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“You’ve Met with A Terrible Fate, Haven’t You?”: How *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*

Relates to the Kübler-Ross Model of Grief

“Actually... I know... We're not safe here, either... I'm no expert on these things, but that's the feeling I get. But... That's how life goes, I guess. There are some things in life that you can't change no matter how hard you try...”- Cremia, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*

Few video games in history have been able to captivate our attentions quite like *The Legend of Zelda* franchise. Compelling stories combined with the latest video game technology of the times makes for an emotionally sweeping narrative that is fun and appropriate for players of almost any age. There is, however, one game that stands out in the lineup as being a wholly unique experience apart from the rest: *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*. In this major departure from the traditional *Legend of Zelda* narrative, could this story actually be Link’s journey through his own death? The the gameplay narrative of ‘*The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*’ is a metaphor for Link’s journey to the acceptance of his own demise through the Kübler-Ross model of grief. In looking at the game in this manner, we can look through the lens of psychology and see how it applies to popular culture.

But first a little history

The Legend of Zelda franchise was created in 1986 in Japan by Shigeru Miyamoto. It was released on Nintendo's first home console, the Nintendo Entertainment System (known as the Famicom in Japan). Miyamoto was inspired to create *Zelda* based off his own boyhood experiences of exploring lakes and caves around his family home in Kyoto.

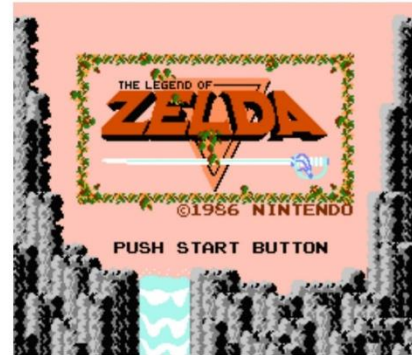


Figure 1- Title screen of the original 'The Legend of Zelda' game

As for the titular character, Miyamoto named her after Zelda Fitzgerald, wife of popular American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, simply because he thought it sounded pretty (Johnson 2016).

Over the last 30 years, the *Zelda* franchise has enjoyed enormous success. Overall, much of the game is formulaic: The main plot centers around a young boy named Link who is tasked with saving the kingdom of Hyrule and its Princess Zelda from the evil designs of Ganon, often also involving a semi-religious quest to find a powerful relic known as the Triforce. Though the main story of the game has changed little over its subsequent iterations, the *Zelda* franchise continues to have an enormous impact on the gaming industry through incorporating the latest techniques and technologies into its narrative frame, inspiring many other popular culture gaming titles to this day (Finnegan, 2016).

The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask is a marked departure from the normal definitive elements of a *Zelda* main console game (handled game analysis is for another day). There is no Ganon, no Princess Zelda (accept in a short 'flashback' cut-scene (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000)), and not even a mention of the Triforce. Why would the designers of one of the world's most popular gaming franchises take such a dramatic turn from a proven formula? Perhaps it is because something more sinister has happened to Link...

Setting the stage: how could Link have died?

It seems preposterous! How could Link, our beloved intrepid hero, have come to such an untimely demise? It all goes back to the ending of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. After defeating Ganon, Link returns the Master Sword to its pedestal, reverting to his childhood form



Figure 2- The Skull Kid prodding Link's prone figure

from the beginning of the game. Navi, Link's persistent fairy companion then returns to her home in Kokiri Forest (*The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, 1998). And there, *Majora's Mask* begins with Link searching through the Lost Woods to find his beloved fairy friend when he is waylaid by two renegade fairies and a forest imp known as the Skull Kid. He is thrown from his trusty steed and is knocked unconscious (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000) ... or was he? This is the most logical place for Link to have met his end. Once Link awakens he follows the skull kid to reclaim his stolen belongings and, just like Alice descending into Wonderland, falls into his own personal journey through a fantastical purgatory.

Walking through The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask with the Kübler-Ross Five Stages of Greif

Whenever a person suffers a great loss, they go through a complex process of grieving in order to come to terms with what has occurred (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Those stages are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—though people may not experience them in that specific order or even only one time (Meyers-Elder, 2008). For the purposes of this analysis we

will follow them in the order presented by Kübler-Ross, which also happens to align with the narrative order of the game.

After falling through what appears to be an interdimensional black hole, Link finds himself in the land of Termina, which he finds along his journey is populated by people who are identical to the people Link encountered on his previous journey through Hyrule (Gambos et al, 2013). Termina



Figure 3- Map of Termina

is a shortening of the word ‘terminal,’ literally meaning ‘leading ultimately to death’ (Merriam-Webster). This rather blatant name for this game world is early proof that link is on a journey to accept his passing.

The first stage in the grieving process is denial (Kübler-Ross 1969). Denial, according to Kübler-Ross, is a buffer to shocking news and is almost always temporary. After being transformed into a Deku Scrub by the Skull Kid and sent out into Termina by a character known as The Happy Mask Salesman, the first major area of the game world Link must explore before being allowed to move on is a place called Clock Town,



Figure 4- The Happy Mask Salesman

so named for the large clock in the center of the bustling metropolis (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000). Immediately upon stepping out into the town, Link can see that a creepy anthropomorphic moon is insanely close to the town. This is surely a cause for panic! But... no. The people of clock town are going about their business. In fact, they are planning a large festival that is meant to take place in three days' time (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000). Further

inspection of the town and the mayor's office reveal that the townspeople are in complete and utter denial that the moon poses a threat. Indeed, the proprietor of the swordsman school believes that



Figure 5- Carpenter arguing in the mayor's office

he will be able to slice the moon into pieces (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000), never mind the celestial impracticalities of this solution... Once three days have passed, the moon begins to fall in earnest and Link must confront the Skull Kid to regain his lost possessions. Once he does, he is able to reset

time to the beginning of the first day and continue on his journey, as now he knows that the danger of the moon falling is very real and has thus moved beyond the stage of denial.

The stage of anger can be found in the next leg of Link's journey through Termina in a place known as the Southern Swamp. Once a person moves past denial, they are often filled with feelings of rage and resentment (Kübler-Ross 1969). The major dilemma of this area? The Deku Princess has gone missing. The Deku King is so filled with rage that he wrongly accuses a monkey (who is a dear friend of the princess) of kidnapping his daughter and intends to put the poor monkey to death! The monkey pleads with the King, but he will not listen even though the monkey knows what actually *did* happen to the princess. Further, this has led the Deku people to be irrationally angry at anyone who is not a Deku Scrub, forcing Link to

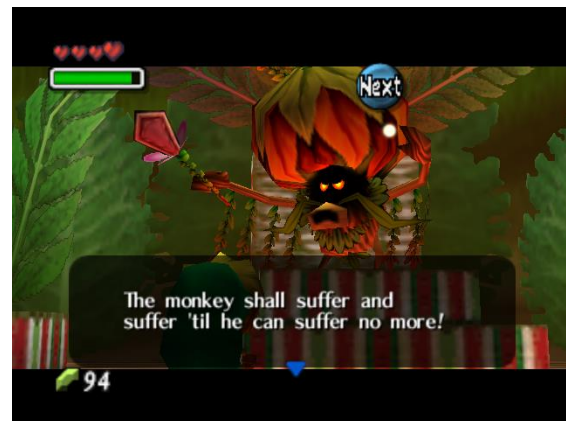


Figure 6- Deku King sentencing the monkey to death

gain access to the palace by donning a transformative mask that allows him to become a Deku

Scrub (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000). This all leads to the point that anger does not have to be logical or valid in the wake of loss (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 2005). Link, being the game's protagonist, sets off to the cursed Woodfall temple to rescue the princess. Upon completing this task, he returns the princess safe and sound to the hall of her father, whereupon she is filled with a righteous anger at the treatment of her friend, the monkey (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000). Having set things right in the Swamp, minus perhaps a family squabble, Link is able to put his own anger at his premature death behind him and move along.

Bargaining is the next step in the process of grieving, which can be found in the Northern mountains of Snowhead. Bargaining is less well known and is often brief, whereupon the grieving



Figure 7- Darmani begging Link to bring him back to life

will try to trade good behavior with a higher power in exchange for prolonged life or a lessening of pain (Kübler-Ross 1969). Upon arrival to the Goron Village Link discovers that a great tragedy has befallen the Goron people: Their great hero, Darmani, has perished. Link is guided to a magical item, the Lens of Truth, which allows

him to see and interact with the ghost of the Goron champion. Darmani beseeches Link to use his magic to restore him to life, and upon finding that impossible, then begs for link to put his soul to rest by saving his people. This is a task Link is able to accomplish, and in return Darmani gifts Link with the ability to transform into a Goron with a magical mask; he also bequeaths to Link his vast guilt at not being able to save his people from freezing to death (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000). Guilt is often associated with bargaining (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 2005). We frequently find fault with ourselves in the face of grief, causing us to feel culpability for the

situations others must face. Link is able to assuage Darmani's guilt and fulfil his bargain by defeating the demon of the Snowhead dungeon and saving the Gorons from an icy death.

The fourth stage in the grieving process is depression, and the next place Link must venture to is the Great Bay Coast. This form of depression should not be confused with mental illness, but seen rather as a very natural reaction to a shocking loss. Once we have come to terms that what is happening is real, feelings of denial and anger are swept away and are replaced by a



Figure 8- Lulu silently staring at the sea

deep sadness whereupon we tend to withdraw from life (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 2005). This is exactly what has happened to the Zora Lulu, lead singer of the Indigo-Go's. When exploring the Great Bay, Link discovers that Lulu's eggs have been stolen by pirates. Lulu becomes so depressed that her children have been stolen that she loses her voice and silently stares out at the sea. Wishing to right this wrong, Link infiltrates the pirate's fortress and recovers the eggs. The eggs hatch and, emulating their musical mother, teach Link a song that snaps Lulu out of her sadness and restores her voice, allowing Link to access the next game dungeon (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000). An interesting thing to note about depression is that it is often times seen as something that needs to be fixed, however, not experiencing sadness after the loss of a loved one would be unusual to say the least. Mourners should be able to experience their sorrows (Kübler-Ross & Kessler 2005). By reuniting Lulu with her babies, Link has symbolically worked through his own sadness and can once again move forward.

The final stage to explore is acceptance, which is wholly represented in the territory of Ikana Canyon. Acceptance is often confused with the idea that a person is totally alright with the tragedy that has befallen them, but that is not the case. Rather it is the idea that they have come to terms with the fact that what they are facing is real and is not going away (Kübler-Ross & Kessler



Figure 10- King Igros du Ikana

2005). This place is unlike any Link has ventured to before: the people of Ikana Canyon are dead. They are all ghosts, skeletons, and zombies and they all need Link to help them come to terms with that. There is a tribe known as the Garo who are described as “emptiness cloaked in darkness,” and upon being defeated by Link in combat commit a type of ritual suicide, accepting death on no terms but their own (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*, 2000). The deceased King of Ikana personally asks you “return true light to Ikana.” To do this, Link must make an arduous ascent to the heavens into the heart of the area’s dungeon, the Stone Tower. Whilst there, Link must use a magical song, the Elegy of Emptiness, to progress through the dungeon by making funeral effigy-like copies of the transformative masks he has collected, all of which are of already dead people (including a copy of Link’s original form. Oooooohhhh! You see where this is going?). The *real* prize of this dungeon is enlightenment, symbolized by the item obtained in the dungeon: the light arrow (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*, 2000). As this stage is completed, true healing can begin.



Figure 9- Statues created by the 'Elegy of Emptiness'

Once Link has completed all five stages, he is able to justly confront the being that brought about his preemptive demise. He can return to Clock Town to challenge the Skull Kid and



Figure 11- Phase Two: Majora's Incarnation

ultimately the evil spirit of Majora's Mask that was possessing him. Majora's Mask, an evil mask used by an ancient tribe to hex and torture others (Gambos et al, 2013), is a symbol of death itself. Through completing his journey Link is gifted with the Fierce Deity mask. This mask allows him to transform into a near invincible being, strong enough to defeat the spirit inhabiting Majora's Mask. By winning this final battle, Link is able to quietly ride off into the fog, his later whereabouts unknown (*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, 2000).

How this applies to popular culture and conclusion

The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask is a prime example of popular culture. Popular culture cannot exist without being relevant to the people. The people, then, ascribe meaning to it (Fiske 2010). Everyone is going to experience grief and loss at some point in their lives. And while it is never explicitly stated that *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* is an allegory for death, that is the meaning that has been ascribed to it through popular culture (and my micro-analysis). This analysis isn't even possible without popular culture theory. It doesn't have to be about death. It could be the betrayal of a friend as the Skull Kid betrayed his fairy friends, or it could be relationship troubles as exhibited by the characters Anju and Kafei—both situations that would initiate a grieving process. Art is often times in the eye of the beholder and it is those meanings we glean from it that make the difference (and what makes it fun, too). This is how *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* has become one of the most beloved installments of the *Zelda* universe.

There is more than enough evidence presented to prove that throughout the gameplay of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, Link is indeed dead and must travel through the stages of the grieving process (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) to pass through purgatory and move on to the afterlife. There is, of course, a lot more evidence to support this fact, such as the death masks Link wears to change his persona (the word 'persona' literally means 'mask' (Lafflan 2016)) to those of powerful individuals who are deceased. But there isn't room to explore that here. That is an adventure left for another day.



Figure 12- Final scene of Majora's Mask

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