay moments. By using the themes that the Reddit data corpus yielded, it shows that the qualitative coding analysis was able to work across data sets. While my field notes are being used to help me identify gameplay moments for analysis, I also included how I was impacted by those moments in my analysis. Ultimately, I focus the analysis on what the game itself is doing in reference to GD-IxD and how my gameplay responds to GD-IxD to properly attend to my research question.

## Noteworthy Aspects of the Data

Since my research is focused on how the player is being directly impacted by GD-IxD, there were a few aspects that presented in the Reddit data corpus that are outside of my scope. One of which concerns ease of access in UI design. While this is already a top priority concerning game design practices, considering that this impacts how fluid it is for the player to interact with the game, this should also be prioritized because of its importance for neurodiverse individuals, as this was specifically mentioned by several Redditors within the data I collected.

Another interesting aspect of the data that I noticed is that the Reddit community tended to gender monsters and creatures as masculine, while characterizing Tri as feminine. It is interesting to consider why this might be happening, and what aspects of these characters prompt players to unintentionally gender characters and creatures that are otherwise genderless. On the surface, the monsters in *Echoes of Wisdom* are *Zelda*'s main method of attacking, and Tri is given voice lines that are high pitched and sound like a slide whistle. Being able to delve deeper into gendered perceptions of NPCs would be highly interesting, especially to identify what implicit aspects of a character make players' interpretations of them lean masculine or feminine. While this would be in the scope of my research, it is clear through the prevalence of other codes within the Reddit data corpus that there are more salient opportunities concerning the player's experience of G-IxD in game design.

I also mention including codes in the first round that mentioned very little in the Reddit data corpus, such as sexualization, infantilization, and violence towards women. I made sure to reference these because, while they were not present in this data set, they are valuable for future research that addresses GD-IxD because they reflect the common cultural effects that are most

tangible in game design. Therefore, these starter codes could be used for future qualitative coding analysis to attend to G-IxD influences in game design.

One important limitation to mention is that, because the Zelda series has a prevalent Whiteness to it with no counter perspective to view IxD through. Because of this, I was not able to code for any intersectional feminist IxD aspects in *Echoes of Wisdom*. However, this would be a valuable approach to include in future research addressing G-IxD and how intersectionality influences game design. Particularly, my original research focus was on how avatar design or creation can be inclusively designed, and how limiting design choices could be an effect of G-IxD. For further research on this, it would be beneficial to analyze how intersectional feminism plays a role in game design and informs G-IxD practices.

## CHAPTER 4: REDDIT DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I consider how gender influences game design and player experience through an analysis of a Reddit data corpus. Specifically, I address the following research question: In *Echoes of Wisdom*, how does game design impose gender and gender ideologies through various interactions, and how does that impact player experience? Addressing this question, I analyze how each theme impacts Redditor's experiences of gameplay and discuss the most prevalent themes identified by the Reddit community. Additionally, this chapter also provides more information on the Reddit forum before presenting data related to the themes of Passive Gameplay, Echo Techniques, Video Game Literacy, and Swordfighter Form, in order of most frequent to least frequent. While these themes do not explicitly name gender, the conversations had within these themes reveal how *Echoes of Wisdom* implements GD-IxD and how it has negatively impacted the players' experiences.

The identified themes discussed in this chapter have been chosen because of their high frequency in the data set, ordered from most frequent to least frequent; therefore, prioritization is dictated by frequency analysis. While there are many themes that go unanalyzed for the sake of prioritizing more prevalent themes identified through their frequency in the Reddit data corpus, it is not because they are unimportant. Many identified codes within this data that are not included are themes such as the critique of gender roles, how NPCs were gendered, and the redditors' awareness of gendered constraints. These go undiscussed because they were not frequently mentioned enough in the community to be included in the analysis. Redditors simply do not discuss the themes that explicitly speak to gender amongst each other, but the themes Redditors discuss still speak to gender issues, even if the contributors were unaware of it.

To briefly provide context for the data set, Reddit is a social media platform wherein users, referred to as Redditors, can post written text, photos, and videos in specific communities, or subreddits. Reddit functions as a place for Redditors to contribute to specific subreddit communities, which results in a social media that operates similarly to an online forum. When considering how useful this data is for assessing the Reddit community's most discussed themes, there are a few confounding factors. First, these subreddits will often have moderators that filter content within the subreddit. It is possible that some content that would have contributed to the identified codes and themes was removed before the data collection process. Second, similar to other social media, Reddit uses upvoting and downvoting as its terminology for liking and disliking a post. This method of engagement creates a kind of social ethos for individual Redditors that will lend a post to more or less engagement by the community, which in turn dictates how many Redditors see the post and interact with the post, how often a Redditor contributes to the forum, and what discussions are had. These factors could have impacted the frequency of the themes purely based on what Reddit's algorithm identified to be engaging topics of conversation.

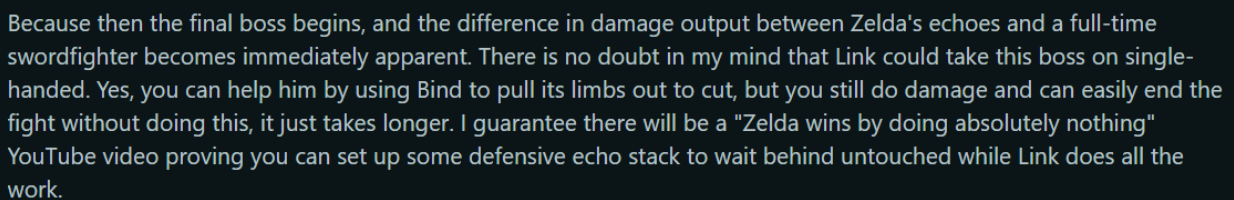
For this data set, all analysis is done on the *r/echoesofwisdom* subreddit, which I as the research am not a member of, nor have I contributed to the community discussion. This subreddit is specific to people who enjoyed the game enough to join the community, but even so, many posts are made by Redditors currently playing the game who need assistance progressing in the game. Many posts in this subreddit consist of Redditors posting their reviews of the game, people posting video clips or screenshots of their gameplay, and occasionally posting art they have done of a character in the game. These contributions to *r/echoesofwisdom* created

opportunities for community engagement, resulting in the arisen themes that are discussed in this chapter.

## Passive Gameplay

The first theme to be discussed is Passive Gameplay, which is defined in Chapter 3 as descriptions of gameplay experiences wherein a player felt unable to contribute to combat; or when they perceived the contribution was inessential to level progression. Within 623 posts and comments analyzed, this theme appeared 112 times. This section presents four specific datum that exemplify what Redditors deem passive gameplay, particularly analyzing how passive gameplay limits player experiences.

The first datum is a section from a [long review posted by CaptainM](#), where they detail their experience with passive gameplay in the final boss battle of *Echoes of Wisdom*. As seen in Figure 4.1, CaptainM ultimately asserts that the final boss battle against Null, the game's antagonist, was anticlimactic, and that they feel this way because the player's contribution is wholly unnecessary to the fight.



Because then the final boss begins, and the difference in damage output between Zelda's echoes and a full-time swordfighter becomes immediately apparent. There is no doubt in my mind that Link could take this boss on single-handed. Yes, you can help him by using Bind to pull its limbs out to cut, but you still do damage and can easily end the fight without doing this, it just takes longer. I guarantee there will be a "Zelda wins by doing absolutely nothing" YouTube video proving you can set up some defensive echo stack to wait behind untouched while Link does all the work.

And this is the root of the problem. At the end of this long adventure, both Zelda the character and I the player feel like sidekicks to Link, helpers instead of heroes, plus-ones to our own final boss battle.

Figure 4.1: A selection of text from CaptainM's game review post

This assessment of the final boss battle demonstrates that CaptainM is dissatisfied with the lack of participation needed from the player and feels that this design choice sidelines not only themselves as players, but Zelda as a character. Because CaptainM states that "both Zelda

the character and I the player feel like sidekicks to Link,” it suggests that CaptainM is aware of how Zelda is being narratively placed into a passive role through the player being forced into a passive role, and that this passivity is outside of the player’s control. Zelda’s participation, and the player’s by proxy, is highly influenced by the unprecedented implementation of passive gameplay in a series that historically depends on active gameplay.

Concerning how CaptainM’s experience reflects gender within the game design, the presence of passive gameplay in this context is unnatural, and the only difference between a traditional Zelda game and *Echoes of Wisdom* is that *Echoes of Wisdom* is the first game to feature Zelda as the protagonist. Zelda’s combat abilities as a protagonist, which predominantly includes summoning echoes, are fundamentally more passive than Link’s traditional sword and shield. Therefore, a connection between passivity and the gender of the protagonist could be made. Further, this shift is negatively impacting CaptainM’s experience of the gameplay.

Additionally, k0ks3nw4i posted [a clip of their gameplay](#), where they used the summoning ability to sleep above the fight out of harm’s way while the Link NPC fights the final boss by himself, as seen in Figure 4.2. Specifically, the player is using summonable objects, the objects acting as an elevator and a bed, to be kept away from danger while Link is seen shooting an arrow at the final boss’s arms below.

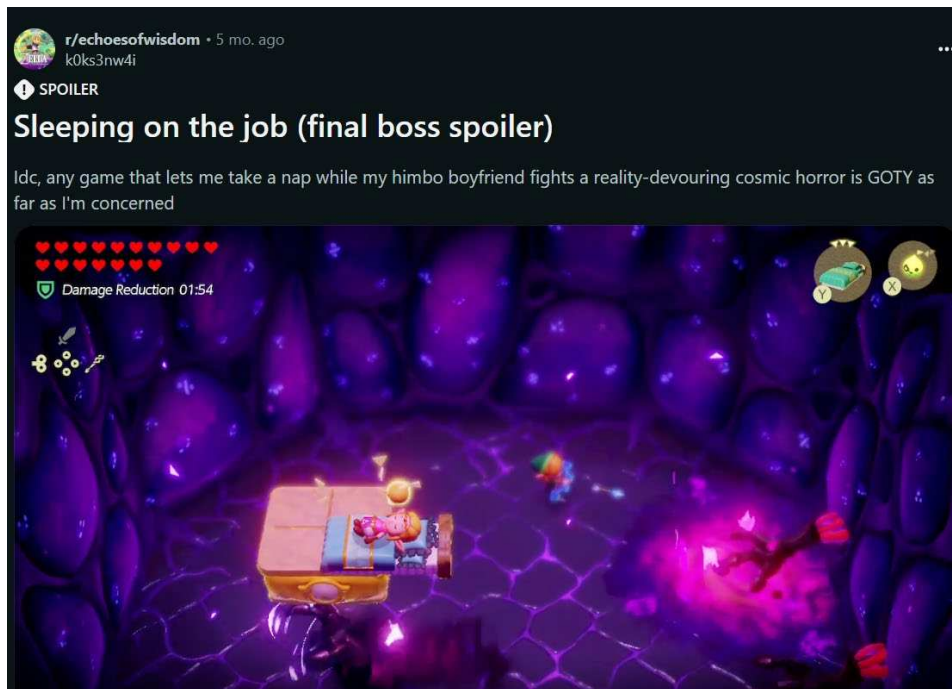


Figure 4.2: A screenshot from a gameplay clip posted by k0ks3nw4i

While k0ksnw4i makes this into a joke, which is clear in their tone and language when they say “any game that lets me take a nap...is GOTY [Game of the Year] as far as I’m concerned,” it proves the exact point made by CaptainM in the previous datum example. Although, while CaptainM expressed frustration when they said “I guarantee there will be a ‘Zelda wins by doing absolutely nothing’ YouTube video proving you can set up some defensive echo stack to wait behind untouched while Link does all the work,” k0ksnw4i sees this as amusing. The humor behind being able to position the player in a way where they do not have to contribute is likely reflective of the fact that this is so unusual and unprecedented in this video game genre. Although the perception of passive gameplay is different between these two Redditors, the extent of passivity in this context is rather ample, which is not what is expected of typical games of this genre.

To elaborate on the game mechanics that are causing passive gameplay, the\_quark adds a comment onto a [review of the game posted by wondercube](#). In Figure 4.3, the\_quark discusses how they felt that they were not contributing to combat in an active way.

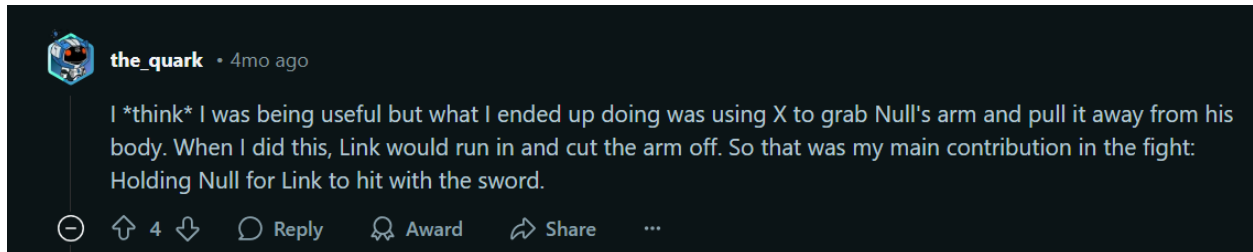


Figure 4.3: A comment posted by the\_quark on wondercube’s game review

This comment is made in agreement with wondercube’s game review. Unlike the previous two examples that discuss the echo mechanic being the reason for passive gameplay, the\_quark attributes the passiveness to the bind ability, used to grab objects from afar. For additional context, many Redditors attributed the passive gameplay being identified as a result of the player not realizing that using the bind ability to pull on Null’s arms was an option. However, it is clear through the\_quark’s testimony that the feeling of passive gameplay is still happening when the player uses the bind ability to contribute. Since using bind is still qualified as an assistive action that allows Link to do more damage, as is said by the\_quark, this action is still a representation of passive gameplay, even if it is the most active version of participation the player can have. Within the limited set of actions the player is afforded as Zelda, the player is unable to participate to the extent that they see the Link NPC doing, as is articulated by the\_quark when they say “that was my main contribution: Holding Null for Link to hit with the sword”. Limiting the player’s actions to passive participation in the gameplay is shown to negatively impact the player’s experience. These limitations also continue harmful portrayals of

gender, as these passive interactions are only being enforced in this way when the player is controlling a female-gendered avatar.

The final datum pertaining to passive gameplay is a thread of comments between two Redditors, ThisIsNotACryForHelp and MamaTex2021, debating the use of the bind ability in the final boss battle, bringing a more implicit factor of passive gameplay into the conversation. This comment thread is in response to CaptainM's review post in Figure 4.1. The thread of comments between ThisIsNotACryForHelp and MamaText2021 is depicted in Figure 4.4.



Figure 4.4: A comment thread between ThisIsNotACryForHelp and MamaTex2021

ThisIsNotACryForHelp argues that the game is being interpreted as passive because other players are failing to use bind against Null in the final boss battle. This is one of many instances of Redditors attributing the passive gameplay experience to the lack of using the bind ability in combat. However, the more salient point is MamaTex2021's reply, in which they express dissatisfaction with swordfighter form, a mechanic that allows the player to participate in active combat, being taken away. Because the game design takes away the player's ability to use swordfighter form in the final battle, the time spent making health recovery items and swordfighter form energy recovery items ends up not being helpful to the player.

In MamaTex2021's reply, they say "I spent a lot of time upgrading and prepping for a boss fight that I was a 'helper' in," demonstrating a sense of ownership over the in-game items and abilities they obtained. This is understandable, as much of the universal video game experience, regardless of genre, is gaining new items and abilities and improving them as a form of leveling up or increasing skills. This is something earned by the player, so it is natural to attach ownership to it. This comment exemplifies how the game only allows the player limited opportunities to engage in combat, resulting in the passive gameplay seen in-game, and how the game upholds this feeling of passivity by making the player's tangible efforts in preparing for the battle unnecessary.

Further, the Redditors in r/echoesofwisdom are much more disappointed with their lack of active gameplay than their lack of passive gameplay. For context, there is an instance in the narrative where Zelda's ability to use echoes is taken away from her and returned at the end of a stealth segment where the echoes the player had collected would have been very helpful in that situation. However, the Redditors of r/echoesofwisdom never mentioned this gameplay segment at all, much less expressed being upset about their echoes being taken away from them. There is a lack of worry concerning passive gameplay mechanics being taken away when compared to the high frequency of dissatisfaction with passive gameplay being implemented, which supports the notion that players feel more impacted when their active participation abilities are taken away than their passive participation abilities.

Overall, passive gameplay, when discussed by Redditors in the r/echoesofwisdom community, is regarded as diminishing of the player role, and it is generally not discussed in a positive way. The only positive emotion that can be attributed to passive gameplay is humor, which is not the same as any enjoyment or fulfillment that can be had. This feeling of

dissatisfaction is likely because the Zelda series as a genre always implements active participation and combat in its design. When the player expects to actively participate and is denied that ability, it negatively impacts their experience. Further, the presence of passive gameplay in *Echoes of Wisdom* suggests that there is a design choice being made that connects passivity with femininity, which is problematic.

While the Reddit community perceives passive gameplay as inherently bad because it limits their participation, there is something to be gained by implementing passive forms of interaction in *Echoes of Wisdom*. Passivity in and of itself is not bad, and *Echoes of Wisdom* implements passivity to push the player to think of alternate ways of engaging in the world without the need for active combat as Link traditionally does. However, the implementation of passive gameplay, even though it is implemented as an alternate gameplay interaction rather than a lesser one, is still problematic because it is being implemented as a feminine trait through making Zelda the protagonist instead of Link. Most noticeably, passive gameplay limits Zelda's ability to participate in active combat. However, passive gameplay also allows creativity and extensive methods of engaging with the world, which is further explored in the theme of Echo Techniques.

### **Echo Techniques**

The next theme to be discussed is Echo Techniques, which is defined in Chapter 3 as descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how players use the echo mechanic as a method of accomplishing in-game tasks in various ways. Within 623 posts and comments analyzed, this theme appeared 103 times. This section presents three specific datum that exemplify how Redditors perceive the use of echoes granting them affordances or implementing

limitations in the environment of *Echoes of Wisdom*, particularly analyzing how echo techniques affect the player's sense of agency.

To provide context for the discussions in this theme, Echoes are a mechanic specific to *Echoes of Wisdom*, in which the player is able to copy furniture and enemies they encounter in the environment. To obtain enemy echoes, the player must find a way to defeat the enemy. Simply put, "Echo" is this game's term for "copy". This echo mechanic is the primary method of interacting with the environment, using furniture echoes to complete puzzles, and summoning enemy echoes to fight new enemies.

Further, elaboration on the affordances granted to the player through video game IxD is needed. Generally, affordances can refer to how a player is able to interact with the game environment. This can mean more simple things, such as if the player can jump or climb over an object in the environment, which is completely contingent on if the game's design allowed for that specific kind of interaction. However, this can also apply to the tools that the player is given to interact with the world. In the *Zelda* series, this is commonly seen through items that are earned. The player will not be able to interact with the game environment in a specific way without the acquisition of a specific item, such as using bombs to clear rocks that are blocking a path. Even if the player can think through an alternate way to progress, the design only allows for specific solutions, therefore implementing a limitation on the available affordances through the game's IxD. In *Echoes of Wisdom*, these affordances are primarily seen through *Zelda*'s possession of the echo mechanic and lack of reliable access to close-combat weapons. The echo mechanic seen in *Echoes of Wisdom* is more lenient with player affordances than many other game's IxD, which comes with its own advantages and disadvantages.

Specifically concerning how affordances impact gender in *Echoes of Wisdom*, Zelda is granted more puzzle-oriented affordances than Link has in many previous Zelda titles. To clarify, Link is granted mechanics in *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom* that grant him many affordances for puzzle solving in the same way as the echo mechanic, where puzzles are not designed to only accept one specific way of solving it. Where affordances concern gender in *Echoes of Wisdom* is more focused on what Zelda cannot do, specifically that she cannot directly contribute to close-combat encounters as Link has always been able to do. This lack of affordance, when compared to Link's affordances, is what demonstrates the design of affordances in a way that is potentially connected to the protagonist's gender.

The first datum is a thread of comments on [marcnut1996's post](#), where they post a video clip of their own gameplay. The video clip posted depicts the player completing a more difficult puzzle with a more unconventional approach. The comments made by the original poster (OP), chirpchir, and SymphonicStorm in this thread depict a variety of feelings towards the use of echoes in creative ways, as seen in Figure 4.5.

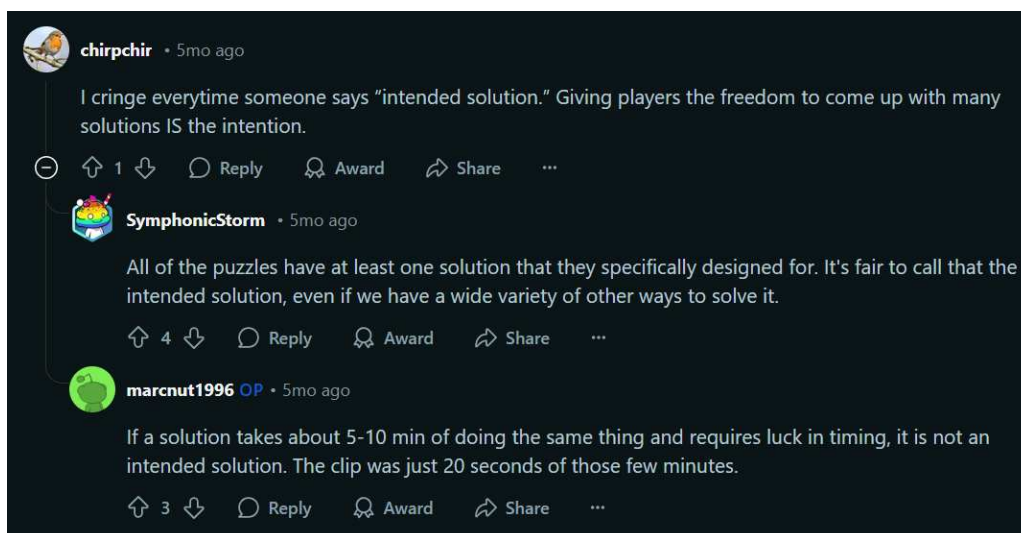


Figure 4.5: A comment thread between chirpchir, SymphonicStorm, and marcnut1996

Beginning the discussion, chirpchir asserts that echoes are supposed to be used for creative solutions, demonstrated when they assert that “Giving players the freedom to come up with many solutions IS the intention.” This opinion is not shared by SymphonicStorm, shown when they refute with “All of the puzzles have at least one solution that they specifically designed for.” Additionally, marcnut1996 says “If the solution takes about 5-10 min of doing the same thing and requires luck in timing, it is not an intended solution.” Attributing the ultimate success to timing and luck diminishes the validity of their own solution while also supporting their argument on intended solutions. While chirpchir and SymphonicStorm’s opinions reflect opposing ideas about intended solutions for echo puzzles, marcnut1996’s contribution holds more weight because they posted the original video clip. An additional detail in this comment thread is that chirpchir has significantly less upvotes than SymphonicStorm and marcnut1996, suggesting that other Redditors in r/echoesofwisdom agree with the assertion that intended solutions are designed for, and that any other more creative solutions are outside of what was built for in the game design.

What this reveals about the community of r/echoesofwisdom is that, although the game’s environment does account for multiple solutions through creative echo techniques, the players in this community still attribute more value to completing puzzles following a perceived intended solution. Even though *Echoes of Wisdom* has a unique design that allows for more creative puzzle solving than previous *Zelda* games, players still value traditional solutions that would be enforced in those previous games. This mindset could be reflective of what players are used to encountering in video game environments, and that they value more strict paradigms over agentive ones. Regardless, *Echoes of Wisdom* granting the player this kind of agency for puzzle solving grants *Zelda* more agency by proxy than many of Link’s iterations in the past.

Redditors contributing to r/echoesofwisdom clearly enjoyed sharing video clips of their gameplay depicting their own unique methods of solving puzzles. Similarly, the next datum is a comment on a [video clip posted by d\\_and\\_I\\_modeling](#) where they use their echoes to creatively solve a different puzzle than the one marcnut1996 posted. TheGameMastre comments on the creativity of this solution, as seen in Figure 4.6.

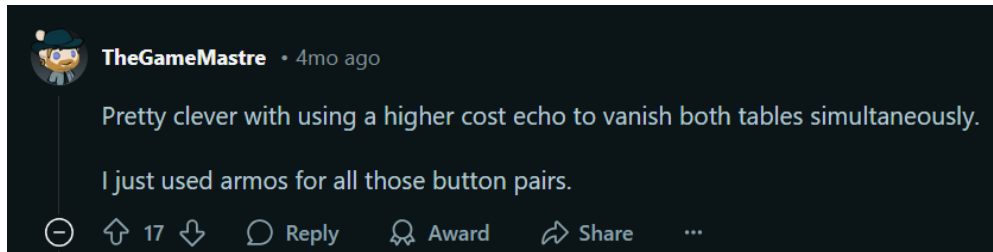


Figure 4.6: A comment posted by TheGameMastre on d\_and\_I\_modeling’s video clip

In this comment, TheGameMastre exhibits a positive perception of creative solutions being used by players, shown when they characterize d\_and\_I\_modeling’s gameplay as “Pretty clever”. This differs from the discussion above on intended solutions because TheGameMastre simply acknowledges how d\_and\_I\_modeling’s gameplay depicted a solution that required thorough knowledge and command of the echo mechanic. In the process, TheGameMastre diminishes their own solution, shown by the inclusion of the word “just” when they say “I just used armos for all of those button pairs.” This suggests a new perspective of Redditors in r/echoesofwisdom that attributes value to creative ways of solving puzzles by mastering available echo techniques, especially because this post has a significant number of upvotes. This alongside the opinions shown in Figure 3.5 articulate an array of opinions surrounding echo techniques, and how it provides agency for the player in puzzle solving situations.

However, echo techniques do not just apply to puzzle solving. In a comment on CaptainM’s aforementioned review of *Echoes of Wisdom*, divineiniquity gives insight into how

the creative use of echoes used in puzzle solving situations are not well translated to combat situations, as shown in Figure 4.7.

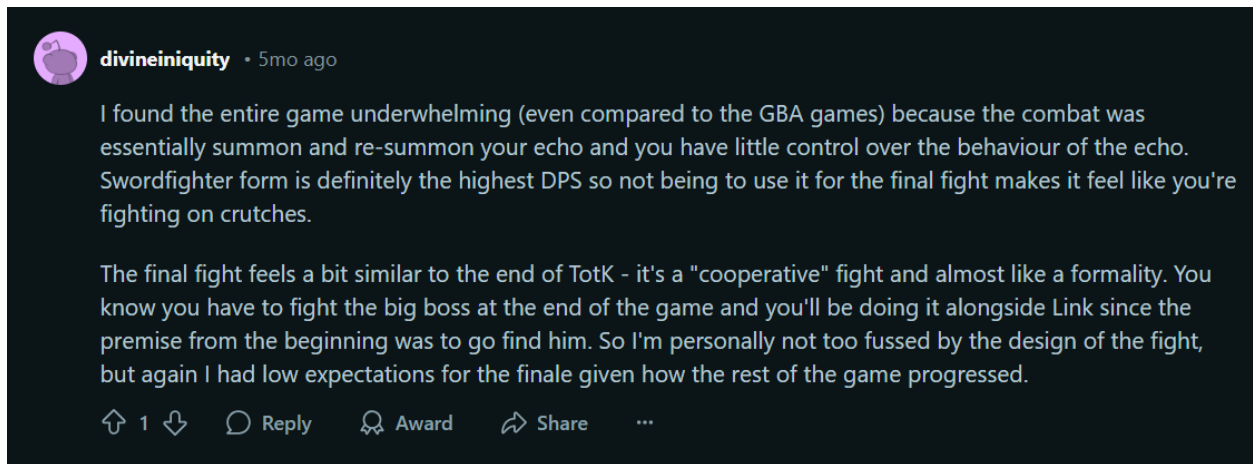


Figure 4.7: A comment posted by divineiniquity on CaptainM's game review

While divineiniquity calls upon many identified themes in this one comment, their depiction of how the echo mechanic is limiting in combat settings further contextualizes exactly how agentive the echo mechanic is. Specifically, divineiniquity says that “combat was essentially summon and re-summon your echo and you have little control over the behavior of the echo,” prefacing by characterizing *Echoes of Wisdom* as “underwhelming”. For context, the only way that the player can somewhat control the actions of the echo they summon to fight for them is by using the target function to select the enemy they want the echo to attack, but the echo does not always act as intended.

Comparing this to the previous perceptions of echo techniques in puzzle-solving environments, there is considerably less agency in how the player can engage in combat than the agency they have in puzzle-solving environments. While puzzles in this game accept a myriad of solutions, combat is ultimately enacted through summoning echoes to fight in the player's stead, while the player in actuality is unable to contribute in other ways. Ultimately, the techniques that

the player employs with their echoes when solving puzzles are not as translatable to combat environments; therefore, players are afforded more agency in puzzle-solving environments and limited in combat environments. This reveals a problematic implication for how gender is approached in *Echoes of Wisdom*, as the echo mechanic is designed to not grant Zelda equal opportunity in combat settings when compared to Link and, by proxy, what the player was able to do as Link in previous *Zelda* titles.

### **Video Game Literacy**

The next theme to be discussed is Video Game Literacy, which I defined in Chapter 3 as descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how the player's gameplay is impacted by their literacy with video games, or lack thereof. Within 623 posts and comments analyzed, this theme appeared 60 times. This section presents four specific datum that exemplify how a Redditor's disclosed experience with video games impact their experiences playing *Echoes of Wisdom*, particularly analyzing how past video game experiences help and hinder players in the unique environment of *Echoes of Wisdom*.

The first datum is a comment posted by TabletopLegends on a [post by Mystic\\_Fennekin\\_653](#), where Mystic\_Fennekin\_653 asks the members of r/echoesofwisdom if they found the beginning portion of the game to be difficult. For context, the player plays as Link in the very beginning and must defeat Ganon before the player can play as Zelda. Comments on this ranged from finding it difficult to finding it easy, but TabletopLegends discloses information concerning their own video game literacy and their daughter's, as seen in Figure 4.8.

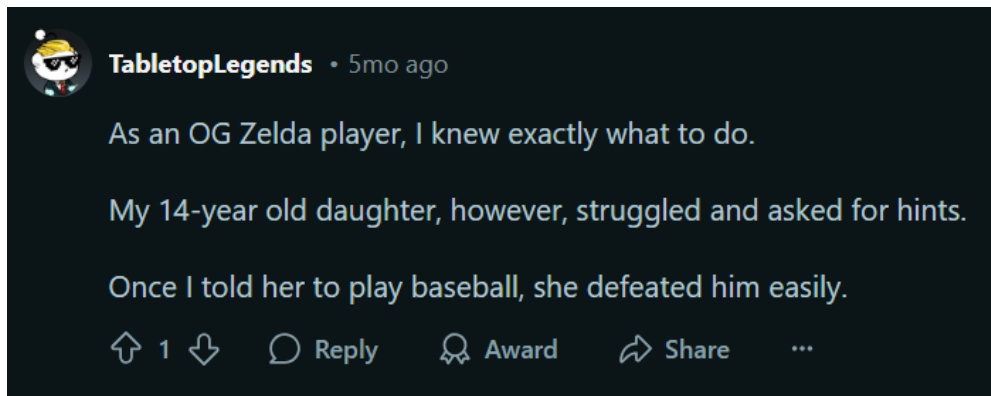


Figure 4.8: A comment posted by TabletopLegends on Mystic\_Fennekin\_653's post

TabletopLegends makes two distinct moves that demonstrate their own video game literacy alongside their daughter's, which are disclosing ages, shown when they say "My 14-year old daughter," and demonstrating past literacies through example, articulated as "Once I told her to play baseball, she defeated him easily." The distinction of age implicitly tells other Redditors that TabletopLegends is old enough to be the parent of a 14-year-old, which gives TabletopLegends age-based ethos for knowing video game literacies relevant to the situation. The example of baseball tells other Redditors that not only is TabletopLegends old enough to have thorough video game knowledge, but specifically has the literacies to know Ganon's famous attack from older iterations of the series where he throws a ball of light at the player, and the player must hit it back to Ganon with the sword. In comparing this exchange to baseball, TabletopLegends is evoking a previous literacy for their daughter to build upon a new literacy in the video game environment. This reveals that younger players are having to learn literacies that older players have already learned, and that this lack of video game literacy impacts how players interpret the difficulty level of *Echoes of Wisdom*. Additionally, players who did not have the opportunity to learn these literacies before are more disadvantaged when learning how to interact with the game environment.

The next datum is a comment posted by retrocheats on a [post by ErMicetto](#), where ErMicetto asks the community if they thought the final boss battle was difficult. Many commenters on this post use this as an opportunity to express their opinions on the entire game being much easier than past Zelda games. Of the influx of these opinions, few connect this feeling of easiness to video game literacy in the way that retrocheats does, as shown in Figure 4.9.

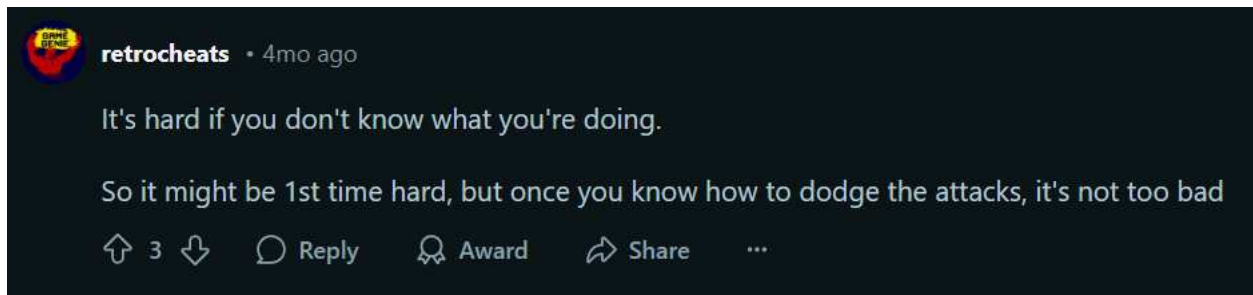


Figure 4.9: A comment posted by retrocheats on ErMicetto’s post

The deduction that retrocheats makes concerning difficulty is directly tied to video game literacy. They enlighten why others might think the game is difficult, saying that “It’s hard if you don’t know what you’re doing” and further encouraging players who find it difficult, when they say “it might be 1st time hard” but that it gets easier when the player knows how to dodge attacks. The specific mechanic of dodging attacks that retrocheats refers to is something common in all action-adventure video games, and a player not being able to command this control yields a lot of information concerning the level of video game literacy of the community. The information in this comment reveals that Redditors who express ease with the game likely have video game literacies prior to the game, while finding the game more difficult is reflective of a lack of video game literacy. However, the level of video game literacy needed for this game is significantly

lower than what is needed for other Zelda games, as is reflected by Redditors' perception of the game being easy in comparison.

The next datum is a comment posted by [tlollz52](#) on a [post made by Kitchen\\_Home\\_89](#), where they ask for help with completing a puzzle. Overall, the Redditors contributing to this discussion are providing their own solutions or commiserating with the complexity of this puzzle, while a majority of the comments are tonally belittling OP for not knowing how to solve the puzzle. Figure 4.10 shows how [tlollz52](#) approaches answering the question asked by [Kitchen\\_Home\\_89](#).

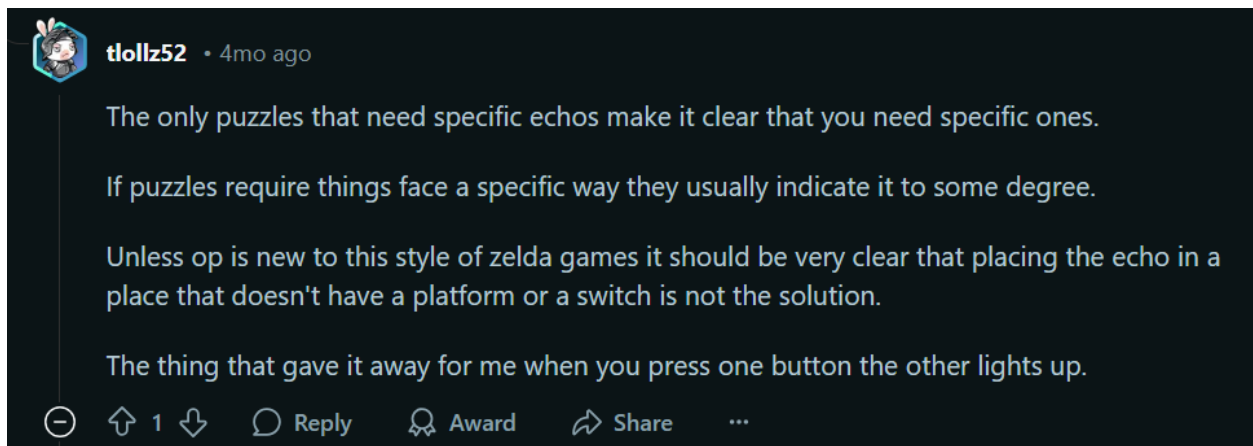


Figure 4.10: A comment posted by [tlollz52](#) on [Kitchen\\_Home\\_89](#)'s post

This approach by [tlollz52](#) is one of the kinder versions on this post, and this kindness is from assuming that [Kitchen\\_Home\\_89](#) is new to Zelda games, as is articulated when they say “Unless op is new to this style of zelda games” within their vague explanation of how the puzzle can be completed. This conditional leniency reveals that this community only accepts players being unskilled at the game if that player is lacking video game literacies. Even then, lacking video game literacies is shown to be a negative trait, in the way that the examples thus far depict

Redditors somehow exemplifying their own video game literacy level in the process of giving advice to others.

The next datum is the beginning of a longer comment thread between [Zeldamaster736](#) and the OP on a [post by Bungledingus45](#), where they post about their enjoyment of *Echoes of Wisdom* in the beginning stages of progressing through it. The comment thread depicted in Figure 4.11 is much less about the experience OP reported of enjoying the game, and more of a debate on what the intended audience of *Echoes of Wisdom* is. For context, [Zeldamaster736](#) references Aonuma, referring to Eiji Aonuma, who is a senior officer in Nintendo's Planning and Development division and the producer of the *Zelda* franchise.

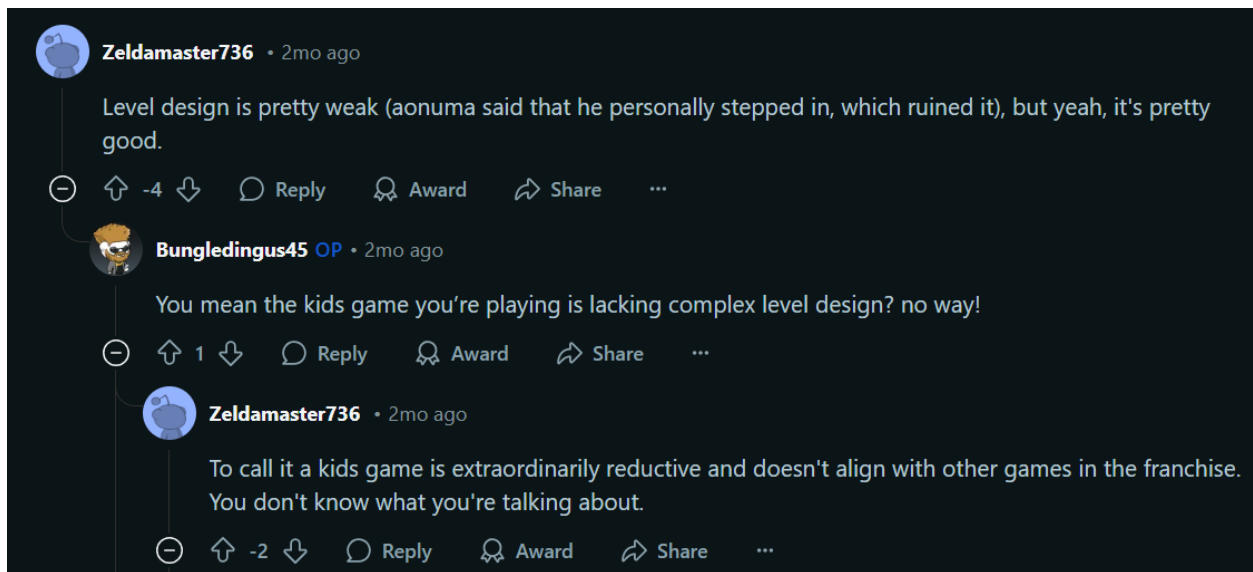


Figure 4.11: A comment thread between [Zeldamaster736](#) and [Bungledingus45](#)

Clearly, the beginning of this comment thread sets the tone for how the proceeding debate is carried out. [Zeldamaster736](#) is assigning intentionality for perceived weak level design to the game designers of *Echoes of Wisdom*. An interview with the head designers of *Echoes of Wisdom* details their discussion on making *Echoes of Wisdom* feel more like a traditional *Zelda* game

with dungeon design and world creation (2024), but the specific point of intentionality made by Zeldamaster736 makes it seem as though the level design was more complicated at one point in development, which is not the case as articulated by the designers. Further, Zeldamaster736's posts are downvoted by members in the community, suggesting that their opinion is not shared by other Redditors.

However, Bungledingus45's reduction of *Echoes of Wisdom* to a game made for children is still problematic in its own way, this detail being shown when they implement a sarcastic tone, responding with "the kids game you're playing is lacking in complex level design? no way!" Since the Zelda series is made for an audience of all ages, deeming *Echoes of Wisdom* as a kid's game suggests that the community is trying to find a reason for why this game is easier than other Zelda games. This reveals that the community deems age as the predominant factor that indicates an acceptable reason to lack video game literacy.

These pieces of datum that represent the community's perceptions of video game literacy ultimately reveal that this community heavily associates age as an indicator of video game literacy, specifically what factor makes a lack of video game literacy acceptable in this community. Lacking video game literacy is seen as a negative trait in this community that is only justifiable because of age. What this implies is that there are other demographic groups that might lack video game literacies where that lacking is not seen as acceptable. Considering the fact that video games are often viewed as a space made for men through the concept of feminine infiltration, as articulated in chapters 1 and 2, assigning negative traits towards other Redditors who lack video game literacies can be reflective of this gendered perspective of the video game community, even though gender is oftentimes indiscernible through username alone. Although identity factors are less discernable through username, the data above shows that

Kitchen\_Home\_89, whose username is reflective of stereotypically feminine jobs and a potential birth year in the number following, received more tonally rude comments than other Redditors asking for help completing a puzzle. This supports the conclusion that age is an acceptable reason to lack video game literacies, but other identity indicators are not given the same leniency.

### **Swordfighter Form**

The next theme to be discussed is Swordfighter Form, which is defined in Chapter 3 as descriptions of gameplay experiences that demonstrate how players used swordfighter form, if they used it, and how it impacted their gameplay experience. Within 623 posts and comments analyzed, this theme appeared 54 times. This section presents four specific datum that exemplify how Redditors perceive swordfighter form's integration in the game design of *Echoes of Wisdom*, particularly analyzing how Redditors interpret swordfighter form as a gendered game mechanic.

Swordfighter form is a new mechanic that is used to supplement the primary echo mechanic, although the affordances it grants are the exact same as Link's abilities throughout the series. Swordfighter form gained early in the game's progression, and it allows the player to directly join combat in a form that looks like a wispy, ghostly version of Link, outfitting Zelda in Link's attire, the only difference being that she has a tiara in the center of her forehead. Additionally, swordfighter form can only be used in about 40 second increments, if your swordfighter form energy gauge is completely full and upgraded to the maximum level, and it must be recharged to use again. It goes without saying that swordfighter form is not something that can be used at will for close combat, so the player must learn to use echoes in alternate ways to engage in close combat.

The first datum is [a post made by HotPollution5861](#), where they express that the bosses in *Echoes of Wisdom* do not feel designed with Zelda's game mechanics in mind. In *Echoes of*

*Wisdom*, there are bosses and mini bosses that players encounter in each dungeon, and this is true for all *Zelda* games. *Echoes of Wisdom* includes 8 dungeons total, meaning there are 16 high-stakes combat situations the player must complete to progress in the game. Figure 4.12 shows HotPollution5861's perception of how bosses are designed to depend on swordfighter form in *Echoes of Wisdom*.

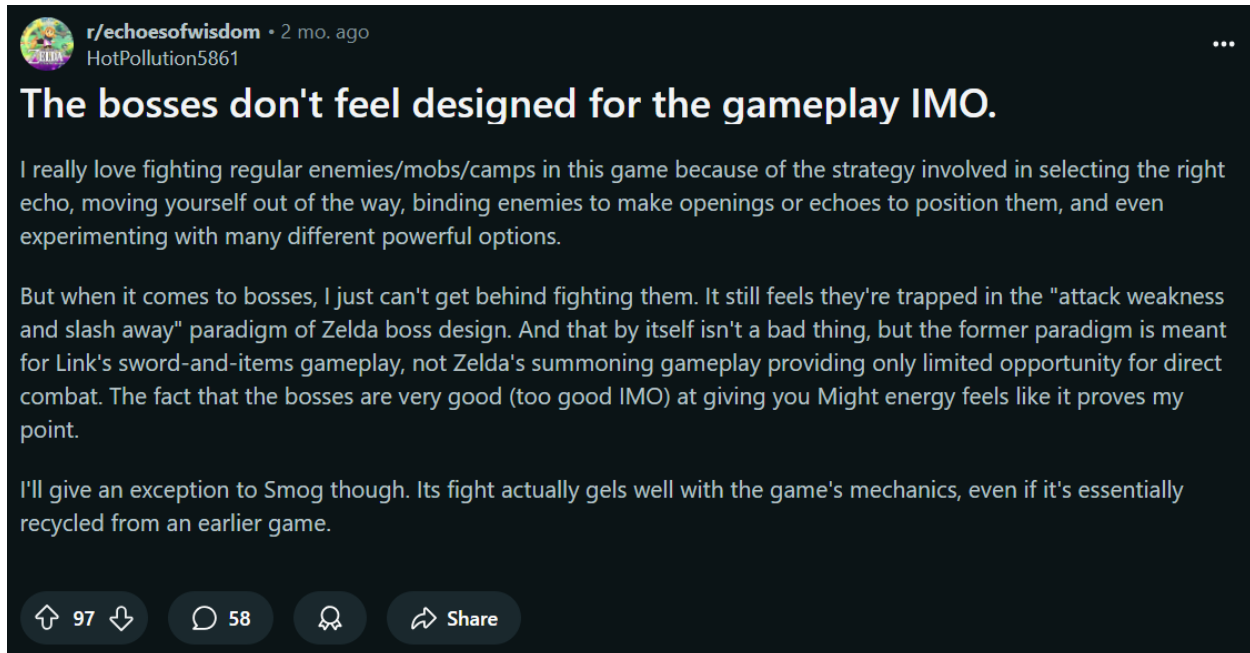


Figure 4.12: A post by HotPollution5861

While HotPollution5861 says that they do enjoy how combat operates with the echo mechanic, they express discontent with swordfighter form being implemented as a way to justify classic *Zelda* boss design, shown when they say “the former paradigm is meant for Link’s sword-and-items gameplay, not *Zelda*’s summoning gameplay providing only limited opportunity for direct combat. The fact that the bosses are very good (too good IMO) at giving you Might energy feels like it proves my point.” For context, might energy refers to the crystals floating around specific in-game environments that recharge the swordfighter form gauge. HotPollution5861

feels that the bosses are not designed with Zelda's echo mechanic in mind. This reveals some discontent with the implementation of swordfighter form among the community, especially since this post received 97 upvotes and 58 comments. Further, this also seems to reveal that the community is in agreement with HotPollution5861's statement that the design of these combat situations is made for swordfighter form instead of Zelda's echo mechanic.

The next datum is a comment by Ividian on the HotPollution5861's post in the previous datum. While all comments express varying opinions about how swordfighter form fits the game's design, Ividian's comment adds additional context to why Redditors might be dissatisfied with swordfighter form's inclusion in *Echoes of Wisdom*.



Figure 4.13: A comment posted by Ividian on HotPollution5861's post

Ividian's comment on how swordfighter form is implemented in the design of *Echoes of Wisdom* designates swordfighter form as "Link's way" and the echo mechanic as "Zelda's way". Ividian's observation shows how they are somewhat attuned to how swordfighter form is designed as a way to give the player Link's abilities without allowing them to depend on the affordances of close combat. This reveals a gendered perspective on game mechanics, as Link's way is fitted best for close combat, and Zelda's way is fitted best for long distance combat. This comment reveals how the design choices made pertaining to game mechanics can implement certain ideas upon players, resulting in them implicitly assigning gender roles to combat specialties when they designate game mechanics as "Link's way" and "Zelda's way".

The next datum is a comment thread between recursion8 and HotPollution5861 on the same post by HotPollution5861. In this, recursion8 outlines how Zelda's mechanics can be used instead of relying on swordfighter form. Figure 4.14 depicts the beginning of their conversation, where they discuss the feasibility of purely using echoes for combat and never using swordfighter form.

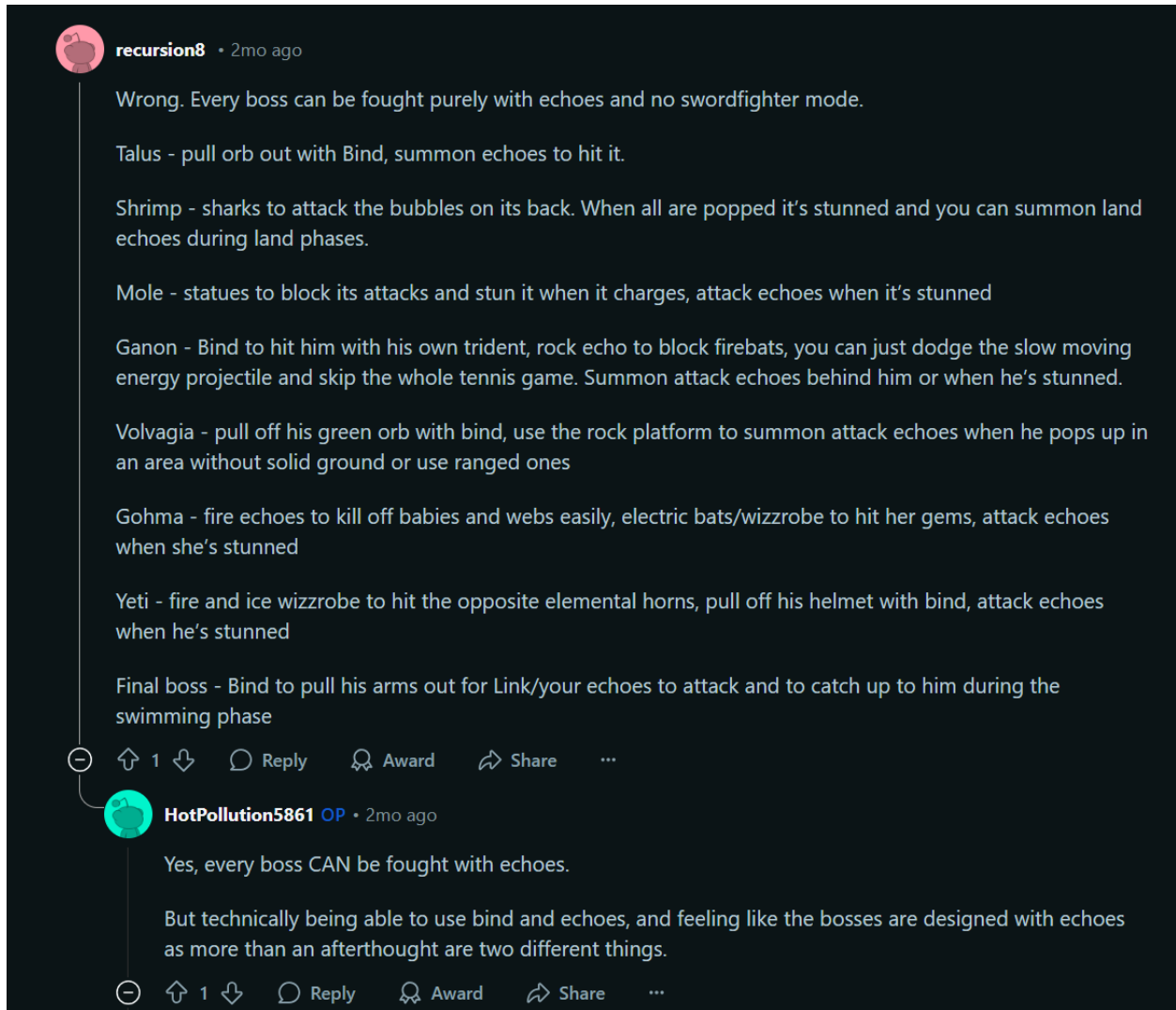


Figure 4.14: A comment thread between recursion8 and HotPollution5861

In the original comment, recursion8 outlines the echoes that can be used in combination with the bind ability in order to defeat these bosses without having to use swordfighter form. HotPollution5861 stands firm in their original argument, stating although combat can be done with Zelda's mechanics, it does not feel like it was designed with those mechanics in mind. Further on in the thread, HotPollution5861 notes that, while it is possible to not use swordfighter form, it takes much longer to defeat the boss. What this reveals is that there are some differing opinions on swordfighter form, those being either that the game is playable without it, or that the game design strongly encourages the use of swordfighter form when fighting bosses because combat was designed with swordfighter form in mind, which are not necessarily opposing viewpoints. What is important to note is that both opinions are ultimately still dissatisfied with swordfighter form's inclusion as a game mechanic, and did not enjoy its inclusion in the game.

The next datum is a comment thread between ArkBeetleGaming, TokraZeno, and Belteshazzar98 on [TokraZeno's post](#) asking the community if they like swordfighter form. The comment thread between these three Redditors shows the extent of how players use swordfighter form in the game, which is shown in Figure 4.15.



Figure 4.15: A comment thread between ArkBeetleGaming, TokraZeno, and Belteshazzar98

ArkBeetleGaming begins this thread by saying that they only use swordfighter form when fighting bosses and the bosses are damaged enough to reveal their weak point, which is a design aspect that is consistent for every Zelda boss. This initial comment has 6 upvotes, revealing that Redditors outside of this comment thread also agreed with the statement made by ArkBeetleGaming. TokraZeno reports that they only used echoes to deal damage, since they did not realize that swordfighter form does more damage than echoes. This reveals that a lot of players in this community did not use swordfighter form very often, and when swordfighter form was used, it was for boss battles. Moreover, swordfighter form is not used nearly as much as the game's design accounts for.

Belteshazzar98 points out an aspect of swordfighter form that is rarely commented on by Redditors, which is that swordfighter form doubles Zelda's regular jump height, which makes

swordfighter form useful for exploring environments and completing puzzles. This reveals that swordfighter form has uses outside of combat that are also implemented as a way to improve Zelda's puzzle solving abilities.

Ultimately, the implementation of swordfighter form and how Redditor's interpret and use swordfighter form reveals a lot concerning how this mechanic operates to enforce binary gender roles. Many Redditors feel that the design of combat in this game are made with swordfighter form in mind instead of being designed with Zelda's echoes in mind. This choice implies that Link is more suited for being the hero than Zelda, since Zelda's abilities take longer and require more finesse than Link's abilities present in swordfighter form. If the levels are designed for Link's close combat engagement instead of Zelda's echoes, this is a direct reflection of how other spaces systemically function to exclude women. To elaborate, the design not accounting for Zelda's echoes as a game mechanic is reflective of GD-IxD because the level design in *Echoes of Wisdom* is more similar to the design of past Zelda games with Link's abilities in mind, and this puts the player at an unfair disadvantage.

## **Results**

This analysis of specific datum within the larger Reddit data corpus suggests that, within the four most prevalent themes found in the coding process, there are instances where the themes inform how gender is enforced through gameplay in specific ways. The passive gameplay theme reveals that passive gameplay is being implemented in *Echoes of Wisdom*, where the protagonist is female, and it is implemented abnormally within this video game genres, which appears to reflect game design interactions built around gender. The theme of echo techniques reveals that, while Zelda is afforded more agency for puzzle solving than Link has historically had, she is not granted equal opportunity in combat settings. This imbalance of affordances between Zelda and

Link suggests an upholding of gender roles in the way that Link has more combat affordances, and Zelda has more puzzle-solving affordances. The video game literacy theme reveals that video game illiteracy is only acceptable in this community when it is caused by the player's age, which suggests that other identity markers combined with video game illiteracy is not acceptable in the Reddit community. Finally, the swordfighter form theme reveals that players do not like the implementation of swordfighter form in the game's design, and players feel that the game's combat is designed to prioritize swordfighter form instead of Zelda's echo mechanic. This becomes problematic when it is clear that swordfighter form grants the player the limited ability to use Link's mechanics, supporting the notion made in the echo techniques theme that Zelda is not granted equal opportunity in combat settings. Overall, while these themes do not explicitly name gender as a problem, the identified complaints that Redditors express concerning how these themes impact gameplay does reveal how *Echoes of Wisdom* has implemented these design choices to portray gender in a way that influencing the design of the game, which ultimately results in negatively impacting player experience.

## CHAPTER 5: GAMEPLAY DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I continue to discuss how gender being implemented in game design impacts player experience through an analysis of my own gameplay. Since the Reddit data corpus provided very limited opportunities to analyze how players interact with the design of *Echoes of Wisdom* beyond their testimonies, analyzing my gameplay alongside my field notes will provide the opportunity to discern how gendered game design is directly impacting the player's actions.

To do this, I will reference the themes identified in the Reddit data analysis to enlighten my gameplay, which will provide further information on how these themes reflect how gender impacts gameplay and create continuity between data chapters. The in-game moments I have chosen to discuss in this chapter are when Zelda gains the swordfighter form ability, when Zelda saves Link towards the end of the game, and the final boss battle of the game. These are listed, and will be addressed, in chronological order as they occur in the game's narrative.

### **The Story of Echoes of Wisdom**

In order to fully provide context for the moments I will speak to, a brief summary of the game's narrative is necessary. *Echoes of Wisdom* begins with the player acting as Link fighting Ganon to save the imprisoned Princess Zelda, and because of this, the player begins having Link's sword, shield, bow and arrows, and bombs. The culmination of the battle with Ganon leads to Ganon fading away, leaving a void that slowly consumes the floor, swallowing Link. Before he is completely sunken into the void, he shoots an arrow at the prism trapping Zelda, cracking it enough for her to break free. The player, now as Zelda, must run from the void that is quickly consuming the temple she was trapped within.

Upon returning to the castle, Zelda informs her father of how she was saved by Link, which is when the player learns that the all-consuming voids, referred to as rifts, have been appearing all over Hyrule swallowing up land, monsters, and people. Upon learning this, a rift promptly appears behind the King of Hyrule, consuming him and his two advisors. Zelda witnesses them being replaced by shadowy versions of themselves, and those versions declare that Zelda is the one causing the rifts, and that she must be executed. This starts the first half of the game, where Zelda gains the power of echoes from an ethereal being called Tri, which looks like green orb-shaped creature that floats above Zelda. Tri allows Zelda to use the power of echoes through the Tri Rod, and with this, Zelda can copy furniture around her and creatures she defeats to summon them at will. With this newfound power, Zelda escapes captivity and begins entering the Still World, which is accessible through the newly created rifts and is how Zelda can dispel the rifts.

The second half of the game is marked by Zelda's return to Hyrule castle to close the fourth and final rift that has emerged in Hyrule, which has now consumed the entirety of the castle and most of the surrounding village. After closing the rift and saving the King of Hyrule, along with the rest of those swallowed by the rift, he informs Zelda of a prophecy that names her Priestess of Wisdom who must vanquish evil alongside the Hero of Courage, to protect the Prime Energy. Additionally, it is now clear that the true antagonist of this game is not Ganon, but Null, the entity creating rifts around Hyrule for the ultimate goal of consuming the world. It is worth noting that this game refers to the iconic Triforce as Prime Energy, the Master Sword as the Sword of Might, and introduces a new villain never seen in the series before, breaking from the set traditions of the Zelda series. Once this prophecy is learned, Zelda must vanquish the three new rifts that have appeared to ultimately keep the Prime Energy from falling into Null's hands.

After closing the three new rifts and now being sanctioned by the Goddess to collect the Prime Energy, Null appears to create an echo of Zelda to attempt to take the Prime Energy first. This leads to the final part of the game, where Zelda finds Null only able to obtain one piece of the Prime Energy, presumably the Triforce of Power, while Zelda takes another, and the third opens a portal into the Still World. It is here that Zelda faces off against Null's version of Zelda to save Link, resulting in Null fleeing deeper into the Still World. With Link and Zelda's combined strength, they defeat Null and reclaim the Prime Energy, saving Hyrule in the process.

Many moments within this synopsis will be detailed more thoroughly in the following analysis, but the general understanding of the story will give more insight to certain contexts that yield a gendered influence within the game's design. While *Echoes of Wisdom* follows the traditional narrative formula of a typical Zelda game, its key differences lie in implicit narrative moments and game mechanics where it can perpetuate and employ GD-IxD.

### **Zelda's Combat Affordances and Obtaining Swordfighter Form**

This key moment of the gameplay pertains to when Zelda obtains swordfighter form, which has been discussed in the previous chapter. The previous chapter identifies this game mechanic as a common theme and shows how players use swordfighter form in their gameplay and what they think about its inclusion in *Echoes of Wisdom*. However, the narrative moment where Zelda gains this ability has much to say about how this game mechanic is portrayed in a gendered way. Further, my own approaches to combat before and after gaining swordfighter form yield interesting information concerning how Zelda's passive gameplay through the echo mechanic is not adequately designed for combat situations.

In my own pace of playing the game, I obtained swordfighter form after only an hour and 45 minutes of game time, including the fact that I would often pause or stop the game to write

field notes in that time. Additionally, much of that recorded time is taken up by the game setting up the narrative through cutscenes and dialogue in addition to guiding me through tutorials of how to use echo abilities. For further context, it took me a little under 22 hours to complete the game. This factor is important because it shows the little time I had to get acquainted to using echoes for combative purposes. Additionally, it reflects how *Echoes of Wisdom* has designed combat situations to depend on the swordfighter form mechanic.

First, it is important to consider how I use the echo mechanic for combat before being given swordfighter form. Before obtaining swordfighter form, my combat engagement is relatively active for my limitations, as my primary method is summoning a creature that I can throw at an enemy or bind to use as a makeshift weapon. For throwing, I would use an Ignizol echo, which is a sentient ball of fire, to throw it at an enemy and catch it on fire. Throwing it was often unnecessary, as summoning it in front of me was usually enough to catch the enemy on fire.

For using echoes as makeshift weapons, I use the Sea Urchin echo, which is a ball of spikes, as a makeshift sword by grabbing the echo with the bind ability and running into the enemies. Figure 5.1 presents two sequential screenshots of what this looks like, and how this method works to enact more active combat. Game capture of this moment can be viewed [in this video clip](#).



Figure 5.1: I summon a Sea Urchin echo and use bind to grab it and run into the Darknut

As is shown in the second part of this scene, the enemy is taking damage from the Sea Urchin echo, showing that this is a method of combat that works. Another thing to notice here is that, while this is my method of participating in active combat, the bind ability still has me considerably farther away from the enemy than I would be if I had the ability to use a sword or other melee weapon like Link. The main problem I encountered with this method of combat is that the enemy would kill the Sea Urchin very quickly because it is a weaker enemy, causing me to resummon and rebind the echo. This resulted in combat encounters taking longer than I was used to them taking, considering that past 2D side-scroller Zelda games would feature enemies that could be killed in about three hits. This specific enemy had to be hit many more times.

Focusing on my gameplay, only having echoes at my disposal for combat resulted in me engineering ad hoc combat to participate in active combat instead of summoning echoes to participate in combat for me. This development of mine is likely because I am used to having a method of directly attacking in other video games, and I prefer active methods of interacting with combat. My preference for active combat clashing with the passivity of the echo mechanic reveals that Zelda's echo abilities are poorly suited for combat situations. This is problematic because the Zelda series historically signals progression through the story with significant

combat trials, reflected as boss battles. The combat-oriented game design is continued in *Echoes of Wisdom*, but this now puts the player at a disadvantage because the player cannot intrinsically engage in active combat without developing their own ad hoc combat maneuvers.

In the first dungeon of the game, the featured mini boss is an echo version of Link, which is the first high stakes combat situation where the player must use their echoes to engage. I decided that this was an opportunity to use my higher-level creature echoes, since this was a higher stakes situation. This choice of mine is where the passiveness of echo combat is truly shown. During the fight with Link, I quickly realized that many of my enemies were attacking too slowly to damage Link enough before Link killed them.

I decided to try using the Peahat echo, which I hadn't used before since it is higher-level, and I thought it to be excessive for the lower stake combat leading up to this fight. Figure 5.2 shows two sequential screenshots of me summoning the Peahat echo and running away. Game capture of this moment can be viewed [in this video clip](#).



Figure 5.2: I summon the Peahat echo to fight Link

This example shows that Link is prioritizing engaging in combat with the echo rather than with me, shown by Link attacking Peahat while I am standing on the opposite side of the room. Link only occasionally targets attacking me, and only does so when the Peahat echo

wanders away from him. Link prioritizing Peahat before it wanders away shows that the Link NPC is designed to attack the thing that is doing the most damage to him, which must be an echo by default. The Peahat echo not attacking Link also shows how little control I have over the echo's action, resulting in feeling helpless in combat situations like this. This reveals that passive gameplay in game environments that are not designed to account for it results in players feeling uninvolved at best, and helpless or frustrated at worst.

To further the point of feeling helpless or frustrated as a result of passive gameplay being utilized in combat scenarios, a few of my field notes articulate this feeling. Before entering this dungeon, I spoke with villager NPCs saying they needed help with the monsters in the forest. Reacting to this, I reported in my field notes that "My immediate thought was 'I don't know what I'm supposed to do about that' versus my usual 'I got this' attitude I usually have". This reveals how enforcing passive gameplay through the echo mechanic influenced my thought processes as a player in *Echoes of Wisdom* compared to how I typically interact with other game environments where different affordances are granted. Additionally, in another section of my field notes pertaining to this battle, I reported that "Even though this new mode of fighting is cool, I still feel like I have to run away and make other things fight for me". This feeling of constantly having to run away is an aspect of *Echoes of Wisdom* that affected my perceptions of the game, especially considering how much I enjoy engaging in active combat in other video game environments. While I interpreted running away as a passive action in my field notes, as I felt I had to run away as a result of being unable to defend myself, it should be noted that running away is not necessarily a passive action. Rather, running away is oftentimes the smart thing to do when presented with specific combat situations. Being able to choose to run away

and not be killed by a strong enemy is an affordance that represents both wisdom and the affordance to act on that wisdom.

Additionally, I had issues in the second half of this fight that exemplified how poor the echoes are at locating the enemy and attacking consecutively. Summoning a Sea Urchin or Ignizol echo to assist Peahat is not an option, considering that the Peahat echo costs 3 of Tri's energy triangles, which is all the player has at this point at the game. Another factor is that the terrain is much less flat than it was in previous situations where I could reliably use bind to make a makeshift sword, so participating in ad hoc combat like before was infeasible. Therefore, this moment reveals that this situation is most suited for summoning echoes to fight Link on their own without being able to contribute, which enforces passive gameplay upon the player.

After defeating the echo version of Link, he leaves behind his sword, which Tri prompts Zelda to pick up. From a symbolic, more literary standpoint, Zelda defeating the echo version of Link and taking his sword seems like the way in which the narrative depicts Zelda being just as strong as Link in her own way and being able to take up the mantle of the hero in his absence. Explicitly, this is a solid narrative move that shows Zelda's power and equality when compared to Link. However, the depiction of swordfighter form shows more of an enforcement of gender roles through the visual design and narrative implementation of this game mechanic. Figure 5.3 contains two sequential screenshots of Tri's dialogue during the acquisition of swordfighter form.



Figure 5.3: Tri provides commentary on swordfighter form

In the first image, Tri observes that the power of Link's sword is more powerful than the rifts being created around Hyrule. To further contextualize this, Tri's power is directly related to the mending of rifts, and Tri's powers are granted to Zelda through her usage of the Tri Rod. With this context, the dialogue infers that the power Link has in his sword is greater than Zelda's ability to create echoes. Additionally, the game's inclusion of swordfighter form alone implies that Zelda's power alone is simply not good enough to accomplish the same tasks, which aligns with Tri's statement.

In the second piece of dialogue, Tri articulates the strength of swordfighter form as being inherently masculine. Particularly, Tri affirms Zelda looking strong when she looks like Link in swordfighter form. While Zelda is often made to look less traditionally feminine when she is granted power in previous games, specifically seen through Sheik in *Ocarina of Time*, this iteration quite literally replaces her likeness with Link's. Tri's second piece of dialogue shows that there is an inherent impression of gender roles being enforced in *Echoes of Wisdom* through the act of characterizing masculinity as strength, therefore equating masculinity to the affordance of active combat participation.

The intricacies of the appearance of swordfighter form yield more information regarding how gender factors into this game mechanic. Figure 5.4 consists of three screenshots from the introduction of Link as the mini boss and the acquisition of swordfighter form for continuity when comparing the costume differences between Zelda's regular attire, Zelda's swordfighter form, and Link's classic attire.



Figure 5.4: How swordfighter form compares to Zelda and Link's regular costuming

Clearly, Zelda's swordfighter form favors Link's attire much more closely than Zelda's attire. The only difference between Link's appearance and Zelda's swordfighter form is that Zelda's hair is pulled back into the cap to show her tiara, which is only visible from the front. Otherwise, the shape of the clothes and body as well as weapon accessories remain the same across both of their appearances. Additionally, Zelda in swordfighter form takes up less space in her resting position than Link does in his. She holds her sword straight forward, while Link holds his to the side with an angled stance. So far, this reveals that not only is there an adherence to gender roles with how swordfighter form implements visual rhetorical design, but also gives insight into how this relates to active and passive gameplay, as *Echoes of Wisdom* is making the move of characterizing active engagement in combat as a masculine trait, and passive

engagement as a feminine trait. Moreover, when considering Tri's dialogue with this knowledge, it is revealed that masculine traits are more valued and accounted for in the game's design choices concerning combat.

Something worth mentioning in the comparison of attire in Figure 5.4 is that Zelda does not have a mouth in swordfighter form, but she does in her casual attire, and Link has a mouth as well. This is a strange design choice, especially considering that other humanoid characters outside of Link and Zelda have mouths as well. The question is, why would this small detail of a mouth not be included? Symbolically, this lack of a mouth could equate to a lack of ability to speak or to be heard.

One symbolic implication could be that, because Zelda is in swordfighter form, and now wearing attire previously only worn by a man, that she is now gender non-conforming. People who defy gender binary in their clothing and accessories are generally not respected by the larger society, and they have to fight a lot harder for their thoughts and ideas to be heard. A second symbolic implication is that, with the action of using swordfighter form, she is stepping into a world traditionally occupied by men. Because traditional gender roles say that she should not use a sword or fight enemies head-on, she is not as respected as she is when she does conform to traditional gender roles, therefore removing her ability to be heard and respected in this space. The simple answer for this, however, could be that the design of the swordfighter form was not refined as seen from the front, since the player mostly sees this form from the back or side view. If so, this lack of attention to detail for a series that has quite a large audience is concerning, especially since this is the first game where Zelda is the protagonist. Regardless of intention, this small detail still reveals another aspect of how visual rhetorical design is implemented in harmful ways.

After gaining swordfighter form as a game mechanic, I accidentally used up the entirety of the gauge because I did not realize how quickly it ran out, only lasting for about 15 seconds. With my swordfighter form gauge depleted, I returned to using echoes as my primary form of combat. When I did get charge crystals to fill the gauge again, I planned to save them for the boss of the dungeon which, calling upon previous knowledge, I knew was coming as the culmination of this dungeon. This reflects a common tendency of mine in video games to save abilities or items that do a lot of damage for when I need them most. Overall, the solidification of swordfighter form as an ability that does a lot of damage and matters for combat is a direct effect of Tri's dialogue commenting on how strong the sword's power is, as well as the Link mini boss fight, where he is shown to quickly dispatch my echoes.

The boss of this dungeon was called Seismic Talus. Right when this battle begins, I transform into swordfighter form. The few seconds before this transformation, however, I run to the wall to get as far away from Seismic Talus as possible, only running towards him when I transform into swordfighter form. Figure 5.5 shows two sequential screenshots of this moment. For additional context, the glowing purple ball pictured beneath Seismic Talus is reflective of a familiar design that Zelda bosses have, where the boss's weak points are made obvious to the player. This continuity with other Zelda games makes the implicit connection between swordfighter form and boss fights natural for players familiar with the series, since all previous Zelda bosses were defeated by wielding a sword. The full boss fight can be viewed [in this video clip](#).

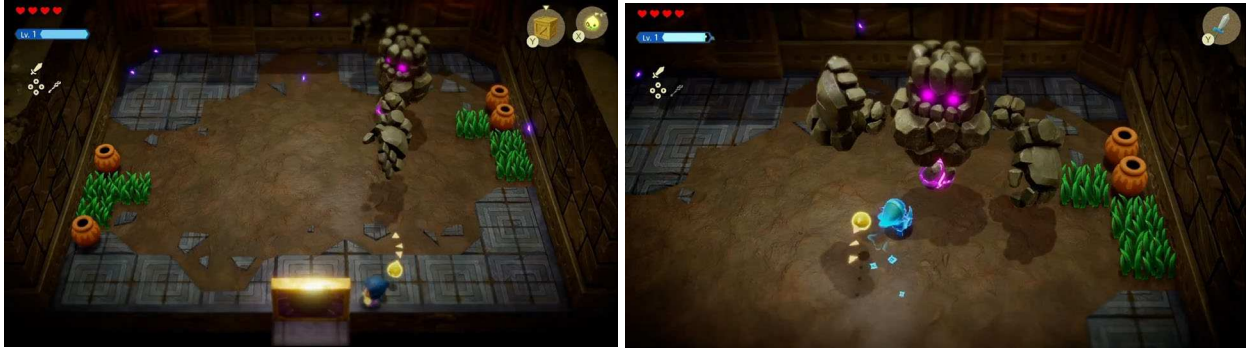


Figure 5.5: I run away from Seismic Talus until I enter swordfighter form

The fight against Seismic Talus sets a pattern for all future boss battles, where the game consistently gives the player energy charging crystals to continuously recharge swordfighter form. With the little time I had in swordfighter form, I made quick work of revealing and continuously attacking its weak point two out of the required three times. After I depleted the swordfighter form gauge, and during the recharging process with the continuously supplied charging crystals, I tried to use echoes to continue to damage Seismic Talus in the meantime. The only technique I used that worked among all of the ones I tried was summoning an Ignizol and throwing it at Seismic Talus's weak point, just how I described my ad hoc combat previous to gaining swordfighter form. This method simply did not work well enough, as my throwing method would rarely hit what I needed it to. Additionally, summoning echoes and waiting for them to attack the boss's weak point took too much time, and the boss would knock the echo off or kill it before it had a chance to hit the weak point. This reveals that the echo mechanic is simply not practical for higher stakes combat situations, and it is not a reliable way of defeating these enemies.

My field notes concerning this combat segment stated that I “had to use Link form to beat the boss, no other work arounds”. First, I find it interesting that I referred to it as “Link form”,

and this supports the fact that swordfighter form visually looks nearly identical to Link, especially when looking at the screen from farther away and not being able to see the smaller details. Concerning this boss battle, I try to use echoes well after I have charged swordfighter form enough because I wanted to figure out how to use echoes in combative ways. In the fight, I pick multiple echoes to try to fulfill that purpose, but I ultimately have to revert back to swordfighter form. This reveals that the echoes do not prove to be a viable method of combat for higher stakes situations.

An additional detail to enlighten the game's dependence on swordfighter form is the presence of charging crystals outside of boss battles. The charging crystals are provided in select lower-stake combat situations, such as the Still World segments that occur for each geographical area. Because the charge crystals are provided in boss battle moments before seeing how they appear in other situations, the presence of charge crystals implicitly tells the player that whatever situation they are currently facing is designed with swordfighter form in mind for completion, and they can safely use it with little fear of running out of charge.

The themes identified in reference to swordfighter form and how it impacts my combat approaches are connected to the identified Reddit themes of passive gameplay, echo techniques, and, of course, swordfighter form. Overall, what swordfighter form does and how it impacts the game design is problematic for gender being implicitly implemented in design choices because it inherently enforces traditional definitions of gender binary to depict strength and capability for Zelda as the female protagonist. The necessity for swordfighter form is out of need for dispatching more complicated enemies, which could have been circumvented in the game's design by making these enemies clearly defeatable with echoes, or by making the echoes more dependable in combat, as is reflected in my accounts of both the mini boss fight against Link and

the boss fight against Seismic Talus. Ultimately, the game makes it clear in its design that, while echoes can be used for combat, swordfighter form is the preferred method of attacking.

Additionally, the ad hoc combat that I developed as previously detailed is reflective of how the echo mechanic does not inherently provide the same active combat opportunities as swordfighter form. This is likely not an experience specific to me, as the development of ad hoc combat was an influence from my previously acquired video game literacies.

### **Zelda Rescues Link and Relinquishes Active Combat**

Just before the final boss battle to complete the game, the player finally finds Link trapped in the same prism that Zelda was held captive within at the very beginning of the game, but he cannot be saved until Zelda defeats the version of herself that Null has made an echo of. This ultimate reversal of the damsel in distress trope is a wonderful acknowledgement of the trope that the Zelda series has been built upon and continuously replicates. Subverting this trope shows that the narrative is critically aware of its importance to dismantling the gender roles and stereotypes that are the foundation of the series. Just like the previous example of swordfighter form, it is the enactment of this moment that reveals gendered game design principles.

After fighting Null's echo version of Zelda, I can now save Link from his prism. To do so, I transformed into swordfighter form and shot the prism with an arrow, which is directly reflective of how Link saved Zelda at the beginning of the game. Once Link breaks free from the prism, Tri immediately notices that he is unarmed and would be unable to fight Null without his weapons. Tri then prompts Zelda to return Link's weapons back to him, resulting in the four sequential screenshots of dialogue seen in Figure 5.6.

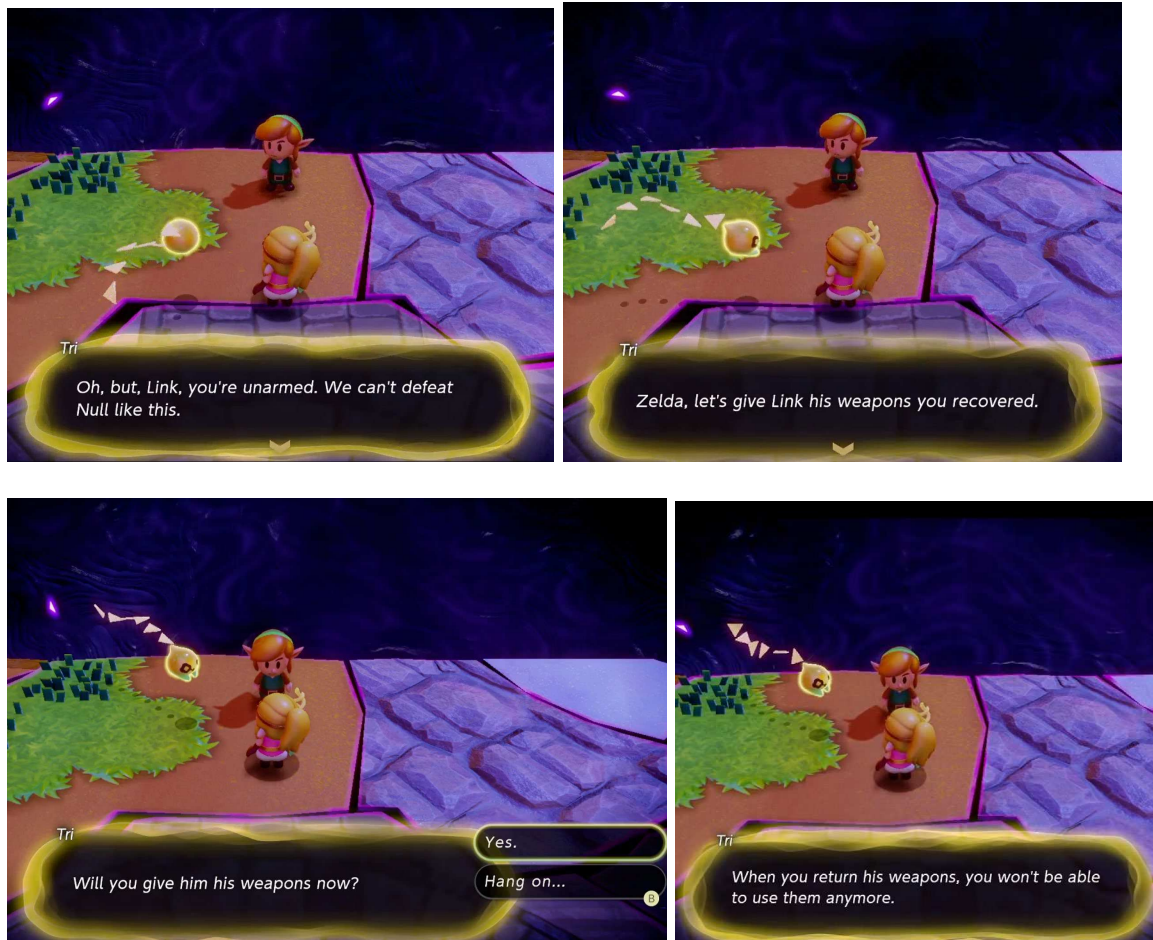


Figure 5.6: Tri forces the player to relinquish swordfighter form

The disappointment in losing swordfighter form is exacerbated by Tri reinforcing the fact that Zelda, and the player by proxy, must give Link his sword to continue progressing through the game. Since the swordfighter form mechanic was described in a way that grants Zelda strength and combat ability that she otherwise lacks, taking this ability away from the player forces them into a role of passive gameplay for the rest of the game's experience. Taking swordfighter form away from the player right before the final boss gives the player little time to readjust to solely depending on echoes for combat purposes, especially since it is unlikely that the player has completed any high stakes battle before this without using swordfighter mode.

While this choice is likely for the purpose of making the player depend on their echoes to push them to come up with creative ways to contribute to the final boss battle, the way it is framed by the narrative is what designates passive gameplay as a condition of femininity in this game's IxD, and passive gameplay is then implemented to reify traditional gender roles. This reveals a certain enforcement of binary gender roles in the narrative's design, where Link is now tasked with performing active combat, while Zelda is forced into a passive role. This is supposed to be one of the most memorable moments of the game, but the feeling of success or accomplishment that the player is supposed to have is stripped away because this success results in a punishing outcome.

I had a strong reaction to this moment in my field notes. I questioned why, through the affordances of the game, there could not be some kind of solution that arms both Link and Zelda, stating "Why would this not follow echo rules? As in, why would I not be able to use copies of his original weapons?" Additionally, I also pointed out that "the game emphasizes this moment", which is clearly seen in Figure 5.6 through Tri's constant request for Zelda to give Link the weapons. Another thing I reported in my field notes is that "the player has to pick the dialogue option to allow Link to take the sword/bow/bombs back", and the player must comply to continue to the final stretch of the game. In this context, forcing the player to comply reveals a mandatory enforcement of gender roles. Because the player is being put into the gender role of a woman through playing as Zelda, they are now being subjected to how gender is traditionally enforced.

While it is mentioned in the previous chapter that players feel a sense of ownership over the skills and abilities they gain in the gameplay experience, the narrative of *Echoes of Wisdom* makes it clear that Zelda's powers are not actually her own. When swordfighter form is taken

away, it is made clear that she was merely borrowing Link's weapons and now must return them to their owner. Similarly, in the beginning of the game when Zelda is first granted the echo ability by Tri, the dialogue reads "You borrowed the Tri Rod", implying that even Zelda's echo powers are not truly hers. This distinction reveals that the echo ability specific to Zelda is not even truly her own power. This is not a move that is made in other Zelda games, as Link's sword and items are always distinguished as his alone. This reveals a harmful narrative implicitly being implemented that Zelda does not intrinsically have the power or ability it takes to be the hero and save Hyrule like her male counterpart does.

The Reddit themes that connect to this analysis are swordfighter form, since this moment involves the design implications of taking it away, and video game literacy, concerning how the removal of swordfighter form feels so strange because it is before the final boss of the game. Taking swordfighter form from the player at this pivotal point could have been a way to signal to the player that the rest of the game contains more puzzle solving than active combat in the final boss battle, but this is not the case. The removal of swordfighter form contradicts affirmed video game literacies within *Echoes of Wisdom* and in other video games, which puts the player at a disadvantage that they did not otherwise account for. The implementation of swordfighter form to reinforce combat-oriented game design and the removal of swordfighter form by the narrative only serve to enforce traditional depictions of gender, and this ultimately negatively impacts the players' experiences.

### **Final Boss Battle Requiring Little Player Participation**

After the player gives up the swordfighter form ability and traverses through a short dungeon segment, the final boss of the game is fought side-by-side with Link. This is notably different from past installments of the Zelda series; if Zelda is at all involved in the final battle,

she takes a much more passive role and she is only ever present for one phase of the final boss battle. Upon reaching Null deeper in the Still World, the narrative establishes that Zelda and Link must defeat Null to retrieve the Prime Energy and save Hyrule. This battle consists of three phases, where the first and third are rather similar, the third being more difficult than the first, and the second phase separates Link from the player, giving the player an opportunity to act without assistance.

Throughout this battle, Link does not have a health bar to show when he is damaged; therefore, he not being in danger of being killed by Null. This small detail establishes that Link is serving a protective role, rather than the player protecting Link. For context, the implementation of NPCs having health bars is used in video games where the player must actively protect the NPC from enemies in the environment to keep them alive. Similar game mechanics can be seen in games such as *Resident Evil 4* (2023), where the player must protect the president's daughter from zombies, or *Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth* (2024), where the player must protect a dog from being hurt by monsters. Deciding not to include a health bar for the Link NPC in *Echoes of Wisdom*, and the fact that the Link NPC engages in active combat on its own, reveals that there is no need for the player to worry about being the protector and, by default, they are being protected. This detail provides another example of how the game's implicit design choices are enforcing gender roles.

In the first phase of the final boss battle against Null, its primary attacks are done with its arms, and it is noticeably more concerned with damaging Link than it is with damaging Zelda. Regardless, I do what I can to be as active as possible during the battle with Null. For this purpose, I use a Fire Keese echo, which is essentially a bat that can act as an airborne object to

inflict fire damage, as a way of attacking Null. Figure 5.7 shows a screenshot of this method, which can also be seen in [this video clip](#).



Figure 5.7: My summoned Fire Keese echo damages Null's arm

Other than the echo successfully damaging Null's arm, there are four triangles focused around the section being hit by the Fire Keese echo. Those four triangles are the visual representation of the target function, which I use to try to signify where the echo should go. This is because, despite my attempts to engage in active combat, the summoned echoes would rarely go where I wanted them to. This reveals that the way echoes operate in combat does not work fluidly to make it a viable replacement for the active combat that swordfighter form provided. Essentially, there is no opportunity for active combat in this phase of the fight with Null.

It is worth mentioning at this point that, throughout the entire game, I had a hard time paying attention to where my echo was on screen, especially in high stakes combat situations, which I attribute to the fact that I was looking at the Zelda avatar to make sure that I was safe. This resulted in many instances where my echo was killed and I did not know. This is relevant to the above moment because, throughout the final boss battle against Null, there were many moments where I thought I had an echo summoned, but did not, which impacted the degree to which I was able to contribute to the fighting.

Because of this, and the fact that Null's movements were becoming too fast for the Fire Keese echo to follow, I switched to the White Wolfos echo, which is a wolf that summons more wolves, consisting of three wolves total. This proved to be a much more effective way of contributing to combat in this situation, as the wolves were able to attack much faster and with much more precision than the Fire Keese. However, this resulted in me sacrificing my already limited ability to directly contribute to combat. To this point, I wrote in my field journal that "it felt like I was running away the entire time, depending on Link and my summoned monster echo to fight for me". This reveals that the removal of active combat participation and forcing players into a passive role creates a positionality for the player where they feel that their own contributions do not matter. Again, while running away itself is the smart thing to do, especially in this situation where Null has a large hit range, this reflection in my field notes shows frustration with not being able to directly fight.

The second phase of the final boss battle takes place when Null tries to escape once sustaining enough damage. Zelda follows Null into the portal, while one of Null's arms blocks Link from following her. Because Null is trying to escape but allows Zelda to follow without Link, this brief narrative segment shows who Null believes is the greater threat outside of Null prioritizing Link in the actual combat. Zelda then pursues Null in a side-scrolling underwater segment, where Zelda must damage the tentacles of the jellyfish that Null has now transformed into to stop it from escaping.

Now being pushed to use echoes that can work underwater, I summon a Bombfish echo, which is essentially a bomb that looks and acts like a fish. This was the underwater echo I consistently favored throughout the game's water segments. With Bombfish, they must be attacked or otherwise suffer an impact to detonate. The screenshot in Figure 5.8 shows that the

Bombfish echoes successfully swam up to the part of the tentacle I wanted to attack, but did not detonate, resulting in my swimming up to the Bombfish and spinning near them to detonate them. This technique can also be seen in [this video clip](#).

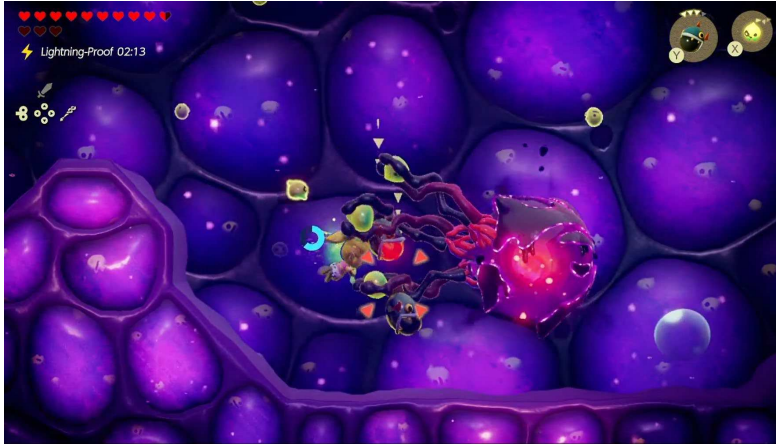


Figure 5.8: I swim up close to the Bombfish echoes to detonate them

Yet again, I am subconsciously trying to make echo combat as active as I possibly can, which I did not realize I was doing in the moment. Because I had to spin to detonate the Bombfish, this shows another representation of ad hoc combat to feel like I am doing the damage myself, since the spinning mechanic does not do any damage to enemies on its own. This process of damaging Null's tentacles is reflective of the entire second phase. This segment is an example of how Null's overall combat design could have been made with Zelda's echoes in mind, as this phase makes Zelda's echoes necessary for the progression of the battle, while also making it feel as though her participation is not as limited. Even if the player did have swordfighter form at this stage of the battle, the echo combat mechanic would have been better fitting for this circumstance. Because the water current is pushing back on the player, it is less convenient for the player to participate in direct combat. Therefore, the second segment of the final boss battle reveals that it is possible to design combat to measure the player's skill using Zelda's echo

mechanic, rather than continuing to design segments that prioritize active combat techniques. Choosing not to implement creative boss battles shows a fault in the design of *Echoes of Wisdom*.

Once the player does enough damage to Null, Zelda is dropped back into the arena seen in the first phase of the fight, where Link is stuck waiting. Once Zelda lands, Link is sure to rush over to check on her, further solidifying the dynamic of protector and protected. Once Null reappears, the third phase of the fight ensues. The difference between the final phase and the first is that Null now has more arms and more ways to attack Zelda and Link. It is this phase of the fight that garnered much conversation in the Reddit data corpus, particularly concerning the fact that many players did not realize that using the bind ability to pull on Null's arms was an option, which I also did not realize during my playthrough.

My failure to notice an active way to participate in the final boss battle seems counterintuitive, since previous analysis of my combat shows how I engineer as much interactivity as possible when I do not necessarily have to actively participate. Even though binding is the most active action the player can use, since it involves the player directly grabbing something, it would be assumed that this mechanic reflects active gameplay. However, binding one of Null's arms only pulls it out further so that Link can come and chop it off. Therefore, binding Null's arms, while considered among the Reddit community as the only way to actively participate in the final boss battle, is still passive because it depends on the Link NPC acting on the player's behalf like a glorified echo.

Additionally, the previous literacies learned through other Zelda games in particular trigger the recognition of a different action that is unattainable: the aforementioned trope of

highly obvious weak points. Figure 5.9 depicts a screenshot of the boss arena, showing Null's design for the third phase.

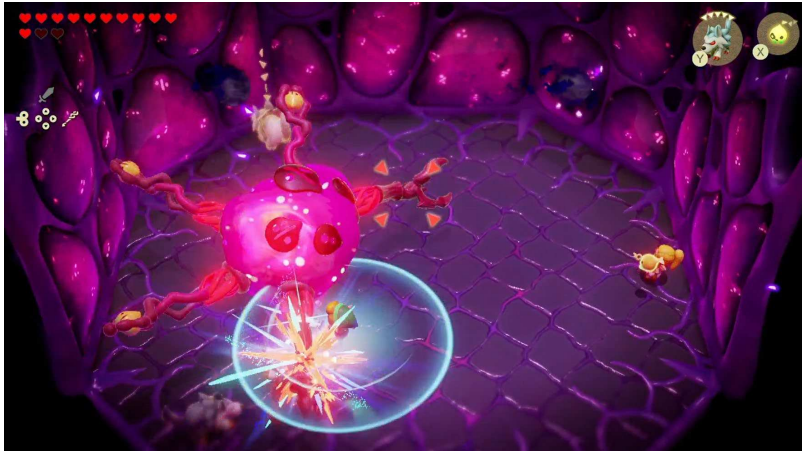


Figure 5.9: Null's full body and weak points in its arms

The points that were intended for the player to bind Null's arms contain the yellow Tri-looking creatures where its hands would be. This same design was just used in the previous phase to signal weak points, so the natural course of action would be to continue trying to actively damage those weak points. Another important factor is that the targeting system would focus on the front arms rather than the ones behind Null, and the echoes would not attack the back arms on its own, even though in this image the echo I summoned can be seen standing right next to the top arm but not attacking it. These design aspects reveal an impracticality for the echo mechanics in combat settings like this one, but that this impracticality has more to do with how the summoned echoes operate in combat than the player's ability to use echoes in combative ways.

Additionally, the player's participation is wholly unnecessary as a condition for completing the fight, as Link can do the entire fight by himself, excluding the second phase where Link is not present. The Reddit community discovered this fact, which was explored

because of how Link's efficiency was observed by the community compared to how the players felt unable to contribute. This was not something that I considered when playing, since video games as a genre are characterized by the player's participation being a necessary factor for progression through the story. The player's lack of necessary participation goes against all other games in the Zelda series, which implies that there is a kind of gender bias happening, either in the context of having a female protagonist, or with the assumption that the audience would consist of more women because of this change, making it an easier gaming experience overall.

Ultimately, the battle ends with Zelda and Link retrieving the piece of the Prime Energy that Null had taken, effectively destroying Null in the process of its removal. The player must use the bind ability on the Prime Energy once it is revealed inside of Null at the end of the fight, but the player is unable to do it alone. As seen in the screenshot shown in Figure 5.10, Link assists Zelda when pulling the prime energy out.



Figure 5.10: Zelda and Link pull out the Prime Energy together

In my field notes referring to this moment, I wrote that I enjoyed the thematic implication that “not just one or the other could do it by themselves, but they had to do it together. They are not lesser than each other, just different”. However, this was before identifying and analyzing the

key themes in the Reddit data corpus, and before knowing that my participation in the fight itself was more of a benefit than a necessity. That design choice in and of itself opposes the narrative of equality being made in this moment. Even so, this conditional equality is such that it enforces a strict binary perception of gender. This thematic moment of equality, when analyzed with a more critical lens, begins to give way to societal expectations of gender, and the ultimate enforcement of those harmful expectations.

The Reddit themes that connect to this analysis are passive gameplay and video game literacy. Passive gameplay is shown through how this boss is not designed to hinge on the player's contributions. The design of this final boss fight reflects the design that all other final boss fights take on, which are heavily combat-oriented to test the player on the skills they have learned. However, when the skills that the player has obtained are either through the echoes that fight for them, or through the swordfighter form ability that was taken away, it is unfair to implement a final boss battle that tests the player on skills they do not have the opportunity to showcase anymore, or that put the player at a disadvantage with the mechanics they are afforded. From the perspective of learned video game literacies, the design of the final boss battle, implementing weak points and reflecting combat-oriented gameplay calls upon the literacies learned in previous boss battles where the player had swordfighter form available to them. *Echoes of Wisdom* implementing combat is not a bad thing, but the combat is designed to prioritize Link's style of gameplay instead of Zelda's.

## **Results**

When analyzing my gameplay in accordance with the Reddit themes I identified through coding analysis, it allowed me to view my experience in more detailed ways. Before analyzing the passive gameplay theme in the Reddit data corpus, I originally did not realize when playing

*Echoes of Wisdom* that I was trying to perform active combat within the more passive affordances of the echo mechanic. Further, the game's design being centered around combat without providing the proper mechanics to engage in active combat prompted me to develop new video game literacies through ad hoc combat maneuvers, where I was able to leverage my existing video game literacy to defeat an enemy. In that way, *Echoes of Wisdom* offers an interesting opportunity to challenge existing video game literacies while also introducing new ones. Concerning this ad hoc combat development, it is interesting to analyze my own gameplay within the context of the Reddit coding analysis to contextualize how my combat and echo choices align with the choices made by the Redditors of r/echoesofwisdom.

While on the surface *Echoes of Wisdom* may seem to be a more progressive entry in the Zelda series, this is not actually the case. Promoting Zelda to the status of the game's protagonist resulted in a change of fundamental game mechanics, and implementing this change resulted in depictions of traditional gender roles. Specifically, this refers to granting Zelda the echo mechanic, but also implementing swordfighter form as an attempt to balance active and passive gameplay. The visual rhetorics and implicit design choices made concerning these game mechanics exemplifies how gender roles are being enforced through game design.

The simultaneous adherence to the Zelda paradigm in some places, while breaking tradition in others, has resulted in the presence of gender impacting game design as seen through close reading analysis of key gameplay moments. The places where the male-gendered paradigm needed to be challenged, such as the combat-oriented boss fights, were left unchanged by the game designers. The game broke tradition in other ways by not only making Zelda the protagonist, but also implementing a game design that granted the player a contemporary way of interacting and engaging with the world outside of combative means. In the Zelda paradigm that

was enforced, combat skill is still operationalized as a determinant of a player's worth and skill, but the player now faces a disadvantage through the implemented echo mechanic. To then try to make a game in which Zelda is the protagonist adds a layer of challenge that has not been encountered within the Zelda paradigm before *Echoes of Wisdom*. The disadvantages imposed upon the player as a result of gendering game design for women is a version of GD-IxD.

Overall, my experience of *Echoes of Wisdom* yields that this game is more harmful than other Zelda titles, even though this one is the first to feature a female protagonist. This presents itself through the gendered aspects of swordfighter form and the echo mechanic being assigned as masculine and feminine abilities through the avatar design of these abilities and further presents itself through the active and passive combat assigned to the respective game mechanics. The costume designing for swordfighter form supports a binary gendered perspective on masculinity being contingent on strength and physical combat through visual rhetorical means. With that, how swordfighter form is referred to in the dialogue of *Echoes of Wisdom* enforces that swordfighter form's masculine traits are preferred but not feasible for Zelda to maintain. Overall, the implementation of game mechanics and how they operate in the Zelda paradigm shows that *Echoes of Wisdom* is perpetuating GD-IxD.

## CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS

In this thesis, I have conducted research on how gender influences game design and how the implementation of gender in game design directly impacts player experience through analyzing how gender is attended to in *Echoes of Wisdom*. Chapter 1 provided an overview of how gender is harmfully portrayed in the visual aspects of game design as a symptom of insidious harmful ideologies in the gaming community. Chapter 2 reviewed relevant scholarship in feminist studies, game rhetoric, and digital rhetoric to introduce relevant concepts and provide context for my research by discussing previous contributions to the field. Chapter 3 detailed the methods I used to conduct my research, which included Reddit and gameplay analysis within an exploratory case study. In Chapter 4, I chose the four most frequent themes that arose from the coding analysis of the Reddit data corpus and brought in some key examples to exemplify how the Reddit community was discussing the prevalent themes. In Chapter 5, I used the themes identified in the Reddit coding analysis to in tandem with close reading analysis to further contextualize my gameplay choices and critique how the narrative and gameplay interactions were designed in *Echoes of Wisdom*.

In this research, I articulated a new term, Gender Dominant Interaction Design (GD-IxD), which attends to the ways in which gender ideologies influence interactivity within game design. In video games, this can be seen through game mechanics and narrative design that enforces gender in harmful ways. GD-IxD is not limited to attending to male-oriented game design; it would attend to how designs are impacted by the construct of gender in harmful ways. This is an important term to define because it names the issue of how binary gender roles are imposed upon the player, as this phenomenon presents itself in both data analysis chapters. Moreover, GD-IxD

has disastrous implications for how pervasive gender binary structures and enforcing gender roles in game design can influence and perpetuate harmful ideologies within the game's rhetoric. GD-IxD being implemented in design can lead to complicit participation in and continuation of patriarchal social structures if left unchecked. Specifically, the implicitness of GD-IxD can influence players by implementing sociocultural and political ideologies, using the rhetorical affordances in the video game genre to further embed those ideologies within players, even when players have critical awareness of it.

GD-IxD differs from Sano Franchini's concept of Feminist Interaction Design (F-IxD); F-IxD is a potential solution for the problem that GD-IxD creates. Sano-Franchini suggests that the solution for male-oriented design is intentional design that considers challenging sexism in specific contexts, challenging binary ways of thinking about gender and sexuality, and designing digital spaces to be broadened to make space for diverse users (2017). This feminist approach aligns well with addressing the present issue of GD-IxD. To add, using intersectional feminist approaches would be an ideal way to challenge pervasive GD-IxD, as this perspective will ensure that other identity indicators, such as race, class, and sexuality, are also being designed for in a way that does not impose harmful views upon players.

In this chapter, I will discuss three key takeaways based on the analysis of data presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. The game design of *Echoes of Wisdom* reveals key takeaways that can be applied to other video game design choices. First, game design that implements a female protagonist yields notable shifts in the types of interactions possible in the game's environment. Second, this change negatively impacts player experiences. Third, GD-IxD in game design reifies problematic sociocultural and political ideologies. Using Costanza-Chock's principles of design justice, I will propose how each takeaway can work towards more inclusive IxD.

## Female Avatars Shifting Game Design

The first takeaway from this research is that there is a notable shift in interactivity when the game's protagonist is female, which is most identifiable through the implementation of passive gameplay. This shift is evident through Reddit community data and the analysis of my own gameplay that identifies passivity in the game design of *Echoes of Wisdom* that is not typical for video games in the *Zelda* series, nor in the broader action-adventure game genre. Passive gameplay, as it is seen in *Echoes of Wisdom*, is a shift directly caused by the implementation of a female protagonist because passive gameplay is implemented through *Zelda*'s afforded game mechanics, but the game design paradigm still assesses player skill in ways reflective of how active combat is traditionally performed in previous *Zelda* games.

The impact that passive gameplay has on player experience is a tangible effect of the shift that is seen when the protagonist of a game is female. Passive gameplay is the most frequent theme that arose from the Reddit data corpus, as articulated in Chapter 4. Redditors mostly discussed how passive gameplay affected their experience of the final boss battle, where the player is forced into a passive role while the Link NPC does all the fighting. Some Redditors even make the connection between their passive gameplay and *Zelda* as a character also being forced into that passive role, expressing disappointment with this design choice. Regardless of the different approaches taken to address passive gameplay, Redditors across the data corpus agreed that the implementation of passive gameplay negatively impacted their experiences of combat situations. This is significant because it shows that players are aware of the constraints imposed upon them and the narrative implications of these constraints being imposed upon *Zelda* as a character.

Additionally, the implementation of passive gameplay in game design takes abilities away from the player that fundamentally puts the player at a disadvantage, especially when the paradigm of *Echoes of Wisdom* assesses player skill through the combat implemented through mini-boss and boss fights. This is shown through the analysis of my gameplay when I use the inherently passive echo mechanic to conduct ad hoc active combat. This reveals that dissatisfaction with the affordances granted through passive gameplay can lead to players engineering ways to feel more active in combat scenarios. While the act of engineering ad hoc active combat suggests a level of flexibility in the affordances of the echo mechanic, it is also made clear through the analysis of my gameplay that the ad hoc active combat is not feasible in many situations due to varying terrain design and lack of fluidity in utilizing ad hoc combat. Essentially, the ad hoc combat I develop is not intentionally designed for in the game's existing frameworks. When the ad hoc combat is not feasible to perform, players are then forced to participate in passive combat, therefore using the echo mechanic as it is intended to be used.

While passive gameplay in the case of *Echoes of Wisdom* is an indicator of GD-IxD through the game mechanics and narrative design that surrounds the implementation of passive gameplay, the presence of passive gameplay as it is seen in *Echoes of Wisdom* is not yet defined in the field. Scholarship concerning passive and active gameplay broadly defines passive gameplay as viewing a narrative and active gameplay as participating in the narrative. There is an argument in this scholarship that passive watchers are less impacted by a narrative as an active player. Christopher and Leuszler respond to this argument and conduct a study where they compare participants' experiences of horror video games and horror cinema. They ultimately assert:

“What both cinema and games have in common is the perceptual interruption engendered by the screen that each medium employs. However, by depending on comparisons with

media forms that are generically different, they fall prey to a logical fallacy that subjects one media form to the limitations of another” (p. 225).

Essentially, it is unfair to judge the rhetorical effectiveness of one genre’s ability to evoke emotions in the participant by the standards of another genre.

Overall, there is a strict view of passive gameplay in current scholarship that exclusively focuses on watching a narrative unfold with no participation, which limits how passive gameplay can be conceptualized for further research in game design. This research, in consideration of Christopher and Leuszler’s distinction between genre work, asserts that passive gameplay is a genre specific condition. For example, video games of the visual novel genre, such as *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017), limit player interaction to dialogue choices. Visual novel video games are therefore fundamentally more passive than an action-adventure game like the *Zelda* series. This conceptualization of passive gameplay aligns more with the scholarship that has been done thus far. However, certain genres of video games inherently being more passive is not necessarily an indicator of GD-IxD implementing passive gameplay, as it depends on if the implementation of passive gameplay is being done with a gendered perspective. Certain video game genres implementing varying levels of passivity because of their genre conventions is a testament to Christopher and Leuszler’s assertion that it is unfair to judge one genre by another’s affordances.

To elaborate, passivity in various video game genres is more of a spectrum rather than a strictly passive watcher active participant framework as other scholarship defines. For example, the *Fire Emblem* series features turn-based combat, where the player instructs the characters to take actions in combat rather than directly controlling the character themselves to attack and move around the combat environment. For video games featuring turn-based combat, this degree of passive gameplay is normal, so the passivity here is not limiting to the player’s actions, nor demonstrative of GD-IxD. However, passive gameplay is problematic in the context of *Echoes of*

*Wisdom* because its implementation does not fit with the genre it resides in, since the action-adventure genre is partially characterized by the player's highly interactive combat, and it is implemented as a gendered characteristic. As such, completing mini boss and boss fights is the only way to progress in the narrative of *Echoes of Wisdom*. This lends itself to a new definition of passive gameplay, which is how player participation is limited within video game genres or game design paradigms where the limitation puts players at an unnatural disadvantage in gameplay.

In accordance with the Reddit data analysis in Chapter 4, passive gameplay as it is experienced in *Echoes of Wisdom* suggests design practices that build passive gameplay into how game mechanics operate, as seen by designing echoes as a puzzle-solving mechanic and trying to apply this mechanic to traditional combat paradigms. This results in passive forms of active combat, implemented in Zelda's limited access to swordfighter form, and active forms of passive combat, which is shown in my own use of the echo mechanic for ad hoc combat from Chapter 5. This degree of passive or active gameplay shows a need for the spectrum perspective suggested above, along with how genre factors into the overall implementation of active or passive gameplay. Further, the gendered way that active and passive gameplay are implemented in *Echoes of Wisdom* reinforces problematic cultural tropes, including how passive game mechanics operate to make Zelda less capable than Link and how Zelda's echo mechanic and orientation to puzzle solving reifies common tropes of cunning and deceitful women using their intellect for their own gain. The results found in this study demonstrate that *Echoes of Wisdom* implements passive gameplay as a form of GD-IxD. This can be used to analyze how passive gameplay is implemented in other video games, and if passive gameplay is being implemented in other video games as a method of continuing GD-IxD practices.

Because this new definition of passive gameplay has arisen through data analysis, this can contribute to furthering theory and research in the field of game design and game rhetoric. This new definition of passive gameplay calls for theorists and researchers to be well attuned to the genres in which they are analyzing passive gameplay, particularly in knowing what level of passivity is normal for that video game genre. With that knowledge, implications for passive gameplay implementation within and outside of GD-IxD can be further explored. This should lead to game designers being more aware of the implications of enforcing passive gameplay in certain genre settings.

To properly address the shift that occurs when a game's protagonist is female, particularly in how it impacts passive gameplay, design justice provides excellent frameworks to respond to this issue. Costanza-Chock's first principle of design justice frames using design to "sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems" (2020). She addresses this principle from the perspective of being forced to operate within a matrix of domination, and how this results in design justice inherently attending to structural and institutional power inequality. For game design, the identified shift into passivity that occurs when the protagonist is female is a tangible example of how structural systems of power continue to impose inequality through design. By implementing this principle of design justice, game designers can begin to dismantle structures of inequality through empowerment and liberation initiatives.

### **Negative Impacts on Player Experience**

The second takeaway from this research is that the implicit shifts caused by implementing a female protagonist yield negative experiences of gameplay. This shift is most notable through the implementation of passive gameplay as it operates to limit player agency.

Because this is uncharacteristic for the *Zelda* series and this larger genre of video games, any limitation of player agency creates a negative perception of the game, and this is doubly problematic because these limitations are being implemented alongside the presence of a female protagonist.

As seen in the Reddit data corpus, players often do not enjoy having less ability than usual, as is expressed through the negative interpretation of passive gameplay. However, the Reddit community made sure to include that there were aspects outside of combat where the echo mechanic specific to *Echoes of Wisdom* granted them more freedom when solving puzzles. Despite this, GD-IxD within *Echoes of Wisdom* still limits player agency in particular ways that negatively impact the experience of the player.

Additionally, the focus on gender that is present in *Echoes of Wisdom* portrays more harmful gender ideologies than other *Zelda* games where there is an absence of gender focus. The way that *Echoes of Wisdom* portrays gender as something that inherently impacts someone's ability to participate in gameplay is not present in other *Zelda* titles, making *Echoes of Wisdom* more harmful, especially because these harmful perspectives are implemented more implicitly. Further, the enforced limitation upon *Zelda* through the implementation of passive gameplay creates an experience where, because players can now directly feel the enforcement of gender roles in negative ways, it negatively impacts their overall experience. In particular, the enforcement of passive gameplay in the game design of *Echoes of Wisdom* presents itself as a method of active gameplay, which implies that the passivity the player experiences as *Zelda* has some correlation to her lack of capability compared to Link's abilities.

Scholarship surrounding player agency largely focuses on interactive gaming narratives where the player's choices impact the story, and to what degree the player can change the

ultimate outcome of the game experience through their limited agency. For example, this kind of narrative agency is implemented in *Life is Strange* (2015) and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018). To the point of player agency, Hammond et al. state that, even when providing players the agency to make choices about how they interact in the world, “the player’s intentions are constrained by the material for action provided by the system” (p. 7). Essentially, even though a game might allow the player to make choices that impact the narrative, there are still limitations concerning the player accomplishing a task to progress the story in specific ways.

The definition of player agency as it is understood by the Zelda community on Reddit and by me as a player is more specific to what mechanics and abilities can be used to complete a task. This kind of agency began to be implemented in the Zelda series with *Breath of the Wild* (2017) and continued to be implemented in *Tears of the Kingdom* (2023), but these titles still afforded the player the use of Link’s traditional weapons. In *Echoes of Wisdom*, this agency is granted to the player through Zelda’s use of echoes to solve puzzles in various ways, but she is not granted the same access to active combat that is seen extensively in *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom*. On the other hand, while Link consistently has his classic combat arsenal in all Zelda games, he is always given items to complete the puzzles he encounters in dungeons. Link gains additional supplementary items for unlimited use to complete puzzles without changing appearance as drastically as swordfighter form does for Zelda. Zelda in *Echoes of Wisdom* is not allowed the same supplementary items for combat situations, only swordfighter form which has limited use.

With the more contemporary Zelda games allowing broader solutions to in-game puzzles, a new definition of player agency arises, which is game design that allows for various approaches to completing tasks, such as puzzles or combat, and does not only design for one

solution. Taking an approach to player agency outside of just narrative choices is something that is not being done within theory and research as of now. For these purposes, there are now two approaches to player agency and game interactivity: narrative oriented agency and game mechanic oriented agency. This multifaceted approach to player agency also gives game designers the framework to consider how agentive they want their game environment to feel. Considering that players want to feel that they have agency in video games, game designers can approach affording player agency in multifaceted ways to improve player experience. While doing so, game designers should also be careful not to implement GD-IxD into their game's mechanic design. This is where *Echoes of Wisdom* fails, as the design of this game allows many affordances for player agency concerning puzzle solving but limits their agency for combat situations. This dichotomy of agency leaves the player with complicated feelings about the game, the negative arising from the lack of agency in certain ways. This could easily be replicated by future game designers who want to implement player agency, but do not consider how GD-IxD impacts their design choices.

Ultimately, the player is the one who suffers from the shift that is seen when a game's protagonist is female because of GD-IxD. Regardless of the player's own perspective on gender issues, players ultimately feel disappointed or frustrated with the limitations imposed upon them by GD-IxD. Therefore, mitigating GD-IxD issues in game design will in turn improve the player's experience with the game, and contribute to a more affirming player experience for women and gender non-conforming players.

To mitigate negative impacts on player experience, Costanza-Chock's second design justice principle states that design should "center the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process" (2020). To enact this, she suggests that designers consult

community partners to assess the community's needs and values. In addition to this, Costanza-Chock's sixth principle, which is that "everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to the design process" addresses another approach to addressing design justice in game design, specifically the inclusion of diverse people belonging to impacted groups in the design process (2020). For game design, this means that not only should members of various marginalized groups be present in the design process, but their perceptions of design choices should be prioritized.

### **Pervasive GD-IxD Reifying Problematic Sociocultural Ideologies**

The final takeaway from this research is that, through the unique abilities that video games have to implement rhetorical strategies, continuing to implement GD-IxD will reify problematic sociocultural ideologies. This is particularly evident through how the visual and narrative presentation of the swordfighter form game mechanic implies harmful binary gender roles. Additionally, the enactment of such ideologies in game design can potentially be mitigated by engaging in critical VGL practices.

The analysis conducted of my gameplay included some visual and narrative analysis, particularly concerning swordfighter form. It was concluded that the visual design and the narrative implications through dialogue frame swordfighter form as a masculine game mechanic, specifically in how swordfighter form visually looks nearly identical to Link, and in dialogue when Tri tells Zelda "You look strong, like that guy who wears green". It is then even more problematic that this masculine game mechanic is what grants Zelda the limited ability to engage in active combat. Since Zelda's primary abilities are more passive, and swordfighter form grants her active participation, it implies that she can only be a hero when she has masculine traits. The designation of active gameplay as masculine and passive gameplay as feminine is a distinction

made by the design of *Echoes of Wisdom* through the visual design of swordfighter form and the narrative depiction of swordfighter form as being stronger through having the abilities of Link. This is more harmful than a traditional Zelda game because it implies a masculine and feminine association with active and passive combat. Hypothetically, if the same echo mechanic were implemented where the player has the same limited access to swordfighter form but the player character is still Link, it would be less problematic because it is not being done in a gendered way that can implicitly enforce specific gender ideologies. This is what makes *Echoes of Wisdom* almost more problematic than other games in the Zelda franchise because the game being designed for a female protagonist has resulted in gendered ways of portraying combat ability and passivity.

Swordfighter mode being implemented as a visually masculine appearance is a direct reflection of male-oriented paradigms of game design, Murray asserts that many game design choices reflect ideologies of men being placed in dominant positions, specifically naming the mastery and claiming of space as a means of perpetuating a colonialist “White man’s burden” narrative in video games (2020). In this sense, swordfighter form’s visual design not only acts to enforce binary gender roles, but also enforces the ideology that masculinity is expressed through violence and claiming space.

Overall, scholarship concerning VGL advocates for it as a valid way of meaning-making and building foundational digital literacies, as Banks asserts in his work on how the digital divide disproportionately impacts Black communities (2006). Bogost also advocates for VGL as an essential component of building foundational digital literacies for children (2008). Additionally, Bourgonjon articulates VGL as such:

“Play comprises not just the technical abilities to install or launch a video game, nor the eye-to-hand coordination needed to navigate an avatar through the virtual world, but most

importantly also entails interpreting what happens during the game and mastering the grammar and practices of the semiotic domain” (p. 6).

This resonates specifically with the delineation Selber draws between functional and critical literacies, where Selber defines functional literacy as “students as users of technology” and critical literacy as “students as questioners of technology” (p. 25). As such, the critical ability to understand and negotiate rhetorical choices regarding performances of gender and harmful implementations of gender must be developed within players as critical VGL. Without access to critical VGL, players are more susceptible to believing and perpetuating harmful ideologies, such as the effects of internalized misogyny that McCollough et al. emphasize in their research (2020). To mitigate the subconscious development of these ideologies, it is crucial to encourage critical VGL among players.

What has been proposed thus far in scholarship to bring a critical literacy aspect to VGL practices mostly concerns a pedagogical approach to teaching critical literacy practices. Specifically, LaMear and Gillern conducted a study on a class of elementary aged students, implementing teaching strategies through a three-week video game unit to foster critical VGL practices concerning gender. Through this, they assert that interpreting video games as texts is highly valuable to introducing critical literacy practices (2023). In the perspectives currently articulated in existing scholarship, video games are regarded as artifacts that can foster other digital literacies. Video games are also regarded as artifacts that provide opportunities for critical engagement, though those approaches for critically engaging are more focused on traditional ways that students approach critical thinking practices for written texts.

What is perhaps more exigent concerning scholarly work is researching IxD in games to find what specific game design choices foster or limit critical VGL practices. Therefore, it is important to examine how fostering or limiting critical VGL contributes to current GD-IxD

practices. Game developers are already aware of VGL as it is, which is clear for many games that provide tutorials, difficulty options, accessibility adjustments, and more. However, this attends to functional VGL, where players are able to play the video game, rather than critical VGL, where players can question and critique the video game. Fostering critical VGL involves introducing narratives that are more complex and nuanced, and giving players the tools to critically question the narrative and mechanics embedded within game designs. Many video games already implement nuanced narratives that evoke critical thinking; however, many do not invite the player to question the more implicit dynamics of gender, race, and other identity-impacted inequality. By implementing a perspective that seeks to mitigate implicit GD-IxD in game design, the game designers must be willing to participate in fostering critical VGL.

Recently, *Metaphor: ReFantazio* (2024) has implemented game design choices that foster critical VGL by positioning the player in a way that directly questions harmful ideologies happening in real world situations. *Metaphor: ReFantazio* presents a fantasy world with a highly prevalent racism problem, although it is implemented through the lens of fantasy races such as elves and animal-like creatures. Where *Metaphor: ReFantazio* succeeds in fostering critical VGL is by positioning the player as a fantasy race specific to this game's world that constantly faces discrimination and unfair treatment by various NPCs. Particularly, this game takes an additional step that fosters critical VGL, where the player's fairy companion will prompt the player to reflect on the discrimination they face through limited dialogue choices, such as asking the player how they feel about being treated in unjust ways. The narrative IxD choices made in *Metaphor: ReFantazio* attend to the development of critical VGL in game design in new and engaging ways, especially considering this game was release only two weeks after *Echoes of Wisdom*. Additionally, the ways that *Metaphor: ReFantazio* implements a design framework to

foster critical VGL can be replicated and normalized, as well as further developed, in future game design.

The initiative of dismantling GD-IxD in video games is particularly important because the increased presence of right-wing gamers also yields increases in right-wing ideologies being vocalized and circulated en masse. This is directly seen through the effects that GamerGate has had, and continues to have, on the gaming community, as discussed in Chapter 1. Right-wing ideologies being proliferated through GamerGate is discussed by Trice and Potts, where they assert that GamerGate's widespread influence is due to dark patterns, which is defined as a user experience that is crafted to influence the user to act in ways that are against their own interests. Particularly, they find that

“The use of dark patterns in GamerGate drove its success. For its targets, GamerGate took advantage of its numbers to turn the Twitter experience into an inescapable GamerGate experience. When one member sent a message, that message became a signal to highly connected community that had been instructed to echo one another and to target a wide, loosely defined array of others.” (p. 7).

Through the networked implementation of dark patterns, GamerGate's rhetoric of hate supported and implicated users in the enactment of harmful ideologies.

As mentioned in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, the swiftness of community action that resulted in the formation of GamerGate is a directly result of men believing that video games are made only for their demographic to enjoy, and any woman who encroaches on this space, referred to as feminine infiltration, endangers their fragile definition of masculinity. This signifies the importance of rectifying GD-IxD issues in game design, and this does not just affect gamers, but what is happening on a societal level. Many corporations and universities are actively dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the United States. Given this development, the impact on how game design is taught at universities, and the fact that corporations might no longer prioritize having diverse voices and perspectives on game design

decisions and initiatives, has yet to be seen. This aligns with the previously discussed principles of design justice that Costanza-Chock proposes, which call for the inclusion of diverse communities in design processes and the consultation of impacted communities throughout the design process (2020).

In addition to the above connection to Costanza-Chock's design justice principles, her fourth principle of design justice states that design justice should "view change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process" (2020). She elaborates by saying that prototypes of designs should be tested by users to improve the design's accessibility. In game design, this can be done through game testing and releasing beta versions of a game to a diverse audience to assess the community's needs and values. Additionally, this principle also allows for growth as it relates to critical VGL. Video games continuing to create opportunities for players to engage in critical VGL will lead to allowing players the space to grow and change, which is also referred to in this principle of design justice.

### **Responding to the GD-IxD Problem**

Through the research I have conducted on how gender influences IxD in game design, I have offered a thorough analysis on how *Echoes of Wisdom* reflects GD-IxD. This research suggested that GD-IxD and its broader term, G-IxD, are important concepts for approaching video game research and theory, how games can be designed with implicit agendas, and how players are impacted by the implementation of harmful ideologies in video games. Using Costanza-Chock's framework for attending to design justice, multiple different methods of addressing the GD-IxD problem are proposed as they connect to the three key takeaways of this research: that there is a shift in IxD when the protagonist is female, that this shift negatively

impacts player experience, and that continuing to implement GD-IxD will reify problematic sociocultural ideologies.

Future research should continue to investigate how gender influences IxD in specific ways. There is a lack in research concerning this aspect of IxD, other than Sano-Franchini's F-IxD, and further exploration into how gender impacts IxD can yield more aspects of GD-IxD that have yet to be discovered. To continue addressing the issue of GD-IxD in game design, research across multiple video game examples could identify commonalities between how GD-IxD is implemented in game design. Further, future research could also indicate existing IxD that actively defies GD-IxD, and how the game design is built to do that work.

For game design, this research suggests that there is more to be done regarding GD-IxD impacts games with character creation frameworks that enforce binary gender. This would not just include the act of creating the avatar, but how the avatar is customizable within both the mechanics and the narrative within the gameplay itself. Some Redditors in the Reddit data corpus spoke about the limitations of *Zelda's* costume customization when compared to the extensive flexibility in costume customization that is seen in *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom*. Other video game titles would be more fit for addressing binary gender character customization, and the gendered forms of visual rhetoric such binaries enforce. While a further investigation into gender nonconforming or agender video game protagonists could not be done within the limitations of this research, *Echoes of Wisdom* offers insight into how implicit game mechanics and narrative implications operate to enforce GD-IxD. Further exploring this would be beneficial to further understand how video games more broadly use their unique rhetorical abilities to enforce binary gender roles, or to defy them. Examining how *Echoes of Wisdom* implements GD-IxD is helpful in the initial identification of it, but there are insights to be gained

from examining a broader ecology of video games and how GD-IxD operates within them to ultimately answer how gender norms are reified through design.

Costanza-Chock's third design justice principle states that design justice should "prioritize design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer" (2020). Ultimately, the intentionality of a design does not matter if the outcome of the design is harmful for marginalized communities. This is something that has been gestured to throughout this thesis but is imperative to remember. A well-intentioned design can still be harmful. Further, the players cannot discern the intentions of game designers, only the effects that game design has on themselves as a player and other players in the community. This design justice principle reveals that the intentionality of the design does not matter if it the design choice results in the perpetuation of harmful ideologies. If game design reflects GD-IxD, then it negatively affects the player, regardless of how it was meant to be perceived.

Game design should be approached with a critical lens that considers not just the broader concept of G-IxD, but the values of diverse audiences, as Costanza-Chock's design justice principles call for. This will not only produce more engaging and critical video games, but also improve the overall experience of gamers, as is shown through the Reddit data and my own account of the gameplay experience. Since video games can insidiously continue the circulation of harmful ideologies, it is crucial to dismantle this by implementing design justice to respond to the identified GD-IxD problem. GD-IxD, if left unchecked, can perpetuate harm and hate where it is no longer welcome.

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