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MERGING QUEER READINGS AND GAMES: AN ANALYSIS OF CO-CREATED QUEER NARRATIVES OF SIDON AND LINK THROUGH PLAY IN *TEARS OF THE KINGDOM*

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Introduction

The release of the video game *Breath of The Wild (BoTW)* in 2017 ushered in one of the most popular ships (romantic pairings of characters) that the Legend of Zelda series has seen, that of Sidon and Link. The Legend of Zelda series is one of Nintendo's most popular video game series with each installment following the adventures of Link. In *BoTW* Link travels to the kingdom of the Zora, a race of humanoid fish creatures, and meets their prince, Sidon. Sidon's charm and enthusiasm for Link resulted in many fans claiming that Sidon was Link's boyfriend. Fans were then shocked to discover that in the sequel, *Tears of the Kingdom (ToTK)*, a new character, a female Zora named Yona, was introduced as Sidon's fiancée, despite there being no mention of her in the previous game. However, as the quest in Zora's domain unfolds, there are many subtextual queer moments that provide support for the queer readings that began in *BoTW* to continue in *ToTK*. What is at stake here is understanding where these queer readings fit in relation to the heteronormative reading that the inclusion of Yona supports. This has broader ramifications for understanding the place of fan productions in relation to the media object they are drawing from. To come closer to this understanding, I analyzed examples of queer streamers on Twitch playing through the quest involving Sidon and the queer readings that the streamer and viewers created. I argue that the co-creation of these queer readings is a form of play and thus cannot be separated from the game.

Theoretical Framework and Methods

Scholars have very different understandings of how fan products relate to the original work. Some argue that there is a hierarchy that presents the original work and normative interpretations as valid and fan products that change the original work as invalid (Nordin, 2019) while others argue that there is no hierarchy, and any

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interpretation/product is valid (Stasi, 2006). Analyzing fan products through theories on play bridges the gap between these interpretations. One of the purposes of play is to allow people to change the game to feel satisfied, accomplished, and fulfilled (De Koven, 1978; Sicart, 2014), thus making that interpretation of the game a part of it and valid. However, there are forms of play that are valued over others (Trammell, 2023) and hierarchies can be formed around those values. As such, queer readings created through play can be a valid part of the game while still existing in a hierarchy that gives it less value. There are already scholars who have argued for some fan products related to video games (i.e. modifications) to be considered a form of play (Postigo, 2007; Sotamaa, 2010). In this project, I extend this argument to queer readings, using theories of play as the theoretical framework through which I analyze the creation of queer readings by communities on Twitch.

For this project, I utilized a mixed methods approach. First, I completed a thematic analysis of videos on demand (VODs) from a sample of 23 Twitch streamers playing through the Sidon quest line. Of the 23 streamers, 21 openly identify as some LGBTQIA+ identity either through the use of tags on their streams or their biography on their homepage. From this I identified 3 styles of play: creating a new narrative and maintaining it for the entire quest, initial anger/shock but no creation of a new narrative, and acceptance from the beginning but acknowledgment of the ship and/or how some fans will be hurt. I then completed a close reading of VODs from three queer streamers who engaged with the first style of play. I examined what narratives were created, how they were created through collective play from the streamer and those in chat, and how the narrative affected the community's response to the quest.

Summary of Findings

I found that these three communities created diverse narratives that were rooted in Sidon and Link maintaining their relationship and relied on moments from the game to support these narratives. Streamer 1 created a narrative that many others in my sample shared. In this narrative, Sidon remains Link's boyfriend/husband, and the community alternated between a complete dismissal of Yona or having Yona understand that she is just a figurehead. Streamer 2 represents a slight variation on this narrative by making it a self-insert where Link represents herself, and therefore Sidon is her boyfriend/husband. This resulted in her acting with hatred towards Yona which included threatening her life multiple times. This narrative relies on in-game moments that could be used to demonstrate that Sidon and Link are together. Therefore, those in chat mostly maintained that Sidon was Link's boyfriend/husband while using the same complex narrative that the streamer was developing about herself and Sidon. Streamer 3 greatly diverged in the narrative she created from Streamer 1 and 2. Like the others, this community maintained that Sidon and Link are in a relationship but did so by making Sidon bisexual and in a polyamorous relationship with Link and Yona. Once this narrative was decided on, Yona was mostly accepted by the community.

Outside of the creation of new narratives, there was a consistent acknowledgment that Sidon and Link are often romantically paired together. For communities that showed either initial anger/shock but no creation of a new narrative or acceptance of the narrative from the beginning, it was still brought up that many people ship Sidon and

Link or that there are going to be a lot of people who are disappointed by the in-game narrative. This reveals how the queer readings of the game have become pervasive and closely tied to the game in ways that the queer readings cannot be separated from it. There were also moments where the community called out Nintendo for using Yona as a way to make illegitimate the queer readings surrounding Sidon and Link. This demonstrates that these communities were aware that the actions of Nintendo served to maintain their queer readings as something separate from the official heteronormative reading. Through play, these communities were able to create narratives maintaining Sidon and Link's romantic relationship that drew on in-game elements to have a satisfying experience with the quest line thus making it a part of the game.

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