

1

Why Do We Care Whether Link Saves the Princess?

JONATHAN FROME

When you're playing *Wind Waker*, it's easy to understand why you feel a swell of pride when you defeat the final boss, Ganondorf. It's taken you many hours of gameplay to get to this point, and to beat him requires considerable skill.

You can't mindlessly mash buttons and rely on easy combos. You've got to master the parry attack and use your shield to deflect Light Arrows. After Ganondorf goes down, as you watch the final cut-scenes, you might reflect on your first combat lesson with Orca, who explains to Link how to manage a sword (and at the same time explains to you how to use the controller to fight enemies). Back then, you couldn't deal with a group of Green Chu-Chu's, but now, you're an expert at combat. You have achieved something and have every right to be happy with your performance.

You might also have some strong feelings about the game itself, outside of your performance in it. A lot of people criticized this game for its cel-animation style graphics, but maybe you like them. In their own way, they're simple yet appealing. The anime design of the characters isn't realistic, but it lets their expressions come across more easily. When Tetra shoots Link out of a cannon into the Forsaken Fortress, the graphic style makes it easy to appreciate his absurd expression of frightened surprise. On the other hand, the game has faults, too. The sailing is, frankly, kind of boring. At first, it's cool to sail through the waves and hunt for buried treasure chests. As the game progresses, the minutes between islands start to seem like hours. These are design decisions made by the game's creators and it is natural for these decisions to cause emotions such as disdain or admiration.

But there's one area in which your feelings about *Wind Waker* are a little harder to explain. In some ways, you respond to the game as if it were real. You care about Link and Zelda as *people*. You care about the story and the challenges they face. You want them to succeed. Yes, part of the reason you maneuver Link all over Hyrule is because you want to overcome the challenges the game puts your way, but that can't explain why it's sad when Link leaves his grandma on Outset Island to search for his sister Aryll, or why you feel slightly touched when Aryll gives you her telescope on your birthday. Later in the game, there is a plot twist regarding Tetra that is quite surprising. You're not surprised because the new information changes your strategy; you are surprised that Tetra is not really who you thought she was. It's character development that surprises you, not gameplay.

You may feel scared by some of the game's monsters. On Dragon Roost Island, you face the large, flame-spewing scorpion Gohma. When you first walk into the final cavern, there is a cut-scene in which you see Gohma slowly rise to his full height, towering over Link, and you think, "This is not good." Your eyes widen and your heart rate increases just a little bit as you look at this threatening monster.

You also have some more subtle emotions during the game. There's a small sense of majesty when you conduct the Wind's Requiem and you see the wind suddenly change direction and blow past Link with great force. The majesty isn't because the change allows you to more efficiently sail to the next island, it's because the animation and music in that small cut-scene captures a sense of wonder and awe at the power of nature.

It makes sense that we're happy when we win the game or feel admiration for the game design. The game is a real game. The graphics are real graphics. But there is not a real hero Link or a real princess Zelda. Gohma is not actually dangerous and there is no actual majestic wind blowing over Hyrule. We rarely think about this disconnect because we're so used to enjoying fictional entertainment. We care about characters; that's just a component of our interaction with media. Yet, there is something deeply strange about this. Why do we care about people who don't exist? We are used to being scared by enemies in videogames. The sight of a Gold Elite in *Halo* can make you jump back in fear. Why? You know it can't really hurt you.

Do You Really Believe that Zelda Kills Ganondorf?

Theories about why we respond to fictional characters usually start with some common-sense notions about emotional responses to real events. Consider a potentially intense emotional event in real life. Imagine that you're at a videogame convention and you've bought a raffle ticket. The grand prize is a fifty-thousand-dollar dream home theater with all the latest videogame consoles, a huge television, top-of-the-line stereo equipment, and dozens of games. You're listening to the winning numbers being announced. Number after number matches, and when the final number, fifteen, matches the last number on your ticket—you've won the grand prize. You are thrilled. You can't believe your good luck. You start imagining how you'll fit this equipment into your apartment. As the numbers are repeated, you suddenly realize that what you heard as "fifteen" was actually "fifty." You have won nothing. Your overwhelming positive feelings are quickly replaced with a strong sense of disappointment. Scenarios like this suggest that our emotions are based on our beliefs about the world. You were thrilled when you believed that you had won the grand prize, but when you came to believe that you had lost, your positive emotions disappeared.

The notion that belief is essential to emotion underlies what is sometimes called the paradox of fiction: we care about characters that we don't believe in. When you play *Wind Waker*, you feel sympathy for some of the non-player characters, such as the Deku Tree. If you find the story compelling, you are very happy to see Link finally plunge his sword into Ganondorf's head, and at the end of the game you feel a mix of sadness and satisfaction when Link leaves Outcast Island (for good?) and sails off with Tetra's pirate ship.

But you don't believe that there is or was a Deku Tree, you don't believe that a boy named Link leaves a real place called Outcast Island, and you don't believe that the game is an account of actual events. Given that this is all made up, why should you respond emotionally to it? When you stop believing that you won a raffle, your happiness disappears. Why don't your emotions disappear when you realize that you don't believe in the characters of *Wind Waker*?

But It All Seems So Real . . .

Several philosophical theories have been developed to explain this apparent paradox. A common view is that when we watch fictional stories we perform a mental activity we call “the willing suspension of disbelief,” a phrase first used in 1817 by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.¹ According to this theory, we have emotional responses to *Wind Waker* because we temporarily believe in its reality. Once we suspend our disbelief, we forget that the Boko Baba we are looking at is not a real carnivorous plant. This view is sometimes called the *illusion theory* because it suggests that we are under the illusion that what we are seeing is real.

There’s a clear problem with this position, however—we don’t act as if we think the events we are watching are really happening in front of us. When we throw a Bomb Plant to blow up a boulder on Dragon Roost Island, we don’t move the GameCube off the top of our TV so that it doesn’t get knocked to the floor. When we see Aryll taken away by a huge bird, we don’t call the police and report a kidnapping. We never really suspend our disbelief; we always have some disbelief in the events on the screen or else we would respond to them as we respond to real events.

Defenders of the illusion theory may say that suspending our disbelief doesn’t mean that we think the game events are real; it means only that we suspend *any* belief about the game’s level of reality. We neither believe in them nor disbelieve in them. This response attempts to ward off the objection that we do not act as if we believe the film is real. This response isn’t compelling, however. Since emotions seem to rely on beliefs, why would someone who does not *literally* believe that the events of *Wind Waker* are real have an emotional response to the events and the characters in the game?

Think about Link’s Grandmother

Noël Carroll suggests that the illusion theory is based on the false premise that we need to believe in the existence of something in order to respond to it emotionally. He argues that emotions can, in fact, be generated by thoughts alone, and he proposes what he

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Biographia Literaria,” *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, (New York: Random House, 1951).

calls the *thought theory*.² He gives the example of standing on the edge of a dangerous precipice. We are in no real danger of falling off the edge; our feet are planted safely, there is no wind, and we have no intention of jumping. But if we vividly imagine going over the edge, plummeting, and hitting the ground, we can be genuinely scared. We're scared, not by a belief that we are in a dangerous situation, but by the mere thought of something bad happening. Carroll also notes that when something bothers us emotionally, we often try not to think about it or to deflect our attention from it to lessen our emotions.

According to the thought theory, we're sad when Link leaves his grandmother on Outcast Island because the *idea* of a young boy leaving his grandmother to engage in a dangerous and possibly deadly mission is sad. We are happy when we rescue Makar and return him to Forest Haven, because the *thought* of returning a lost Korok to his family is pleasing.

But these explanations may strike some as empty. When we vividly visualize being killed, emotion is created because we are consciously constructing a vivid image in our minds. Without that type of visualization, we don't have a strong emotional response to the scenario. But if our thoughts only cause emotional response when we visualize them, then this doesn't explain your response to *Wind Waker*, because you don't visualize the world of the game while you play. You don't have to—you see it onscreen. In fact, it's very hard to play a videogame and simultaneously visualize something else. Also, some events that spur emotions, such as a monster suddenly popping up in front of you, happen too quickly to form conscious thoughts. The thought theory doesn't explain why actually seeing these fictional images without have any conscious thoughts can create emotion.

Let's Pretend We Want to Kill Ganondorf

A third theory that attempts to dissolve the paradox of fiction is the *pretend theory*, which has been championed by the philosopher Kendall Walton.³ Walton's theory is a general theory of how we interact with artworks, but it is applicable to videogames as much

² Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³ Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, (Harvard University Press, 1990).

as paintings or films. The pretend theory is an approach that is more plausible than it may first appear and is a primary framework through which philosophers discuss works of art. Walton argues that interacting with representational art is analogous to playing children's games of make-believe. He says that in games of make-believe, children use props to imagine fictional scenarios. For example, Tom and Jane might play a game of make-believe in which they pretend to be Link and Tetra. Tom grabs a yardstick and swings it as if it were a sword. Jane grabs a cardboard tube and looks through it as if it were a telescope. The yardstick and the tube are props they use to play the game of pretend. On Walton's account, Tom and Jane's actions authorize them to imagine certain events in their game. Jane might hand the tube to Tom, point to a house, and say "we're approaching Windfall Island!" Her actions suggest to Tom that he is supposed to pretend that the house is a place called Windfall Island.

Walton claims that the process of using props in pretend play is analogous to the process of engaging with artworks. In fact, Walton thinks that the analogy is so strong that we should actually think of engagement with representational fictions as a form of pretend play. When we play a videogame, the images and sounds of the game are props like the yardstick and tube in the children's game. The game player is authorized by these images and sounds to imagine features of the fictional world of the game in the same way children might use props to imagine certain features of the fictional world of their pretend play.

When you play *Wind Waker* and see the image of The King of Red Lions talking to Link, you're authorized to pretend that a magical talking boat really exists. In the same way that Jane's actions authorize Tom to pretend that they're approaching Windfall Island, these images authorize you to pretend that this boat exists. Or imagine that you walk into a room where your friend is playing *Wind Waker* and you see Link sailing in the ocean. You say, "Oh, you finally figured out how to get the sail." You don't believe that you are looking at an actual sail; you understand that what you are seeing is a flicker of light on a screen. Nonetheless, you refer to it as a sail. According to the pretend theory, your comment indicates that you are pretending that what you see is a sail, even though you know it isn't.

Walton uses this theory to explain how artworks generate emotional responses. Walton describes Charles, who watches a horror

movie about a deadly slime.⁴ During the film, when the slime approaches the camera, Charles screams. Later, Charles claims that he was terrified of the slime. Walton states that Charles cannot really be afraid of the slime because Charles knows the slime cannot really hurt him. Rather, Walton claims, Charles *imagines* that he is afraid of the slime. Charles plays a game of make-believe in which he imagines that the slime exists, that it is coming towards him, that he is in grave danger, and that he is afraid of the slime. Part of this game of pretend is for Charles to act as scared as he would if he were actually in danger, but Walton does not think that Charles's emotion is limited to actions—Charles *feels* scared as well. Charles's response, which Walton calls "make-believe fear" or "quasi-fear," feels the same as regular fear. It is make-believe not because it is devoid of real feeling but because it is based on Charles *imagining* he is in danger rather than *believing* he is in danger. Walton, recognizing that film viewers often feel things that they may not choose to feel, describes make-believe emotions as involuntary. You pretend to have the emotions whether you want to or not.

Walton's theory provides an internally consistent explanation for the paradox of fiction. We're happy when Link defeats Ganondorf not because we actually believe that he has saved Hyrule, but because we're pretending. Just as we use the patterns of light on the screen to imagine that there is a hero named Link and that he defeats a villain named Ganondorf, we use these images to pretend that we are happy about these events. This response feels like a real emotion but is not because it is caused by a fictional situation. Or so goes the theory.

Problems with Pretending

Unfortunately, the pretend theory is not a good solution to the paradox of fiction. Noël Carroll criticizes the theory by arguing that if Charles is merely pretending to be scared of the slime, then he should be able to start and stop pretending at will, because pretending is a voluntary activity. Indeed, an essential part of the idea of pretending is that the person pretending is consciously choosing to treat one thing as another. When Tom pretends that a yardstick is a sword, he does this by choice. The notion that Charles is *invol-*

⁴ "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy* 75:1 (1978).

untarilly pretending seems to stretch the meaning of pretending past its limits. Walton must agree that Charles's pretending to be scared is involuntary because most readers and viewers do not voluntarily pretend to have emotions when reading books, watching films, or playing videogames. This issue highlights a significant difference between children's games of make-believe and playing videogames. Walton says that when you see Link using the sail, you pretend that the image you see is a sail. Yet it is almost impossible *not* to see that image as a sail. You can't just "stop pretending" and decide to see the image as a bundle of individual pixels. In contrast, Tom and Jane can stop pretending to be Link and Tetra at any time. They can just stop pretending that the yardstick is a sword and the cardboard tube is a telescope.

Tom and Jane also have a lot more freedom in their pretend play than you have in playing a videogame. They decide how to use the props in their fictional world. Tom can pretend the yardstick is a sword or a lantern or a pogo stick. Any of these choices work in the context of his pretend world. When playing a videogame, however, you don't have that degree of freedom. It's true that videogames are much more interactive than traditional media like films or books. You can choose how to move your character and, in some videogames, what your character looks like. But your choices are somewhat constrained. If you walked in on your friend playing *Wind Waker* and said, "Hey, you found the giant lollipop," they would think you were nuts.

Also, when they are playing make-believe, children use the same prop very differently. Jane might pretend that her cardboard tube is a telescope, but another kid could take it and pretend that it was a megaphone. In videogames, players can't do this. When you press the B button, Link swings his sword. Everyone who plays the game would say the same. You're not really free to pretend that pressing the B button makes Link stand on his head. Why do videogame players all pretend the exact same thing when kids with cardboard tubes don't? For many reasons, pretend doesn't seem to be the right approach.

Why Are We Scared of Gohma?

None of these three theories can satisfactorily answer the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. Earlier, I asked why our eyes widen and our heart beats faster when we see the fire-breathing

scorpion Gohma rise above us. We don't run away from the screen, so the illusion theory must be wrong in saying that we temporarily think Gohma is really dangerous. We are more scared of actual monsters than the thought of monsters, so the thought theory can't explain the whole story. And if our fear involuntarily causes our heart to race, that emotion hardly seems like "pretending."

The main problem with these three theories is that they implicitly characterize the mind as monolithic and discuss only the conscious mind in their explanations. Under the guise of concepts such as imagination and thought, these theorists gloss over the variety of mental activity and the numerous unconscious processes that are part of our emotional responses to artworks.

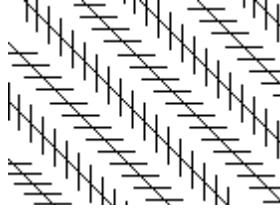
The illusion theory says that since we react emotionally to artworks, as we watch them we must think they are real. The assumption is that our conscious judgments about an artwork must fully accord with all aspects of our emotional response. The pretend theory says that we know that the artworks are not real, so our emotional responses to them must be pretend. Again, the premise is that emotional responses are based on beliefs and must be consistent with conscious judgments. The thought theory says that we emotionally respond to both artworks and reality because both generate evocative thoughts or ideas. Although this is true, the theory gives no account of why we respond differently to artworks and reality, and it does not discuss the role of unconscious mental activity. The theory avoids the question of why our responses to artworks are partially but not fully like those to real life.

A Multi-Level Mind

The concept that the mind is not monolithic but has potentially competing aspects goes back at least to Plato, who offered a model of the mind in *The Republic*. Plato notes that people can be thirsty yet not drink, and some can be happy in their suffering. Plato also describes Leontius, who was simultaneously repulsed by rotting corpses and yet wanted to look at them.⁵ Plato concludes that the mind (or, as he called it, the soul) must have separate components that are motivated by different goals.

⁵ Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton University Press, 1961), lines 439b–e.

Cognitive science, which construes the brain as an information-processing device, developed the idea that the mind has multiple systems, in part through the notion of mental modules as described by Jerry Fodor in *The Modularity of Mind*.⁶ Fodor suggests that our minds include a number of relatively separate information-processing modules which process information without feedback from higher-level mental processes. An optical illusion can illustrate this concept:



In this figure, the diagonal lines are parallel even though they don't *look* parallel. If we use a ruler, we can convince ourselves that they are parallel, but even if we know that they are it's impossible for us to see them as such. Although our conscious judgments tell us that the lines are parallel, our visual systems perceive them otherwise. This example shows how two mental systems can come to contrary conclusions about the same object.

The notion that the mind has multiple levels helps us explain our emotional responses to videogames and other artworks. Torben Grodal has suggested that there are important connections between psychology and art which can help us understand what happens when we watch representational art.⁷ According to Grodal, when we perceive something in the world, we make an evaluation, perhaps non-consciously, about whether we are perceiving something directly or are perceiving a representation of that thing. We can distinguish between looking at a real boat, a reflection of a boat, a painting of a boat, or a boat on a television screen.

Determining whether something is real or a representation is what Grodal calls a *global appraisal*. Global appraisals are contrasted with *local appraisals*, which are lower-level unconscious judgments such as whether something is blue or green or whether

⁶ Jerry Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind*, (MIT Press, 1983).

⁷ Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

something is moving or still. Local appraisals are inputs to global appraisals but more limited in the types of information they evaluate. The distinction between global and local appraisals is not black-and-white; these categories describe a spectrum of mental activity. However, they are useful for understanding why we respond to artworks as we do.

When we evaluate whether something is real or a representation, we're making a global appraisal based on a wide variety of information, including information initially processed by local appraisals. We might call the final judgment a determination of the object's *reality-status*. When we see a GameCube controller, we process a lot of information about it at a local level. What color is it? Is it three-dimensional? Is it moving? How does it feel if we touch it? We make a judgment about its reality-status: it is a real GameCube controller. When we see The King of Red Lions onscreen when we play *Wind Waker*, we also process a lot of information about it at a local level. What shape is it? Does it cast a shadow? If I move my head to the side, can I see more of it? We can also bring in other types of general knowledge. Can boats talk? Can boats move themselves? We make a judgment that The King of Red Lions is not real. We're looking at a representation of a boat, not an actual boat.

Since reality-status is a global appraisal, it makes no sense to ask whether objects are locally appraised as real or not. In terms of local appraisal, there is simply no evaluation of reality. Consider the local process of detecting motion. The motion, at a local level, is not seen as real or unreal. The system that detects motion does not see a real thing moving or an image moving or a fictional object moving—it simply sees motion.

Evaluating Zelda

This same process applies to artworks. When we look at the fire-breathing scorpion Gohma, we note (perhaps unconsciously) that he appears to be two-dimensional, that he emits light rather than simply reflecting it, and that he moves in a strangely repetitive manner. These local appraisals feed into a global appraisal that Gohma is not a real monster but just a representation of one, and that we are not in danger. However, our various appraisals are not necessarily unified. When Gohma breathes fire towards us, we might reflexively lean backwards. On one level of our minds, we see fire coming towards us, and we move to avoid it. But we don't run out

of the room, because at a higher global level, we realize that we are not in any real danger.

Why are we sad when Link leaves his grandmother, or touched when Aryll gives Link her telescope? Because we have these feelings in real life when witnessing similar scenes. Although at one level we understand that we are just watching computer-generated images, parts of our minds still process these human interactions as if we were watching real people.

This understanding of our emotional response explains something that was not addressed by the thought theory offered earlier. Why does the thought of winning the grand prize at a videogame convention not excite us as much as actually winning? Because the thought of winning may activate some local appraisals that lead to happy feelings, but actually winning activates many more appraisals, both local and global, and the feelings are thus much more intense. The reality-status of an event is an important determinant of how much and what kind of emotion it generates. Similarly, if you were actually faced with a huge, fire-breathing scorpion in real life, you would be much more scared than you are when facing Gohma onscreen.

It's very natural to think that we have full access to our mental activity and to assume that we act according to our beliefs. It's also natural to assume that our emotions are based on what we believe. Unfortunately, none of these assumptions happen to be true.

When we assume that our minds are rational and consistent, the fact that we have emotional responses to videogames forces us into questionable conclusions. If our emotions are based on our beliefs, then we must believe either that fictions are real or that our emotions are not real (they're just pretend). Or, if our emotions are not based on our beliefs, then they are based on thoughts about situations—but then it's not clear why thoughts and reality cause different emotions.

We react to videogames and other art forms⁸ in some ways as if they are representations and in some ways as if they were reality. Different parts of our minds react differently to the same stimuli. We know that *Wind Waker* is a game and we're happy when we win. We know that it's been designed, and we admire many of the

⁸ For an assessment of *Zelda* itself as art, see Chapter [???????Cuddy's chapter] in this volume.

design decisions. But, although at a high level we know the characters are not real, some unconscious aspects of our minds don't know this, and they react as if it were real. Our non-unified minds cause emotions at multiple levels and can result in strange combinations of feelings and behavior. And as videogame simulations approach reality, we may expect that our emotional responses to them will approach our responses to reality as well.